

A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Case for a Holistic Reading of the Biblical Story of Redemption

J. Richard Middleton
Roberts Wesleyan College

Over the past quarter of a century various evangelical Christian voices have articulated the bold, even startling, theological claim that the eternal destiny of the redeemed consists in the renewal of earthly life, to the exclusion of a disembodied heaven hereafter.¹ This claim goes beyond the traditional, hybrid idea that we will experience eternal fellowship with God “in heaven,” conceived as a non-physical realm, through the medium of a resurrected body. Indeed, this claim does away entirely with the notion of “heaven” as an eternal hope, since this notion is thought to be fundamentally incompatible with authentic biblical faith. In some circles this claim has been warmly received.² In other circles, however, it has been condemned as heresy.³ In this essay, I

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Christian Theological Research Fellowship, November 18, 2005, in Philadelphia, PA.

² This view is articulated in works such as the following: Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984); Al Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision of Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Redeem Life on Earth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984); Paul Marshal, with Lela Gilbert, *Heaven Is Not My Home: Learning to Live in God’s Creation*; Michael E. Wittmer, *Heaven Is a Place on Earth: Why Everything You do Matters to God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); John Eldridge, *The Journey of Desire: Searching for the Life We’ve Only Dreamed of* (Nashville: Nelson, 2001); and it is assumed in the writings of N. T. Wright; see esp. *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God; London: SPCK/Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

intend to explore the exegetical case for a consistent understanding of redemption as the restoration of God's creational intent, such that the appropriate hope of the redeemed is life in a renewed intra-mundane, earthly creation.⁴

The Logic of Creation and Redemption in Scripture

Let us first clarify the inner theological logic of this claim, by contrasting it with alternate conceptions of creation and redemption that are derived from outside the Bible. Here I am concerned particularly with conceptions that have functioned as a normative grid or lens through which Christians have often read Scripture.

It is important to distinguish, first of all, how *creation* is understood in Scripture from its conception in the modern western worldview (beginning in the Renaissance), since this has impacted how we tend to use the term. The tradition of modernity typically limits creation to "nature" (the non-human, plus the body), as distinct from the human realm of freedom, which is thought to transcend nature. Creation in the biblical tradition, however, includes human society and culture in all its complexity and fullness, along with our earthly environment—an idea that the Bible shares with its ancient Mesopotamian milieu.⁵ This fuller biblical conception of creation—which includes the entire human socio-cultural order—is ignored by many Christians in their reading of Scripture. The idea of the redemption of creation—if it is in view at all—is typically reduced to the (admirable) task of caring for the "environment." Yet this is only one facet of the complex human relationship to the non-human world. On a biblical worldview, all human cultural activities and social institutions arise from our interaction with this "environment." The reduction of creation to "nature" results in the absence of critical reflection on the defining human calling to develop culture and the redemptive calling to participate in its transformation.

But a second distinction is also necessary, concerning how we conceive, not creation, but *redemption*. Here we need to distinguish redemption in the biblical

³ I am aware of at least one professor who lost his job at a Christian liberal arts college for teaching this very idea.

⁴ All biblical translations in this essay are from Today's New International Version (TNIV), unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ For a discussion of how biblical understandings of creation both reflect and dissent from their Mesopotamian milieu, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), chaps. 3-5.

testimony from its logic in the Greek philosophical tradition that has come down to us from Plato—a tradition that has deeply influenced the church’s worldview. In Scripture, redemption is conceived most fundamentally as the reversal of the fall and the restoration of God’s good purposes from the beginning. By way of contrast, in our dualistic philosophical inheritance from Plato, redemption is conceived as transferal from a lower, inferior realm (variously understood as body, earth, matter, nature or the secular) to a higher, more valued or esteemed realm (understood as soul, heaven, spirit, the realm of grace or the sacred). This dualistic assumption is often simply superimposed over biblical texts that address redemption and so leads to a distortion of the Bible’s message. Whereas a dualistic understanding of redemption typically devalues the good world God created and encourages an aspiration to transcend finitude, the biblical worldview leads to an affirmation of the goodness of creation, along with a desire to pray and work for the redemption of precisely *this world* (including human, socio-cultural institutions) that earthly life might be restored to what it was meant to be.⁶ Being aware of the distinction between these two conceptions of redemption helps clarify the significance of the creation-fall-redemption paradigm that is utilized by many who are interested in developing a Christian worldview.⁷

It is important to emphasize here that redemption as the reversal of the fall and the restoration of creation does not mean a return to primitive beginnings. This caution is sometimes behind the theological proposal that we should replace the *creation-fall-redemption* paradigm with a *creation-fall-redemption-consummation* paradigm, since the final eschatological state transcends the simple restoration of creation. There is certainly validity to this proposal.

Indeed, there is good biblical evidence for significant discontinuity between creation and redemption. We may think of Paul’s contrast in 1 Corinthians 15 between

⁶ I acknowledge, as Terence E. Fretheim has noted (*God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* [Abingdon, 2005], 190-191, 345, n. 86), that the terms *redemption* and *salvation* may need to be distinguished in Old Testament usage (with *salvation* being the wider concept and *redemption* being reserved for God’s actions on behalf of Israel). However, in this essay I am using the terms interchangeably.

⁷ For further discussion of the contrast between these two approaches to redemption, see Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*. See chaps. 3-5 for a sketch of the creation-fall-redemption worldview and chaps. 6-7 on the influence of Greek dualism on the Christian tradition.

the present mortal body and the resurrection body, a contrast analogous to the difference between a seed and a fully-grown plant. Likewise, the resurrected Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels as being able to walk through walls and perhaps materialize at will. Nevertheless, the resurrected Jesus is still recognizably the same person and even eats a meal of fish with his disciples on the beach—which suggests a fundamental continuity between creation and redemption. Likewise, a careful reading of 1 Corinthians 15 reveals that the discontinuity Paul emphasizes is between the body *as corrupted by the fall* and the body *finally freed from the bondage of sin*. That is, the primary reason why eschatological redemption differs from our present life in the world is that it entails the removal of sin and death.

