

Ecology and the Johannine Literature

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From an initial point of view, concerns about ecology and the depreciation of the environment do not seem to be addressed in the biblical writings, suggesting that the Christian tradition has nothing positive and creative to offer in current debate on these issues. From another, and deeper, viewpoint, however, such a conclusion is superficial: it does not follow that Scripture has nothing to offer in current theological discussion on these (and other) matters. There are implications in biblical theology that can and must be drawn out to address the present context. These are perhaps most clearly present in the two creation accounts in Genesis 1-2, and other Old Testament texts that are influenced directly by the creation story. But such implications are also apparent in other parts of Scripture, particularly the New Testament. This paper examines the perspective of the Johannine literature, and what it may have to contribute to present-day theological concerns on the environment. The main focus is the Gospel of John and the Johannine Epistles (1, 2, and 3 John), but it includes some brief reflections also on the Book of Revelation.¹

Importance of 'Flesh' in the Gospel and Epistles

John the evangelist's understanding of redemption, in both the Gospel and Epistles, is grounded in a theology of creation as the work of God's hands. In the Fourth Gospel, John affirms the nature of material reality. On the one hand, the Word is the source and origin of creation, the one 'through whom all things were made' (Jn 1:3). On the other hand, the Word is made *flesh* in Jesus Christ. The Word, who is the source and origin of creation, enters the world as part of it: Creator becomes creation. Here John presupposes that human beings, originally made in God's image, have lost something of their original, created identity. Yet, through the incarnation, the advent of the Word and all that it implies in terms of Jesus' ministry and sacrificial death, that original, sublime identity is restored and those who believe become 'children of God', born of the divine Spirit (Jn 1:13; 3:3, 5). This incarnational worldview is confirmed in the Johannine Epistles, which reiterate the centrality of the Word-made-flesh as part of the core of Christian faith (e.g. 1 Jn 4:2; 2 Jn 7).

Much of this perspective derives from the Johannine use of the term 'flesh' (*sarx*). This concept is first introduced in the Prologue to the Gospel (Jn 1:1-18),² where it appears twice.³ In the first instance, rebirth is depicted as solely the work of God (1:13): 'As many as received him, he gave them authority to become children of God, to those believing in his

name, who were born not of blood nor of the will of *flesh* nor of the will of a man but of God' (1:12-13). Though created by God, flesh does not possess the 'authority' (*exousia*, 1:12) to bring about new birth. Moreover, between creation and God stands the 'darkness' which obscures the original face-to-face relationship between Creator and creation (1:5). Only God, not creaturely flesh, can enable human beings to recover their true identity. The second use of 'flesh' in the next verse brings us to the central point of the Prologue: 'and the Word became *flesh* and dwelt/tabernacled among us' (*eskēnōsen*, 1:14a). 'Flesh' here is the part which stands for the whole, indicating the full humanity of the divine Word, a humanity that is bodily and spiritual. The central paradox of the Fourth Gospel is thus that the Word, the pre-existent Son, in the words of Tertullian, is 'born yet not born, carnal yet spiritual, weak yet strong, dying yet living'.⁴

In the ensuing narrative of the Gospel, the 'signs' of Jesus' ministry involve the restoration of mortal flesh (Jn 1-12): the healing of the royal official's son and the disabled man at the pool (Jn 4:46-5:9), the feeding of the hungry (Jn 6:1-15), the restoring of sight to the man born blind (Jn 9:1-7), the raising of Lazarus from the dead (Jn 11:38-44). Within the public ministry of Jesus in these chapters, there are several contexts in which references to 'flesh' explicitly appear. In John 3, for example, Jesus uses the terms in the context of birth. Nicodemus' extraordinary failure to comprehend birth as a metaphor of entry into eternal life becomes clear (Jn 3:1-10). The new order which requires so radical a transformation has already been indicated symbolically by the miracle at Cana, in the changing of water into wine (Jn 2:1-12). Only by being born 'from above' can Nicodemus enter into the new reality which the Johannine Jesus both brings and embodies (Jn 3:3-5). Here the evangelist sets out two parallel spheres of flesh and Spirit: 'that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit' (3:6). The distinction between the two is not pejorative but descriptive: it defines the radical distinction between God and creation. New life comes only from the breath of the divine Spirit, and not from anything that mortal flesh can achieve.

