

Toward Creative Eschatology

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Eschatology is a highly subjective word. If you ask ten people, "What is eschatology?" you are likely to receive ten different answers. However subjective "eschatology" may be, one common theme emerges with regularity: destruction.

The standard dictionary definition of eschatology is the Christian doctrine of last things including the end of the world, the last judgment, and the resurrection of the dead. In the popular Christian imagination, eschatology has come to include the War of Armageddon, falling stars, a darkened sun, and a bloody moon.

No one can deny this destructive element of biblical eschatology. The Old Testament is filled with violent eschatological images. Isaiah 24 is filled with brutality enacted by the hand of YHWH. "Behold, the Lord makes the earth empty and makes it waste, distorts its surface and scatters abroad its inhabitants" (Isa. 24:1).

Isaiah 34 is no less violent. The Lord pours out His wrath, thereby slaughtering the nations. The sword of the Lord is bathed in blood as it takes vengeance on the heathen. Their dead bodies lie in the streets, and the stench of their rotting corpses rises from the earth. Fire, brimstone, and smoke fill the air forever. Afterwards, "All the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled up as a scroll" (34:4).

Ezekiel 7 is a lesser known yet equally harsh passage describing YHWH bringing an end to the four corners of the land. The prophet describes the scene as a singular disaster, doom, and a day of trouble. The sword, disease, and famine would decimate the wicked--only a few survivors would escape to the mountains, and they would be weak, hungry and in mourning.

Daniel 7 may be the most famous Old Testament eschatological scene. Daniel witnessed a vision of four hideous monsters arising from the sea. Each one trampled the earth and devoured the righteous. They took turns holding dominion over the people of God. The fourth showed signs of greater ferocity than the others. It possessed iron teeth and ten horns, and it demolished everything in its path. This creature had a fearsome eye-filled horn that spoke blasphemy, and it waged war against the saints of the Most High. Finally, the Ancient of Days appeared, and a Human One ascended to the throne. The saints received a verdict in their favor, and the monsters were consumed and destroyed. This fierce vision distressed Daniel and caused him great consternation. "My thoughts greatly troubled me, and my countenance changed" (7:28).

The eschatological sayings of Jesus are no less destructive. In quoting Micah, Jesus warned: "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). He further claimed, "I came to send fire on the earth" (Lk.12:49). Jesus further echoed the eschatological writings of Daniel 7 and 12 when maintaining that some would be ashamed of him when he came in glory (Lk. 9:26).

He predicted that Galileans and Jerusalemites alike would suffer death, destruction, and desecration if they did not heed his teaching. "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:1-5). Jesus told stories about wicked vinedressers who longed to own the vineyard, whose greed would result in their devastation. The owner of the vineyard "will come and destroy those vinedressers" (Lk. 20:15).

The Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 is Jesus' most lucid prophecy of eschatological disaster. On the symbolic Mount of Olives (Zech.14:4), Jesus warned of wars and rumors of wars, great tribulation, and disastrous heavenly portents. He foretold of the abomination of desolation and instructed his disciples to flee to the mountains to escape death. The Son of Man would come on the clouds (as in Dan. 7), and the tribes of the earth would mourn. Heaven and earth would pass away, and it would all occur in the lifetime of his audience.

Paul and the other New Testament writers employed equally ominous themes when considering Herodian Jerusalem. 1 Thessalonians speaks of the descent of the Lord, an angelic shout, and a trumpet blast "all of which would come as a thief in the night. "For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them" (5:3). The situation had intensified by the time Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians when he foresaw a great falling away, the revelation of the man of sin and the son of perdition. Paul connected all of this to the menacing "mystery of lawlessness."

The book of Hebrews warned the early Christians that heaven and earth would soon be shaken, and they should not "draw back to perdition"; otherwise, they would not enter God's rest (4:5; 10:39; 12:26). In prophetic fashion, James blasted the exploiters of the poor by promising their sure doom, "Behold, the Judge is at the door!" (5:9). Jude's harsh little letter guarantees that the Lord would come to "execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly" (v.15).

Perhaps the most graphically destructive New Testament eschatological passage is 2 Peter 3. Peter contended that the heavens and earth were being "reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men" (3:7). He further envisioned the dissolution of the heavens with a great noise and the melting of the earth with fervent heat. Once again, he expected his audience to be alive to witness the catastrophic events (2 Pet. 3:13-14).

Who can forget the unspeakable horrors found in the book of Revelation? John saw pestilence, plagues, and panic. He observed dead bodies, gruesome monsters, and satanic minions. He witnessed a fiery lake into which the enemies of the saints were cast.

By emphasizing the destructive tone of Scripture, popular Christianity has emphasized a destructive brand of eschatology. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, versions of destructive eschatology played parts in Prussian nationalism and World War I, the Russian Revolution, World War II and the current situation in the Middle East.