But even beyond the discontinuity represented by the removal of sin, it is clear that redemption is not a simple return to primal origins. The Bible itself portrays the move from creation to eschaton as movement from a garden (in Genesis 2) to a city (in Revelation 21-22). Redemption does not reverse, but rather embraces, historical development. The transformation of the initial state of the earth into complex human societies is not part of the fall, but rather the legitimate creational mandate of humanity. Creation was never meant to be static, but was intended by God from the beginning to be developmental, moving toward a goal.⁸ Nevertheless, while there is thus a certain discontinuity between eschatological redemption and the original state of creation, it is important to emphasize that redemption in the Scriptures is the restoration of God's *creational intent* for humanity and the world, including the development of culture and society through humanity's interaction with the earth.⁹

With these two distinctions (concerning creation and redemption) in mind, it becomes easier to see that the traditional picture of "heaven" (found in many classic

⁸ There is even an ancient Christian tradition (assumed in C. S. Lewis' novel *Perelandra: A Novel* [New York: Scribner, 1996; orig. 1944], esp. chap. 16) that even if there were no fall, the original humans, after a time of testing, would have attained a new state of maturity, transcending in some way their original condition, which may well have allowed them to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (see Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994; orig. 1955], chap. 14: "The Planting of the Tree"). For a recent statement of this view, see Nicholas John Ansell, "The Call of Wisdom/ The Voice of the Serpent: A Canonical Approach to the Tree of Knowledge," *Christian Scholars Review* 31/1 (2001): 31-57.

⁹ God's original intent for creation is further discussed (below) in my analysis of the plot of the biblical story.

hymns and contemporary praise songs) as perpetual fellowship with, and worship of, God cannot constitute full redemption in biblical terms. This is because the traditional picture typically omits (and thus implies the negation or abrogation of) large areas of human life that God created good. "Heaven," therefore, as an eschatological state does not constitute genuine redemption of the multifaceted world God intended from the beginning. The logic of biblical redemption, when combined with a biblical understanding of creation, requires the restoration and renewal of the full complexity of human life in our earthly environment, yet without sin.

But is this logic fleshed out in actual biblical teaching? Answering this question will require an exegetical exploration of the content of Scripture. First, I will sketch the plot structure of the biblical story that is represented in abbreviated form by the creation-fall-redemption paradigm. By attending to the basic thrust and movement of the biblical plot it becomes clear that eschatological redemption consists in the renewal of human cultural life on earth, with absolutely no role for "heaven" as the final destiny of the righteous. Second, I will examine five New Testament texts that describe the Christian eschatological hope as the repairing of what went wrong in the fall and that apply this repair as holistically or comprehensively as possible to all creation, human and non-human. Third, I will examine a handful of New Testament texts that do not, on the surface, fit the model of redemption proposed here, and that are typically adduced as counter-examples, since they seem to suggest a supra-mundane destiny for the redeemed. It will be important to examine these proposed counter-examples carefully for what they actually say.

The Plot of the Biblical Story of Redemption

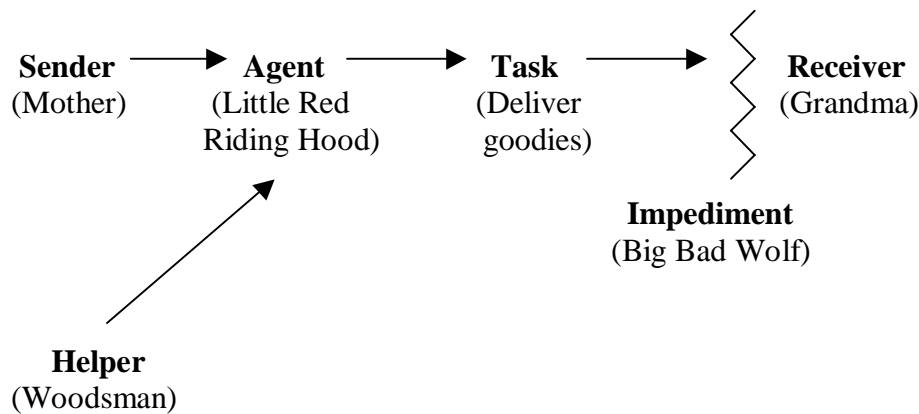
Let us look first at the entire sweep of the story of redemption that the Bible tells. Since the Bible is an immense literature, which I cannot hope to survey in the scope of this brief essay, my plan is to sketch only the outlines of its plot. Indeed, it is at the skeletal level of plot that the narrative thrust of the story becomes clear.

At its most basic level, plot is a matter of something going wrong and being fixed. We call this narrative *tension* or *complication* and narrative *resolution*.¹⁰ It is thus easy to see that the Bible's story of sin and redemption constitutes the rudiments of a plot. But I want to introduce a bit more complexity into the analysis. Here I turn to

¹⁰ Aristotle (*Poetics*, 18.1-3) used the images of "tying" and "loosing" to describe what we would call plot.

categories I have adapted from Vladimir Propp and A. J. Greimas, mediated through the work of New Testament scholar Tom Wright.¹¹ These categories focus on the sending of agents to accomplish tasks and are thus eminently applicable to the biblical macro-narrative, which contains many examples of people called or elected by God for a particular mission.¹² But before applying them to the plot of the biblical story, it will be helpful to see how the categories work by applying them to an easier example—the story of Little Red Riding Hood (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Categories for Plot Analysis



¹¹ Although Wright came to use these categories in *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God; London: SPCK/ Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), I was stimulated to develop the rudiments of my own analysis while listening to Wright’s lectures on the Gospel of Mark given at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, January 31-February 1, 1989. For nuanced discussions of the applicability of Propp’s and Greimas’s categories to biblical scholarship, see Pamela J. Milne, *Vladimir Propp and the Study of Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Bible and Literature; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) and Daniel Patte, *The Religious Dimension of Biblical Texts: Greimas’s Structural Semiotics and Biblical Exegesis* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

¹² The terminology (sender, agent, task, receiver, impediment, and helper) is my own and the model is considerably adapted (I have omitted much from the work of Propp and Greimas). It is intended only as a heuristic, non-technical model for narrative analysis of the large-scale plot of Scripture. Indeed, this model is used, without flagging it as such, to sketch the plot of the biblical story in J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), chap. 6.