The story of the feeding of the 5,000 also makes explicit reference to 'flesh' (Jn 6:1-15), especially in the long dialogue that follows the actual feeding (6:25-71). In these verses, Jesus is revealed as the bread of life, the manna from heaven, on which/whom believers must feed in order to have eternal life. The phrase 'flesh and blood', in the latter part of the dialogue (6:53-56), refers to Jesus himself in the context of faith and worship. The divine self-giving through the incarnation and Jesus' sacrificial death represents the one self-giving which is both human and divine: in a secondary sense, it points to word and sacrament as embodying that life-giving event. The flesh of Jesus is that which dies and rises again,

creating and sustaining life—not just physically but also eternally (6:57-58). Yet John asserts a few verses later that the flesh is ‘of no avail’ (Jn 6:63). Here the ineffectiveness of flesh is contrasted negatively with ‘the life-giving Spirit’. The point here is that flesh *of itself* has no power to give eternal life. The same negative connotation is found at John 8:15, where judging ‘according to the flesh’ is contrasted with the refusal of the Johannine Jesus to judge anyone. Only the Spirit who is the author of life has such power; only the ‘flesh’ of Jesus in incarnation and atonement, where it radiates the divine glory, can transfigure mortal flesh.

The last explicit occurrence of ‘flesh’ occurs in the second half of the Gospel, in Jesus’ private ministry to his disciples (Jn 13-17), at the beginning of Jesus’ great prayer. The phrase ‘all flesh’ (Jn 17:2a) can be read in a narrower or broader sense: it may refer only to human beings or it may point, in an expanded sense, to all creation. But just as, in describing the incarnation, John chooses to use ‘flesh’, so here is the same choice of language. ‘When it stands by itself, *sarx* [flesh] is not just another way of saying ‘man’’.⁵ In some of its wider biblical usage (as, for example, the Flood narrative, Gen 6-9), ‘flesh’ can refer to all living creatures and not just human beings—in Johannine terms, all that is formed by the divine Word.⁶ In this sense, John 17:2 can be read with both creation and incarnation in mind. The Son’s dominion over ‘all flesh’ in creation is set alongside the assertion that the Word/Son became flesh. The two seeming contradictions unite. The one who formed flesh is himself formed in flesh; the Creator of all living creatures becomes a living creature; flesh stands alongside flesh in order to redeem it. The Son who prays to the Father is the one in whose flesh divine glory shines: in his life, death, resurrection and final ascent.

The Passion and Resurrection narratives do not make direct use of the word ‘flesh’ (Jn 18-21). The term ‘body’ is found here instead, a synonymous term though also more specific, referring particularly to the crucified body of Jesus (*sōma*, Jn 19:38, 40; 20:12). In the Cleansing of the Temple, the same word is used metaphorically of the temple (‘he was speaking of the sanctuary of his body’, Jn 2:21), informing the reader that the *body* of Jesus is not destined to remain a lifeless corpse. Jesus is ‘the resurrection and the life’ (Jn 11:25), the one who has the uniquely divine authority, as the Good Shepherd, to lay down and take up his own life (Jn 10:17-18). Yet both terms, *sarx* and *sōma*, emphasise the mortality implied by the incarnation; the divine radiance revealed in the human flesh/body of Jesus makes possible his atoning death and his resurrection from the dead. A powerful symbol of the life-giving significance of Jesus’ flesh is the flow of blood and water from his pierced side (Jn 19:34-37; cf 1 Jn 5:6). Nothing more vividly expresses the palpable nature of Jesus’ life and death, the materiality which the Son has so fully and freely embraced in order to transfigure it through

his sacrificial death. The imagery reinforces the centrality of the incarnation in John's theology. Here on the cross, the divine, saving and life-giving glory radiates paradoxically from the crucified flesh of Jesus, the Lamb of God who 'takes away the sin of the world' (Jn 1:34).