Today proponents of destructive eschatology continue to make pronouncements and predictions from pulpits proclaiming that the end is near, and the Kingdom of God will arrive with a bang! (literally). Some sit behind pseudo-news desks and correlate newspaper clippings with Bible prophecy. Over 36 million copies of the Left Behind book series have helped to popularize a fearful sense that a calamitous conclusion is at hand.

Additionally, popular culture has capitalized on destructive eschatology. Movies like *The Seventh Seal*, *Armageddon*, and *End of Days* profit from and add to a destructive mentality. The Left Behind book series and its spin offs have made countless millions of dollars and have added to a sense of growing hysteria. (Ironic, isn't it? If as the books suggest the end is approaching why not give the books away? What good will the money be at the end time after the "rapture"?)

In uncertain times like our own, destructive eschatology seems like current events. In the wake of September 11, we have encountered mass death, wars, and disease. An overriding sense of fear engenders a mood of imminent doom, much of which stems from a destructive interpretation of Biblical eschatology. According to a Time magazine poll (July 1, 2002), nearly 25% of respondents believe the Bible predicted the September 11 attacks.

Policy makers have taken notice of the surge of interest in destructive eschatology. Christians who believe that the Kingdom of God must enter the world through a violent conflagration feel it is their holy duty to precipitate a war. So, they wield their monetary and political influence to fulfill their eschatological vision. It should not surprise us that when one preaches destruction in the name of God that destruction will follow.

Moreover, destructive eschatology has a hand in cataclysms that appear on the surface unrelated to eschatology per se, such as the ecological catastrophe we are rushing toward. If God is going to destroy the earth and all of its elements anyway, why not give Him a hand? Why conserve natural resources if God will certainly annihilate the planet any day now? Why address the problems of widespread poverty, hunger, and Third World debt if God's plan includes wiping everything out any day now?

In contrast, fulfilled Bible prophecy within the Christian community scoffs at the doomsayers for misreading both Scripture and current events. The traditional preterist paradigm contends that eschatology is not about the destruction of the planet, but about the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Preterism speaks of the collapse of the Old Covenant system, the levitical priesthood, and the temple service.

Put simply, most eschatological paradigms, even traditional preterist ones, define eschatology primarily in terms of destruction. Granted, they place the destruction in various loci, but they still identify it in terms of destruction. If one characterizes eschatology primarily in destructive expressions it is irrelevant as to when one places the destruction. The destruction of the planet, destruction of the ungodly, destruction of

Jerusalem is all destruction. And a destruction based eschatology is the seed-bed for personal and cultural pessimism.

As our survey indicates, there is an obvious destructive element in biblical eschatology. To be honest with the biblical texts, one simply cannot ignore the calamitous language. However, the operative question is, What does the destruction lead to? As Jrgen Moltmann observes, "Downfall and redemption are two sides of the same coin."

If kept in its proper biblical timeframe, the destructive aspect of eschatology ties directly to the cross of Christ and the redemption of humanity. In other words, the severity of God that focused on Christ cleared the way for the goodness of God to all humanity. Following death there is resurrection. In this way, the destruction of a planet, race, or city does not develop into the centerpiece, goal, or even the means of eschatology. Christ himself is the focal point of eschatology and the means by which eschatology is realized.

Max King, who founded the Transmillennial® view, wrote at length about this in *The Cross and the Parousia of Christ: The two dimensions of one age changing eschaton* (1987). King observed, "The cross and the parousia of Christ are in Biblical eschatology what alpha and omega are in the Greek alphabet "the beginning and the end."

Viewing eschatology as the fulfilled work of God in Jesus Christ transforms eschatology from a destructive event into a constructive force.

To experience eschatology in creative terms, we need to grasp the purpose of eschatology in the first place. Eschatology begins in Genesis. In Eden God embarked upon His creation of humanity in His image. Adam and Eve sinned, thereby demonstrating the failure of humanity to live in relationship to God on their own power. Left to themselves, Adam and Eve were dead, unable to reach above the dust of the earth, and separated from the presence of God.

Eschatology is about the fulfillment of the God-Human relationship by which God would create humanity in His own image and make humans life-giving spirits (1 Cor. 15:45). How and where is that mission accomplished? I maintain it is a reality in Christ Jesus. "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power" (Col. 2:9-10). Jesus Christ is the last Adam, the heavenly man, whose "gift of righteousness" results in justification of life "to all men" (Rom. 5:17-18). Again, King asserts that today "we have the undisputed fullness and abiding presence of Christ."

Jesus himself understood his mission in constructive, not destructive, terms. He did not come "to steal and to kill and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (Jn. 10:10).

This framework provides a means to recognize the creative facet of eschatology. Eschatology is a genesis and pertains to God's New Creation, not destruction. We can understand eschatology in terms of a marriage. The consummation of a marriage is not

the end of the relationship; it is only the beginning that marks the commencement of a creative, life-giving relationship.

It is no coincidence that the book of Revelation describes eschatology as marital bliss. "John saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). In conjunction with this wedding, John "saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . Then He who sat on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new'" (Rev. 21:1, 5). Here is the New Creation in which God dwells with humanity. After the divine wedding, a voice from heaven exclaimed, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them" (Rev. 21:3).