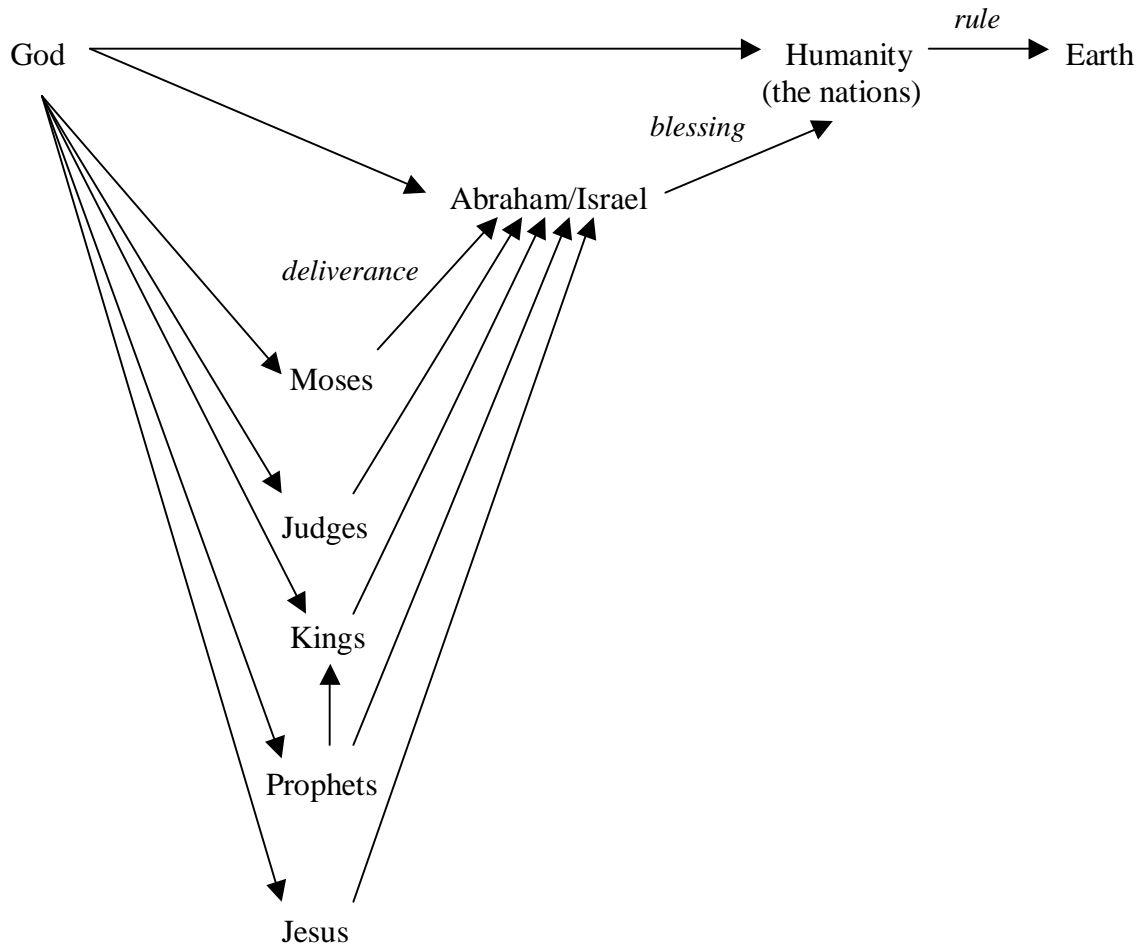
The story begins when Little Red Riding Hood is sent by her mother to deliver a basket of goodies to her grandmother. Here we have an excellent illustration of an initial narrative sequence of *sender—agent—task—receiver*. Although this is how the story begins, there is as yet no plot. The plot proper begins with the introduction of an *impediment* or complication, which prevents the initial narrative sequence from being completed. Enter the Big Bad Wolf. The initial agent now needs help. So we have a *helper* (really a second agent), whose task is to bring aid to the first agent by removing the impediment. In our story, the woodsman comes to the aid of Little Red Riding Hood by killing the Wolf who has swallowed the grandmother. But the removal of the impediment is not yet the end of the story. The story only reaches its fruition—that is, narrative resolution occurs—when the initial narrative sequence is finally completed. Since the story began with Little Red Riding Hood trying to deliver the basket of goodies to her grandmother, the story properly ends only when Little Red and her grandma—and now also the woodsman—have a picnic together.¹³

If we were to apply these categories of plot analysis to the story the Bible tells, it is possible to sketch the plot structure of the entire Bible (see Figure 2).¹⁴

¹³ The presence of the woodsman at the picnic is a new element, not envisioned in the initial narrative sequence. Likewise, the Lamb (who does not appear in the initial narrative sequence of the biblical story) is present in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:22-23; 22:3).

¹⁴ I am here sketching the plot of the Old and New Testaments together (the Christian Bible), conceived as a complex, but indissoluble, unity.

FIGURE 2: The Plot of the Biblical Story



Plot Level 1: Creation and the Human Calling

The initial narrative sequence of Scripture is quite clear: God creates the human race to rule the earth. This is the biblical version of the sequence *sender—agent—task—receiver*. This narrative sequence is found in the three primary statements of human creation in the Bible. In Genesis 1:26-28 the divinely commissioned human task is portrayed as ruling animals and subduing the earth; in Genesis 2:15 the human task is described as working and protecting the garden; and Psalm 8:3-8 tells us that God made humans rulers over the works of God’s hands and has put “all things” under their feet, with

various forms of animal life listed as examples. In all these creation texts, the movement is “missional” —from God via humans outward to the earth. And the fundamental human task is conceived as the responsible exercise of power on God’s behalf over the non-human world.¹⁵

It is sometimes shocking for readers of the Bible to realize that the initial purpose and *raison d’être* of humanity is never explicitly portrayed in Scripture as the worship of God (or anything that would conform to our notion of the “spiritual,” with its dualistic categories). Instead, Scripture portrays the human purpose in rather mundane terms of exercising power over our earthly environment as God’s representatives. In the context of the ancient Near East (which is the Bible’s original context), rule of the earth refers most basically to the development of agriculture and animal husbandry, which are the basis of human societal organization, and ultimately includes the development of all aspects of culture, technology and civilization.¹⁶ To put it another way, while various psalms (like 148 and 96) indeed call upon *all* creatures (humans included) to worship or serve God in the cosmic temple of creation (heaven and earth), the distinctive way *humans* worship or render service to the Creator is by the development of culture through interaction with our earthly environment (in a manner that glorifies God).¹⁷

¹⁵ This rule of the earth on God’s behalf is precisely what Genesis 1:26-28 means by the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*), as is recognized by most Old Testament scholars. For an account of the history of interpretation of humanity as *imago Dei*, see Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, chap. 1.