Yet John takes the symbolism further. In the appearance of the risen Christ on Easter Day, the wounds of suffering are shown to the disciples, leading them to Easter faith and joy (Jn 20:20, 25-28). The wounds represent the human flesh of Jesus, fundamental also to his identity as the Risen One. They become symbols not only of death but also of life, the life which issues from death. It is this recognition that leads Thomas to his climactic confession of faith: 'my Lord and my God' (Jn 20:28). Indeed, the whole, complex narrative of John 20-21 functions to reassure the reader that the incarnation is still palpable, even if in a different way, through the life-giving presence of the Spirit-Paraclete activating the life, love and mission of the believing community.⁷ Here the significance of 'flesh' is expanded beyond the tangibility of the earthly Jesus, so that the saving effects of the cross are accessible for future believers, those who have 'not seen and yet believed', and who are 'blessed' (Jn 20:29).

The Johannine Epistles are very close to the Gospel in their use of language for the incarnation and the cross, although there are also differences. 'Flesh' refers in two out of three instances to the corporeality of Jesus, which is central to the author's anti-docetic Christology: that is, his opposition to those who deny the genuine humanity of Jesus (1 Jn 4:2; 2 Jn 7). This perspective is reinforced by the extraordinarily tangible language of the opening words of 1 John, 'that which we have *heard*, that which we have *seen with our eyes*, that which we have *gazed upon* and *our hands have handled* concerning the word of life ... and *we have seen* and bear witness...' (1 Jn 1:1-3). Although these words describe the message of the gospel, at the same time 'Jesus Christ is the slightly veiled subject'.⁸ Later, the same Epistle speaks of 'the water and the blood' as witnesses alongside the Spirit (1 Jn 5:6-8), a perplexing reference that points, most likely, to the flow of blood and water at the crucifixion (Jn 19:34), which also, in a secondary sense, has often been understood to have sacramental overtones. However, the Johannine Epistles seem to depart from the usage of the Gospel of John in at least two respects: Jesus' blood is now explicitly stated as cleansing (1 Jn 1:7)—although the theme of 'cleansing' is not absent from the Fourth Gospel—and, on one occasion, *flesh* is used pejoratively, with reference to concupiscence, in the phrase 'the desire of the flesh' (1 Jn 2:16). This may seem closer to Paul's largely negative use of the term 'flesh' (as opposed to his more positive use of 'body'). Yet even in Johannine terms, the flesh unenlivened by the Spirit finally turns out to be at enmity with God.

Theological Significance of Flesh

Throughout the Fourth Gospel, and as reflected in the Johannine Epistles, the notion of flesh expands in significance, filling with meaning the radical statement of divine humanity in the Prologue at John 1:14. It demonstrates the identification of Jesus' humanity with our materiality and the capacity of transfigured flesh to nourish and sustain the life of the human spirit.⁹ Nevertheless, whereas his flesh is transformative, ours is not: it is his flesh that redeems and transfigures ours.

In asserting that the divine glory is manifest through the flesh, the evangelist gives flesh an extraordinary status. It is the core Johannine symbol of salvation, in which the material realm becomes the bearer of divine reality. The Old Testament sees divine glory as residing in the tabernacle/temple, but that indwelling is now manifest in the person of Jesus, the pre-existent Word incarnate, who belongs to the realm of glory and radiates divine light within his own being; he is the new and definitive Temple of God. The flesh of Jesus is not an evanescent or fanciful symbol that is dependent only on his mortal life: 'the incarnation is not the loss but the making visible of the *doxa* [glory] of Jesus'.¹⁰ Throughout the Gospel, in particular, the notion of 'flesh' is seen to widen in meaning, finally moving beyond the limitations of death. Thus divine revelation and material reality come together in this portrayal, without loss of identity. The one who lies in the Father's embrace (1:18) is gathered into flesh; God takes shape in human form, created from clay, subject to death, mortal, vulnerable—radiant with deity, yes, but radiant also with the promise of flesh renewed, refined, immortal. As Gregory of Nazianzus exclaims:

