

The Bible and Ecology

Looking at the Gospel according to John and Related Literature

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Perhaps the best known verse in the fourth gospel, if not in the Bible as a whole, is John 3:16
“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life”.

For many this has been understood as a promise that we shall have life after death, simply put, that we shall go to heaven when we die. This was often set in contrast to not believing and being condemned to hell. Mission could be defined as telling people that they can be saved from eternal damnation. The focus was the afterlife both in fear and in hope. “When we all get to heaven” made life in the interim bearable. Indeed, it is understandable that for perhaps the majority of believers until recent centuries life in this world was harsh. Life’s meaning lay in looking beyond. In the meantime we are just passing through.

Other New Testament writings helped feed this perspective. The Letter to the Hebrews addressed believers facing tough times with the assurance that Jesus also faced suffering and that they needed to pin their hope on reaching the promised land, the heavenly city, when they could leave this life and this world behind. We are pilgrims passing through on the journey out of this world. Jesus is our forerunner. Hope for a new heaven and a new earth left little room for caring about the old earth which was to pass away, especially when one expected this to happen within one’s life time as the first believers like Paul did.

It was possible to explain creation’s harshness as resulting from the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden. Only because of them, as the story goes, did weeds and thistles grow, soils become barren, and women face pain in pregnancy and giving birth. Some pushed the rationalisation of human plight even further by developing the theory that material creation is a dirty trick of a subgod who trapped the divine light of the soul in the material world, in physical bodies, which act like tombs and reproduce themselves to prevent the light from escape. Only those who come to know their true origins and listen to the redeemer’s message of hope will be freed from this evil world at death to soar back to their origins in divine light. Such people were called Gnostics. Their salvation lay in knowing this. Gospels appeared in the second century attributed to Mary Magdalene, Philip, Judas, and others which claimed that this was really the message Jesus came to bring and which the other disciples failed to grasp. The emerging church was surely right to reject such claims.

The Gospel according to John is a Jewish writing in which a follower of Jesus makes the case that Jesus is the hoped for Messiah. Jesus, too, was Jewish. Jews embraced this creation as something which God had made and was good. This was in their theological DNA. We see this directly when we go to the beginning of the fourth gospel. For there the author deliberately echoes the creation story in Genesis. Both Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1 commence with the words “In the beginning”. John declares that in the beginning was the Word, recalling that in Genesis we read that God created by speaking: “God said: ‘Let there be light!’”

John means more than that there were words in the beginning, for he identifies the Word as a person, Jesus, claiming that the one whom history saw in Galilee, was none other than God's divine Word, part of God's own being. Using imagery of companionship and family John portrays Jesus as being God and being with God and as acting for God in creation. "All things came into being through him" (1:3). The author may be deliberately countering gnostic claims when he adds: "and apart from him nothing came into existence" (1:3b).

After reading the opening few sentences of John, one could be forgiven for believing that what was to follow would be a book about creation. Instead, the focus moves to the way the Word came into the world he created and, astonishingly, found that it rejected him, or at least human beings did, with only a small number of exceptions who then became his followers. He not only entered his creation; he became flesh, as 1:14 puts it. This is not about turning into meat. It is about the divine Word becoming a human being in the person of Jesus. Far from entering the trap of matter, the Word embraced it, and lived among it as part of it, like a living temple of God's divine presence.

What does this mean for understanding the fourth gospel? It certainly does not mean that creation does not matter. For anyone who has heard the opening verses knows that creation's maker was right there among human beings. There are two strands of thought which feed into this understanding. Those with a strongly Greek background and familiar with popular philosophy would have heard the word, Word, in Greek, Logos, and connected it to the Stoic idea that Logos/Word was like a spirit or fluid which penetrated all reality. They would hear the claim that in Jesus the meaning life, what holds it all together and what makes sense of it, has appeared.

For many Jews there would be another connection. They could sometimes speak of God's Word or Wisdom being like God's companion and helper at creation. Who better to give instruction about wisdom than God's Wisdom, usually depicted as female. They even extended this thought to say that the way God's Wisdom spoke was above all through scripture, through the commandments. They could speak of God's Wisdom or Word as bringing light and life, as quenching the soul's thirst like water, and its hunger like bread. It is not surprising then that in John we hear these claims being made about Jesus: he is the light, the life, the bread, the giver of water. What others Jews claimed of the Law, John, without ever disparaging the Law, which it saw as God's gift, sees Wisdom's light and life in Jesus. All such images are saying that Jesus, the Word, shows the way to live in relationship with God.

This then sheds a very different light on our John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life". "Eternal life" in John is not primarily about life after death, but life shared now with God, a life which lasts even beyond death. While "the world" here means the world of people, the world of creation is not something awful let alone evil which one has to endure, but the handiwork of the Logos, the Word. While the focus in John is primarily on eternal life as sharing God's life in relationship with Jesus and with one another, and nowhere returns to the themes of the first verses, these verses set the frame of reference for all that follows. Eternal life is to be lived and shared not despite the reality of creation but within it. Its reality inspires images which celebrate that life.

One of the contentious issues in interpreting the fourth gospel is whether the author sees any place for showing love to non-believers. It arises because nearly all the statements about love focus on believers loving one another and the love between them and the Son and the Son and the Father. And yet none of it makes sense without the underlying affirmation that God so loved the world, the world of humanity. In a similar way none of it makes sense without the underlying Jewish assumption which the first believers shared, that creation is also God's and good.

John does not extrapolate on the implications of that assumption. The author may well not have either needed or been able to do so. To demand that he should have or to try to read into the text more than is there is not to respect the author's integrity. He does, however, provide a significant starting point. He does that in particular by the way he uses the traditions about Wisdom/Word to depict Jesus' significance. He certainly knows of traditions which focus on the death of Jesus as dealing with sin, but subordinates them to the Wisdom/Word model which focuses on relationship and shared life. In this way he avoids the danger that the good news becomes limited to having sins forgiven and escaping judgement, which can leave any consideration of creation out of view. Instead we meet creation's maker who knows how best to live within it and so leaves the door wide open for us to reflect on what it means when we extend this notion of love and life in relationship to the world beyond humanity. Our new understandings of that world equip us to pass through that door in ways the author could not have imagined.