¹⁶ For further analysis of the human purpose in Genesis, see Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, chaps. 2 and 5; Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster/ Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), chap. 4; Middleton and Walsh, *The Transforming Vision*, chap. 3; and A. M. Wolters, “The Foundational Command: ‘Subdue the Earth!’” in *Year of Jubilee; Cultural Mandate; Worldview* (Study Pamphlet 382; ed. B. van der Walt; Potchefstroom: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1999), 27-32. See also Eric G. Flett, “Priests of Creation, Mediators of Order: The Human Person as a Cultural Being in Thomas F. Torrance’s Theological Anthropology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 58/2 (2005): 161-183.

¹⁷ This is not meant to exclude what we call “worship” from the appropriate human response to God. My point is twofold. First, the cultural development of the earth, rather than “worship” narrowly conceived, is explicitly stated to be the human purpose in biblical texts recounting the creation of humanity. “Worship” in the narrow sense may be understood as part of human cultural activity. Second, we should not reduce human worship/service of God to verbal, emotionally charged expressions of praise (which is what we usually mean by the term). Note that Paul in Romans 12:1-2 borrows language of sacrifice and liturgy from Israel’s cult in order to describe full-orbed bodily obedience (which, he says, is our true worship). This is the Bible’s typical emphasis.

But a *complication* or *impediment* soon arises to prevent completion of the initial narrative sequence. In Genesis 3 this is portrayed initially as human transgression or violation of a boundary God has prescribed (the tree of the knowledge of good and evil), with consequences for *inter-human* boundary transgression in Genesis 4 (Cain's murder of Abel, then Lamech's bigamy and his retribution killing of a youth who injured him). These consequences of the original transgression escalate in each generation that follows, until violence—which is fundamentally inter-human violation—fills the earth. Indeed, human violence or bloodshed, which has corrupted the earth, is noted in Genesis 6 as the reason for the flood. However, Genesis 8 understands the flood as an ultimately failed attempt at narrative resolution, since the human heart has not been changed.

That is, while the initial narrative sequence of Scripture expects humanity to work together, exercising power vis-à-vis their earthly environment, in order to transform the initially primitive earthly state into a complex culture that brings glory to God, humans rebel against God and increasingly use their power against each other, resulting in the world of violence, brutality and abuse we know only too well—indeed, resulting in our subjection of the earth to corruption or futility.¹⁸

Plot Level 2: Abraham/Israel

God then initiates a secondary narrative sequence—a subplot in the biblical story—that will frame the rest of the Old Testament and most of the New Testament. God calls Abraham out from the now diversified human race (described as the nations or the families of the earth) to be a *new agent* or *helper*, precisely to impact the human race, the original agent. While God promises Abraham a large family—indeed a nation—with its own land, neither of these is the ultimate purpose for which Abraham has been called. In five texts in Genesis (starting with 12:1-3), God tells Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that their purpose (including that of their descendents) is to mediate blessing to the human race—as if this new family will be God's priests in the world.¹⁹ The task entrusted to Abraham and his descendents is, narratively speaking, to aid in reconciling humanity to God and thus restoring humanity to its original purpose, by helping to remove or

¹⁸ Note that violence is the *misuse* of the power God gave humans to rule the earth.

¹⁹ This is stated to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, 18:17-18, 22:17-18, to Isaac in Genesis 26:4-5, and to Jacob in Genesis 28:14.

overcome the impediment of sin/violence.²⁰ Whereas human power or agency was originally to be used for cultural development of our earthly environment, in a post-fall world, it is (also) to be used redemptively, for addressing the problem of human evil and brokenness.

Plot Level 3: Moses to Jesus

But a new impediment arises. Summarizing a great deal of narrative detail here, Abraham's family migrates to Egypt due to a famine, increases in number there and ends up in bondage. God then calls a new narrative agent to help this family, now known as Israel. This agent is Moses, whose story (a sub-subplot) takes up four books of the Pentateuch (Exodus to Deuteronomy).²¹ Summarizing further, Moses' complex narrative task is to bring deliverance to Israel, to mediate the Torah as instruction for Israel's communal life, and to guide the newly liberated people back to the land initially promised to Abraham. Moses is successful in this task. In terms of the plot, we would expect that Israel would now get on with the task of bringing blessing to the nations. And, indeed, we find a re-articulation of the Abrahamic calling, applied to the entire nation in Exodus 19:3-6. Right after the exodus from Egypt, when the people have arrived at Mt. Sinai, Moses tells them that they are called—in the context of the whole earth, which belongs to God—to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:6). This is another way of describing the Abrahamic calling of mediating blessing to the world.

But new impediments arise that prevent the fulfillment of this task. Summarizing even more detail here, we could sketch God's call of Gideon in Judges 6:11-17 to deliver Israel from oppression by their enemies once they are in the land of promise—and God calls other judges too, over and over—but these plot resolutions are all temporary. Indeed, the institution of judge degenerates in the person of Sampson, the anti-judge, followed by bloody inter-tribal violence, when everyone did what was right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6, 21:25). In sum, life has again regressed to the pre-flood situation. Then follows God's reluctant concession to Israel's request for a king “like the nations” to govern them and fight their battles (1 Samuel 8). In the midst of a complex narrative of mostly failed kings, who do not help in restoring Israel to their mission of bringing

²⁰ Although how this is to be done is not explicitly stated.