Oh the new mingling! Oh the blend contrary to all expectation! The one who is, becomes. The uncreated is created. The uncontainable is contained through a thinking soul, mediating between godhead and the thickness of flesh. The one who enriches becomes a beggar; for he begs for my own flesh, so that I might become rich in his divinity. The one who is full becomes empty; for he empties himself of his glory for a little time so that I might share in his fullness ... I received the image [*eikōn*] and I did not protect it; he received a share in my flesh so that he might even save the image and make deathless the flesh.¹¹

The notion of the restoration of the fullness of the divine image (*eikōn*) is central to this understanding of incarnation. The renewal of human nature is the purpose of Christ's coming, a renewal made possible in the Fourth Gospel only by the divine Word. Irenaeus understands this when he argues that the Word in becoming flesh 'became Himself what was

His own image'.¹² Likewise, for Athanasius, humankind, already made in the image of the Word, can only be restored by the advent of the One who is the definitive Image of the Father: 'therefore the Word of God came through himself, in order that, being the Image of the Father, he might re-create humanity according to the image'.¹³ In the Prologue to the Gospel, it is clear that human beings have lost something vital in the Fall; in Johannine terms, it is their status as 'children of God', which can only be restored by the unique Son of God (1:12-13).

In this sense the incarnation, in its Johannine understanding, is connected to the rest of creation, now more than ever 'groaning in travail' (Rom 8:22). We have already seen that 'all flesh' at John 17:2, although it is primarily concerned with human beings, it need not be confined to human reality. John's terminology suggests a broader sphere that encompasses creation within the orbit of incarnation. Theology in the Western tradition, at least since the Enlightenment, has tended to focus exclusively on human beings, with little or no concern to develop a cosmic Christology that incorporates creation. To achieve the latter, we need not lapse into a 'creation theology' with its tendency to downplay sin and the saving role of Jesus Christ. Johannine Christology begins with creation as the rightful domain of the Word (Jn 1:3-4, 10-11). In becoming human, the Son expresses solidarity not only with humankind but also with creation. In this sense, we can speak of a *creation Christology* arising from the Johannine understanding of the centrality of the divine Word in forming and transforming the world. This perspective has the potential for healing the rift between creation and redemption, between nature and history. The phrase 'all flesh' enlarges our understanding of the incarnation to include all that is formed by the generative and regenerative power of the Word. The Fourth Gospel and Johannine Epistles do not permit a dualistic anthropology that divorces spirit and flesh, soul and body. Flesh has its origin in God's creative word and stands in contrast, not to the soul, but to God's own self. John retains the sense of the world as God's creation, and the object of God's love and grace.

The Johannine language is all-encompassing, transposing itself beyond the limits of Jesus' own historical setting. In crossing the abyss between heaven and earth, 'above' and 'below', the flesh of Jesus, enlivened with divine glory, crosses also the chasm between human beings. It implies a connection between the incarnate Word and the rest of creation. The garden imagery, which bounds the Passion narrative (Jn 18:1; 19:41) and which is the locus of the first resurrection appearance (Jn 20:1-18),¹⁴ suggests that redemption moves beyond the human realm to all that is created by the divine Word. This extension includes the

material world in all its variety and complexity—‘all things’ created at the beginning (Jn 1:3) and ‘all things’ enlightened by the revelation of divine love and glory at the end.

Revelation and Creation

The Book of Revelation is probably the most difficult and controversial book in the New Testament to interpret, particularly on the question of the environment. Part of the diversity of interpretations, including more bizarre readings, stems from a general ignorance about the Judaeo-Christian genre of apocalyptic, and a consequential inability to read its signs and symbols.¹⁵ But these are, to a considerable extent, traditional and can be found in other apocalyptic writings, including the Book of Daniel (especially Dan 7-12). Here questions of genre and eschatology are critical. Revelation is a mixed genre: a letter, as is clear from the beginning and ending (Rev 1:4-6, 22:21), which incorporates a series of shorter letters (Rev 2-3), an apocalypse, which dominates most of the ensuing chapters, and a prophecy (Rev 1:3; 22:7, 18-19). Without knowledge of the genre, we can fail to appreciate that, while Revelation is concerned with the future and the final advent of God’s reign, it possesses also a strong focus on the present—the experience of the community under severe pressure in a Graeco-Roman context— and also on the past, particularly the death and resurrection of Jesus. The basic theological issue behind Revelation is that of idolatry, which itself leads to questions of social justice and economic oppression: worship of God the Almighty and the Lamb as against worship of the Beast, with all the implications such a choice has for spiritual and moral living.