God's goal (end or telos) never was to rob, kill, or destroy. His heart desired all along to create a fellowship between Himself and humanity. Paul wrote that through Christ, "you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life" (Rom. 6:22). God's sentiment, "I will be you God and you shall be my people" neatly describes His eternal purpose for humanity.

In the New Creation, John saw no temple because "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (Rev. 22:22). Biblical eschatology is not the entrenching of the separation of God and humanity by annihilating the planet and its inhabitants. On the contrary, it is humanity in Christ being filled with the fullness of God Himself.

The whole gist of creative eschatology tied to the death and resurrection of Jesus is found in 2 Corinthians 5. The New Creation comes into being via Christ's death and resurrection. "If One died for all, then all died" (v.14). It then grows into the entire kosmos. "If anyone is in Christ, He is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold all things have become new" (v.17). Eschatology does not end there. It continues in verse 18. "Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation."

The New Creation involves the pioneering act of declaring of the reality of Divine-human reconciliation. It is announcing in word and deed that the gap between God and humanity is forever gone. These actions bring us into partnership with God in the shaping of our world. We join with God in taking the lump of clay that is our community and shaping it into the image of God. Walter Wink in *The Human Being* observed, "So humanity is called to create a new and hitherto unknown world through creativity." Like Jesus in John 20:22, we breathe the spirit of life into our world.

In this way, we transform the end into the beginning and transform last things into first things. This is why Tim King, president of Presence Ministries, has recently introduced the field of 'archonology,' the study of first things. Whereas the popular conception of eschatology involves destruction, archonology provides a method to think about, discuss, and participate in the New Creation of all things.

To balance eschatology with archonology, we must embody the New Creation. This calls us into a truly incarnational and Christ-filled life. In the manner of Christ, we bring

people and God together into one body (Eph. 2:15-17). This task is especially significant for those who adhere to fulfilled covenant eschatology; because, if we comprehend that humanity has the abundant life given by God through fulfilled covenant eschatology, we ought to live an eschatologically-fulfilled life.

Some people live eschatologically unfulfilled lives of delay, destruction, and disappointment while others live eschatologically-empty lives of existential angst and despair. Archonology offers the possibility of experiencing "with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height--to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:18-19). This is no utopian pipedream. It is simply a good-faith attempt to actualize the theology of constructive eschatology.

At this point, we ought to ask, What would an eschatologically-fulfilled life look like? If eschatology is about God's new creation and divine-human reconciliation rather than destruction, then we ought to live creative and reconciled lives. We ought to find new and innovative ways of announcing and effecting reconciliation. This would require us to rescue eschatology from theoretical theology discussed in academic settings to a vibrantly animated way of life. Eschatology is not for believing; it is for living.

The apostle Paul was the eschatological theologian par excellence, yet his eschatology was never a tidy systematic code of belief. He lived his eschatology and called other people to do the same. For instance, following his masterpiece on eschatological resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul reminded his readers to take up a collection for the poor. When reminding the Philippians that the Lord was at hand, Paul urged Euodia and Syntyche to get along with each other, and he commissioned Clement to help them. A resurrected life is a generous life. A person who has been made alive has a responsibility to breathe life into others. An eschatologically-fulfilled life implements reconciliation on an individual level. This is the purpose of archonology.

Often, Bible study ends up as a cold, dull, lifeless analysis into moot areas of speculative investigation. The Transmillennial® view asserts that archonology is more than simply exegeting Scripture. Archonology is living our fulfilled covenantal eschatology "on the ground." We build on the foundation of the historical reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the mission of the first-generation church. We add the layer of biblical exegesis, and that grows into a positive theology. At this point, we must not stop. From here we begin to translate the historical, biblical, theological message into a life-giving, engaging, creative message designed to encounter our world.

Archonology is an open-ended dialogue that embraces the whole scope of human activity, all aspects of life; nothing is left out, and no one is left behind. It is what Molly Marshall wrote about in *What It Means to be Human*: "Not only does God call humans into being, God also calls the human family into special service on behalf of creation."

What would eschatologically-fulfilled art look like? In music, government, international relations, law, labor relations, banking, economics, business, education, psychology,

physics, biology, medicine, ecology, history, architecture, athletics, technology, sociology, family dynamics, fashion, worship, or any other area of human involvement? These are queries archonology opens for dialogue.

Traditional eschatologies do not ask such questions because they either look forward to a destructive cessation of humanity and the world, or they do not contain the conceptual tools to reach beyond history, exegesis, and theology to touch the world of human activity beyond the walls of the church. As the body without the spirit is dead, so is eschatology without a human encounter.

Through the field of archonology, Transmillennialism™ seeks to commence an on-going inquiry into all areas of human pursuit in light of the reconciliation of God and humanity in Jesus Christ. This discussion invites all of humanity into a never-ending conversation and enactment of the creative love of God in Jesus Christ to make a whole new world of love and grace that is the Kingdom of God.

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