²¹ That it is a sub-subplot is clear from the chart in Figure 2

blessing to the world, God begins sending prophets, first to the kings, but then to the people.²² But the prophets' message to both king and people to return to the LORD largely goes unheeded, resulting in the Assyrian destruction of the Northern kingdom in the eighth century and then the Babylonian invasion of Judah in the sixth century, followed by exile.

Finally—jumping even further ahead—God sends his son, Jesus the Christ, as a helper or agent to restore Israel to their purpose and task. It is important to note that, in terms of the plot structure of the Bible, Jesus did not come initially to save the world from sin, but to restore Israel—and this is confirmed by looking at the actual ministry and message of Jesus in the Gospels. Not only do we have Jesus' famous comments to a Canaanite woman about his mission to “the “lost sheep” of the house of Israel,” (Matthew 15:21-28), but he also commissions the Twelve (symbolizing the core of a restored remnant) to aid him in this mission (Matthew 10:1-16). In this first commissioning of “apostles” (meaning “sent ones”), Jesus explicitly enjoins them not to go to the Gentiles or the Samaritans, but only to the towns of Israel.

Plot Level 2: The Gentile Mission

Of course, by the end of Matthew, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, when a sufficiently large body of (Jewish) disciples have been gathered, the risen Jesus finally commissions the apostles to take up the Abrahamic task, namely to go to the nations/Gentiles with the message of the Gospel. The story of the Gentile mission then takes up much of the book of Acts and is the background to the Pauline and general epistles.²³

I want to conclude this sketch of the biblical plot by comparing two New Testament texts that describe the calling of the people of God. Both of these texts clearly

²² It is fascinating to see the stylized (form-critical) similarities in the call narratives of Moses (Exodus 3:1-4:18), Gideon (Judges 6:11-7), Saul (1 Samuel 9:15-21), David (2 Samuel 7:8-27), Solomon (1 Kings 3:4-9) and Jeremiah (1:1-19), especially the objection that the one called is inadequate (typically framed as a question or series of questions, focused on “Who am I?”). It is intriguing that there are similarities between the questions in these texts and the “What is humanity?” question in Psalm 8, a text that describes the human calling. All these texts have fundamentally the same function, in that they (but not only they) describe the empowering of agents to impact the biblical story.

²³ The Abrahamic blessing is specifically interpreted in Acts 3:25-26 as the offering of salvation.

depend on the first articulation of Israel's calling at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:3-6) and they will serve to illustrate how the biblical plot structure moves from level 3 back to level 2 and then back to level 1 again.

The first New Testament text—which comes after the successful plot resolution effected by Jesus—uses language taken from the Exodus 19 description of God's election of Israel to articulate the mission of the church, now composed of both Jews and Gentiles (due to the continuing success of the Gentile mission). "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, *that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*" (1 Peter 2:9). While the language is different from that found in the Great Commission, the task here is fundamentally the same. This is a continuation of the Abrahamic calling. God's redeemed people are called to mediate blessing to the world. We are back to level 2 in the plot structure.

Plot Level 1: The Human Calling Restored

However, we find a very different use of this Exodus 19 language in Revelation 5. In John's eschatological vision of worshipers around God's heavenly throne, we discover a group of heavenly creatures singing praise to the Lamb who was slain and who is "standing" in resurrection victory. The Gentile mission that was inaugurated with the call of Abraham/Israel is here portrayed as complete—the nations have received the blessing of salvation. Therefore, the worshipers sing to the Lamb:

You are worthy because you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God members from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, *and they will reign on the earth.* (Revelation 5:9-10)

Here, once the subplot of the sending of Israel has been successful and the nations have received the blessing of salvation, the redeemed human race will once again utilize their God-given power and agency to rule the earth as God intended—a renewal of the human cultural task, but this time without sin.²⁴ The initial narrative sequence of the

²⁴ The application of the Exodus 19 language to this task suggests that humanity's role vis-à-vis the earth is analogous to that of Israel vis-à-vis the nations—the priestly mediation of blessing.

biblical story will finally be fulfilled.²⁵ Far from being the end or cessation of history, this is history's true beginning, free from the constraints of human violation either vis-à-vis God, other humans or the earth itself.

What have we learned from this sketch of the biblical story? By attending to the basic thrust and movement of the biblical plot it becomes abundantly clear that eschatological redemption consists in nothing other than the renewal of human cultural life on earth. The important point here is that the idea of "heaven" as the eternal hope of the righteous has *no structural place* in the story. It is simply irrelevant and extraneous to the plot. "Heaven" was never part of God's purposes for humanity in the beginning of the story and has no intrinsic role as the final destiny of human salvation. Indeed, that there is not one single reference in the entire biblical canon (Old or New Testament) to "heaven" as the eternal destiny of the believer. While this idea has a vastly important role in popular Christian imagination (and even in some theologies), not once does Scripture itself actually say that the righteous will live forever in "heaven."²⁶

The Comprehensive Scope of Redemption in the New Testament

But this conclusion is not simply derived from examining the plot structure of the Bible. It is, further, supported by specific statements made in various New Testament texts that describe the final, eschatological completion of salvation—what is expected to happen when God's redemptive purposes come to fruition. I will examine five such texts. In each of these texts I am interested in two interconnected questions: First, how is the saving *activity* of God described? And, second, what is the *object* or *recipient* of God's saving activity? When we ask these two questions of each text, we will see a definite pattern emerge (see Figure 3).

Acts 3:19-21

The simplest and perhaps most cryptic of the texts is Acts 3. Here Peter is preaching the Gospel in Jerusalem. In verses 19-21 of his sermon, he exhorts his hearers:

²⁵ Little Red Riding Hood and her Grandma finally have their picnic.

²⁶ Since the mid-seventies I have been asking my students (in adult Sunday School classes, in campus ministry study groups, in undergraduate and graduate courses) to find even one passage in the Bible that actually says that Christians will live in heaven forever (or that heaven is the eternal destiny of the righteous). After a lot of searching, they admit—incredulously—that they can't find any.

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God *to restore everything*, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. (Acts 3:19-21)

It is clear in this text that the eschatological saving activity of God is described as *restoration* and that it is applied as comprehensively as possible, to *everything* (verse 21). This somewhat brief and cryptic statement gains clarity from comparing it to other statements in various New Testament epistles.

Ephesians 1:9-10

Thus, in Ephesians 1 we have a long Pauline sentence describing God's plan of salvation. The most important section for our purposes is verses 9-10.

And he [God] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to *bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ*. (Ephesians 1:9-10)

Here salvation is understood as the task of *unifying, under one head* (namely Christ), that which has been fragmented (or perhaps alienated) and this unifying action is applied comprehensively to *all things in heaven and on earth* (verse 10).

Colossians 1:19-20

Our third text is from Colossians 1, which contains another long Pauline sentence. Verses 19-20 constitute the conclusion of this sentence and articulate God's purpose in sending Christ.

God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Christ], and through him *to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross*. (Colossians 1:19-20)

In this text salvation is conceived as *reconciliation* or *making peace* between those who are at enmity, presumably by removing the source of that enmity, namely sin. Indeed, verse 20 contains the idea of atonement through the blood of Christ. But Paul does not myopically limit the efficacy of Christ's atonement to humanity. Rather, the

reconciliation with God effected by Christ's shed blood is applied as comprehensively as possible to *all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven*.

2 Peter 3:10-13

Our fourth text is from 2 Peter 3:10-13. Although the text is dominated by language of judgment and destruction, there are two positive statements about redemption nestled in this text (in verses 10 and 13).

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and *the earth and everything in it will be laid bare*. . . . That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to *a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness*." (2 Peter 3:10, 12-13)

Here the saving activity of God is described first as *laying bare* (or *uncovering*), with *the earth* designated as the object of this activity (verse 10). The image is of the smelting of metal, where the dross is burned off so that the pure metal may be revealed (or "laid bare"). Then, at the end of verse 13 God's saving activity is described as *renewal*, and this is applied to *heaven and earth* (that is, the entire created universe), which will be characterized by righteousness.²⁷

We should pause here and note that prior to the New International Version, no English translation said the earth was "laid bare" at the end of verse 10. Instead, translators typically followed the King James Version, which has "burned up" — a reading that certainly fits the dominant image of destruction in the text. As is well-known to New Testament scholars, this is not a translation decision, but rather a matter of textual criticism. But whereas the translators of the KJV had only inferior Greek manuscripts available to them, and thus may be excused, many later English translators continued to utilize these inferior manuscripts despite the clear presence of the verb for "laid bare" (or "revealed," "uncovered" or "discovered") in the main Greek codices that form the primary witnesses used to construct the eclectic Greek text on which modern

²⁷ That the "new" heavens and "new" earth refer to renewal rather replacement (starting from scratch) is indicated both from the context, which has the earth being laid bare or uncovered, and from the text's choice of *kainos*, rather than *neos* for "new."

translations are typically based. It seems that, aided and abetted by a dualistic worldview which devalued earthly life and *assumed* a supra-mundane destiny for the redeemed, translators allowed the tenor of judgment in 2 Peter 3 to overwhelm the text and determine their text-critical choices (going against the dictum that the more difficult reading is probably the better reading).²⁸ While the text undoubtedly speaks of judgment and destruction (using the image of a cosmic conflagration), it describes the destruction, not of creation, but of *sin*, thus cleansing or purifying creation.

Romans 8:19-23

The fifth text is Romans 8:19-23. Here Paul draws on both the imagery of childbirth (labor pains) and the language of Exodus 2:23-24, which portrays the Israelites groaning in their bondage under Pharaoh (a different sort of labor pains).²⁹ In Romans 8 Paul applies these images not just to the human condition, but to the entire created order.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that *the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God*. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, *the redemption of our bodies*. (Romans 8:19-23)

Utilizing the model of deliverance from Egyptian bondage, Paul here portrays salvation first (in verse 21) as *liberation* or *setting free* from bondage, and this is applied to *creation itself* and also to *humanity* (described as the sons/children of God). It is because the human race implicitly takes the place of Pharaoh in Paul's picture (subjecting creation to frustration) that non-human creatures await human liberation.³⁰ Since humans have

²⁸ For a lucid exploration of this issue, see Al Wolters, "Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10," *Westminster Theological Journal* 49/2 (1987): 405-413.

²⁹ For Paul's use of the exodus traditions (including a discussion of Romans 8), see Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Paul and His Story: (Re)Interpreting the Exodus Tradition* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 181; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

³⁰ Commentators have historically been divided as to the identity of the one who subjected creation to frustration, positing variously God, the devil or humanity (Adam). Humanity is certainly the most likely candidate (or even if it is God, this is a divine response to human sin, mediating its cosmic consequences).

been granted dominion over the non-human world, the oppressor has first to be liberated. But human liberation is not simply “internal” (affecting only the “soul”), since salvation, portrayed as *redemption*—which continues the exodus imagery—is applied in verse 23 to our very *bodies* (a reference to the resurrection).

**FIGURE 3: The Comprehensive Scope of Redemption
(5 New Testament Texts Describing the Ultimate Goal of Salvation)**

Scripture	Saving Activity of God Described	Object of God’s Saving Activity
Acts 3:17-21 (esp. 21)	<i>Restoration</i>	<i>Everything</i>
Ephesians 1:7-10 (esp. 10)	<i>Bringing together, unifying</i> (under one head)	<i>All things in heaven and on earth</i>
Colossians 1:16-20 (esp. 20)	<i>Reconciliation</i> (by removing the source of enmity, through the blood of the cross)	<i>All things whether on earth or in heaven</i>
2 Peter 3:10-13 (esp. 10 & 13)	<i>Uncovering, laying bare</i> (having purified) <i>Re-creation, renewal, making new</i>	<i>The earth and everything in it</i> <i>Heaven and earth</i>
Romans 8:19-23 (esp. 21 & 23)	<i>Liberation, setting free</i> (from bondage to decay) <i>Redemption</i>	<i>Creation itself; humanity</i> <i>Our bodies</i>
Basic Characteristics of Salvation:	<i>Restorative</i> Salvation is God repairing what went wrong with creation (not taking us out of the world, to “heaven”)	<i>Comprehensive and holistic</i> God intends to redeem or restore “all things” in heaven and on earth, including our bodies (salvation doesn’t just apply to the human “soul”)

When we pull together the unifying strands of these five texts, a clear pattern emerges (see Figure 3). First, salvation is conceived, not as God doing something completely

According to the first chapters of Genesis humanity has been granted stewardship over their earthly environment. It therefore follows that human corruption has inevitably affected that which has been entrusted to their care, with the result that the non-human realm is now “subjected to frustration.” That the redemption of the entire created order awaits the redemption of humanity thus implies a redeemed exercise of stewardship over the earth. The text assumes that renewed cultural activity is the primary mode of human response to the lordship of Christ.

new, but rather as *re-doing* something, fixing or repairing what went wrong, an interpretation that is congruent with the biblical language of restoration, reconciliation, renewal, and redemption. Second, this restorative work is applied *as holistically and comprehensively as possible*, to all things in heaven and on earth. Since “heaven and earth” is how Scripture typically designates the created order (with the earth consistently understood as the dwelling of humanity³¹), the final salvific state envisioned in these texts clearly contradicts an understanding of a supra-mundane “heaven” as the ultimate dwelling-place of the redeemed.

Problem Texts for a Holistic Eschatology

There are, nevertheless, certain New Testament texts that do not—on the surface—fit the holistic model of redemption proposed here, and these texts are typically adduced as counter-examples since they seem to suggest a supra-mundane destiny for the redeemed.

These texts include Jesus’ reference to the place he was going to prepare for the disciples in John 14:1-3, Paul’s description of his longed-for heavenly dwelling, along with his desire to be absent from the body and present with the Lord, in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, and the idea of the “rapture” in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and Matthew 24:36-44. It will be worth carefully examining these proposed counter-examples for what they actually say.

John 14:1-3

In John 14 Jesus comforts the disciples, in the farewell discourse, about his imminent departure.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. My Father’s house has plenty of room; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.
(John 14:1-3)

On the surface, this certainly seems to say that Jesus is going to take the disciples to live with him in “heaven” (his Father’s house with many rooms). Undeniably, Jesus is returning to heaven (even though the actual term is not used) to prepare a place for

³¹ As is explicitly stated in Psalm 115:16.

the disciples. And when he returns they will, indeed, be with him. But *where* will this be?

One answer is to look at Revelation 21:1-5, with its vision of “a new heaven and a new earth” (that is, a new creation).³² There the seer reports,

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.” (Revelation 21:2-3)

The very description of the New Jerusalem as a bride “prepared” for her husband should remind us of Jesus going to “prepare” a place for the disciples. Indeed, both preparations take place in heaven. In Revelation 21, however, the New Jerusalem (which is both a holy city and the people of God—that is, redeemed humanity in their concrete socio-cultural, even urban, character), comes down out of heaven. Here it is very clear that the final, permanent dwelling place of God with humanity is on earth. Indeed, one chapter later we are told (in Revelation 22:3) that in the New Jerusalem—which has come down from heaven to earth—there will no longer be any curse (Genesis 3 will be finally reversed). Instead, God will be enthroned there (on earth) and God’s servants (according to verse 5) will “reign forever.”³³

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

A second text often cited as a counter-example to a holistic vision of redemption is 2 Corinthians 5:1-10. In the context of describing persecution and suffering, Paul encourages his readers:

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our

³² I am not here assuming that the author of Revelation must be the same John as the author of the Gospel. Rather, I am engaging in an intertextual reading of Scripture.

³³ The word “forever” is crucial, for it disabuses us of the idea of some temporary earthly “Millennium,” to be followed by an eternal “heavenly” state.

heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. (2 Corinthians 5:1-5)

When Paul goes on to correlate “at home in the body” with “away from the Lord” (5:6) and “away from the body” with “at home with the Lord” (5:8), it certainly sounds as though he is contrasting embodied life on earth with the hope of living in heaven forever. Yet a close reading of verses 1-2 suggests that when Paul contrasts life in our “earthly tent,” in which we groan, with our “heavenly dwelling,” “a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (5:1-2), he is contrasting two forms of bodily life—our *present body* (subject to death) with the *promised resurrection body* which is being prepared for us by God in heaven.

The common assumption of the New Testament is that heaven is the place where salvation is being prepared for the faithful, until God’s kingdom comes in its fullness.³⁴ Quite consistently, the New Testament describes salvation (sometimes described as a city, a building, a kingdom or an inheritance) as being “prepared,” “kept” or “reserved” for Christians in heaven (where their citizenship presently is), only to be revealed at the last day—on earth.³⁵

It is true that 2 Corinthians 5 is one of the few texts in the New Testament that alludes to an “intermediate state”—the possibility of communion with Christ (presumably in “heaven”) beginning after death, but prior to the resurrection. Yet one thing is clear. Despite this brief allusion, it is the *resurrection*—not the intermediate state—that is Paul’s ultimate desire and hope. He hammers home the point that he fully expects “not to be naked” (5:3), that he does “not wish to be unclothed” (5:4); instead he longs to be clothed with his heavenly dwelling (5:2). In other words, Paul’s explicit hope is not for existence as a “naked” soul or spirit (presumably in heaven), but for eternal embodied life (on earth).³⁶

³⁴ This idea underlies Matthew 25:34; John 14:1-3; Acts 3:21; 1 Corinthians 2:9; 2 Corinthians 5:1-4; Philippians 3:20-21; Colossians 1:5; Hebrews 11:16; 1 Peter 1:3-5; Revelation 3:12, 21:2.

³⁵ The direction of salvation is from heaven to earth, *not* from earth to heaven. This is a central point in George Eldon Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), esp. chap. 1: “The Background of the Pattern: Greek or Hebrew?”

³⁶ Indeed, it is notable that while there is significant attention to the hope of resurrection in the New Testament, there is no clear doctrine of the intermediate state that might clarify Paul’s inchoate

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

A third possible counter-example to a holistic vision of redemption is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, one of two classic texts on the “rapture.” In 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul is encouraging the early church, by affirming that those who have died in the faith prior to the return of the Lord will not be disadvantaged. He tells his readers in verses 15-16 that the dead in Christ will, indeed, have precedence over the living at the second coming, in being raised first. “After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” (1 Thessalonians 4:17) While this certainly seems, at first blush, to support the idea of living eternally in heaven, it is intriguing that (like John 14) the text does not say *where* we will be with the Lord forever. This has to be supplied by the interpreter from the tenor of the rest of Scripture. As we have seen, Scripture suggests this will be on earth.

Paul is here drawing on the Greco-Roman custom of *apantēsis* (“meeting”), indicated even by his own use of the verb *apantēsin* (“to meet”) in verse 17. As Gene Green has aptly pointed out, “this was almost a technical term that described the custom of sending a delegation outside the city to receive a dignitary who was on the way to town.”³⁷ It was customary for people to vie for pride of place in meeting the dignitary, hence Paul’s assurance that Christians who had already died would not be inconvenienced at this great event; rather they would rise first (and perhaps even be the first to meet the coming King). Most importantly, explains Green, the custom was that

conception here. Other New Testament allusions to some sort of “heavenly” existence prior to resurrection do not help. Let us take the three most obvious. The reference to Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham in Luke 16:19-31 is a vivid, imaginative picture used in a parable by Jesus to make a particular point about judgment. As is widely recognized, it is not meant to teach anything positive about an intermediate state. Likewise, the reference to the “souls” of the martyrs under the altar in Revelation 6:9-10 is of little help, since these righteous dead are clearly not at peace (as in the traditional picture of heaven), but are crying out “How long?” on behalf of those suffering on earth. Finally, Jesus’ words to the thief on the cross in Luke 23:39-43 confuses matters considerably, since his assurance “*Today* you will be with me in Paradise” is difficult to fit with the New Testament’s own reckoning that Jesus was not raised until the third day and did not ascend to heaven for some time after that. This text might actually be used to support the notion of soul-sleep (the idea that there is no consciousness of the intermediate state, but that one moves subjectively from death to resurrection).

³⁷ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Leicester, UK: Apollos/ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 226.

those who went out to meet the dignitary *returned* with him, escorting him in grand procession into their city.³⁸ In this case, this means an escort *to earth*.

Matthew 24:37-41

The fourth putative counter-example is Matthew 24:37-41, which also happens to be the other standard proof text for the "rapture." Here Jesus explains what will happen when the Son of Man returns. According to verses 40-41: "Two men will be in the field; *one will be taken* and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; *one will be taken* and the other left." The common assumption of many biblical interpreters is that the one taken is the believer, going to heaven to be with the Lord.

The problem is that we do not typically read the text carefully enough. Let us understand the comparison Jesus makes. First, Jesus describes what life was like in the time of Noah, when people did not expect the flood. His point in verse 39 is that "they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and *took them all away*. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man." Note that the phrase *took them all away* describes judgment (it was Noah and his family who were *left* on the earth). Thus, when Jesus introduces the eschatological equivalent to the days of Noah (in verses 40-41) it is clear from the analogy he draws that the ones *taken* are the unrighteous, to judgment.

If we doubt this interpretation, we need only turn to Luke's version of this text, for he follows the narrative of one taken and one left (in 17:34 and 36) with a question from the disciples in verse 37. "Where, Lord?" they ask. That is, where are they taken? Jesus replies, "Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather." This is clearly a reference to judgment; the image is certainly not of "heaven."³⁹ We should not be surprised by this, for the same Jesus who taught about the last days in Matthew 24 proclaimed in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the meek for they will *inherit the earth*" (Matthew 5:5).⁴⁰

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

³⁹ The image Jesus alludes to is the valley of Ben-Hinnom (*gai-ben-hinnom* or Gehenna), southwest of Jerusalem, which had become the city dump in the Second Temple period, used for incinerating garbage, dead animals and executed criminals. In the Old Testament the valley of Ben-Hinnom is associated with idolatry and child sacrifice (by burning) to Baal or Molech.

⁴⁰ This reminds me of a cartoon in which one character says that the Bible predicts the destruction of the earth; to which another character replies, Do the meek know this?

It turns out, then, that a close reading of these supposed counter-examples to a holistic vision of redemption reveals that they do *not* teach a supra-mundane destiny for redeemed humanity. Indeed, they fit remarkably well with the dominant tenor of Scripture, which portrays the redemption of the entire created order and human redemption as the restoration of bodily life on earth—that is, the renewal of God’s creational intent from the beginning.

What Role Then for Heaven?

The point of this essay is certainly not to deny the existence of heaven. There is, indeed, an important role for heaven in the biblical worldview. In Scripture, the term “heaven” (or the “heavens”) represents, first of all, part of the created universe: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). In this context, “heaven” certainly refers to that aspect of creation understood to be more transcendent (the realm beyond ordinary human access). This is why Scripture portrays heaven as the throne of God—with earth as God’s footstool (Isaiah 66:1-2), an image, paradoxically, not only of God’s transcendence but also of God’s immanence (since he has chosen to dwell *within* the created order).⁴¹

Heaven is also the realm—in contradistinction to earth—where God’s will is perfectly accomplished prior to the eschaton. This is the assumption behind the prayer Jesus taught his disciples: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). It is the biblical eschatological hope that one day God’s salvation (which is being prepared in heaven) will be manifest fully on earth. Then earth will be fully conformed to heaven

But “heaven” simply does *not* describe the Christian eschatological hope. Not only is the term “heaven” never used in Scripture for the eternal destiny of the redeemed, but continued use of “heaven” to name the Christian hope may well divert our attention from the legitimate biblical expectation for the present transformation of our *earthly* life to conform to God’s purposes. Indeed, to focus our expectation on an otherworldly salvation has the potential to dissipate our resistance to societal evil and the dedication needed to work for the redemptive transformation of this world.

⁴¹Terence Fretheim has convincingly argued that because in the biblical worldview “heaven” is part of the created order, the location of God’s throne in “heaven” is actually an image of the *immanence* of God within creation. See Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 37.

Therefore, for reasons exegetical, theological and ethical, I have come to repent of using the term “heaven” to describe the future God has in store for the faithful. It is my hope that all readers of this essay would—after thoughtful consideration—join me in this repentance.