Revelation seems, at first, to present a somewhat ambivalent view of creation. Some of the apocalyptic visions speak of the destruction of whole segments of creation as a consequence of divine judgement (e.g. the vision of the Seven Trumpets, Rev 8:6-11:19, or the Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath, Rev 16:1-18:24). Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that, in Revelation, the earth itself is the arena for the apocalyptic battle between good and evil.¹⁶ Indeed, there are contexts that speak positively of creation: in the vision of Revelation 12, for example, where the heavenly woman who has just given birth flees the fiery red dragon. Here the creative power that she embodies, which is palpably associated with the universe (sun, moon and stars, 12:1-2), contrasts starkly with the destructive power of the dragon/serpent (12:4a). Significantly, her child is rescued by heaven and the woman flees the dragon, the earth itself and creation coming to her aid to rescue her (12:13-16).

Most important, however, is the final apocalyptic vision of Revelation. In language and imagery that bespeak the incarnation (the dwelling of God among mortals, Rev 21:3), and

the life of the church (the bride, Rev 21:2), this vision after the final victory is of a new (that is, renewed) heaven and earth. Into this transfigured world the city of Jerusalem descends, floating down from heaven to earth. The city is carefully described in a series of allegorical images: its dimensions, its materials, its foundations, its gates, its streets (Rev 21:10-21). In fact it is a garden city, a civilised human habitation through which a river flows, with an avenue of trees on either side (Rev 22:1-5). The symbolism depicts the union, not only of God and humankind, but also of nature and civilization. To this city the nations come to find healing in its vegetation and consolation for all their suffering. This is a vision of Paradise regained, an ecology of the last things that opens the gates to those once excluded, a harmonious creation re-made in Christ, through his incarnation, sacrificial death on the cross and resurrection. It implies, not only the restoration and transformation of human beings in their relationship with God and with one another, but also the restitution of creation far beyond its original making. So the Bible, in one sense, ends where it begins: in a garden and in community, in a harmonious relationship at every level: among mortals, between mortals and other living things, between mortals and their Creator—although the new far exceeds the old in every way. In the centre of this vision stands the incarnation and cross of Christ, symbol of restoration not just for human beings but for the world. The tree of the cross is responsible for ‘healing the hurt caused by the tree of Eden’.¹⁷

Conclusion

The Johannine writings, in all their diversity, have a good deal to offer current discussions on ecology and the environment.¹⁸ Their theology and anthropology are non-dualistic and inclusive, setting human beings within the framework of creation in Christ. Given that the material world is of significance to God, in providence and redemption, then it must be of significance also to the Church. In the Johannine writings and the Book of Revelation, salvation is not just for souls but also for bodies; nor is its extent restricted to the human world but embraces all created things. In these texts we find a vital challenge to the individualistic emphasis of the post-Enlightenment religious tradition and an encouragement to move to a biblical perspective that takes creation seriously as the domain of God’s creative and re-creative love. The theology of ‘flesh and glory’ in the Gospel of John is of particular power in this respect. By taking on human flesh, in the incarnation and on the cross, God reveals life-giving, saving glory. It is an act of sheer grace, and its purpose is the transformation of human beings to become ‘children of God’ through the Sonship of Jesus, and the transfiguration of all creation to reflect the glory and grace of God.

Questions:

1. If God in Christ has indeed redeemed, and will redeem, the whole of creation and not just human beings, what implications might this have for the way we live in relation to the non-human world?
2. How does garden imagery in the Bible—the Garden of Eden, the garden of the lovers in the Song of Songs, the garden of Gethsemane and the resurrection, the garden-city of the New Jerusalem—influence our attitude and behaviour towards plants and vegetation? What is our Christian responsibility?
3. How can idolatry affect our relation to each other and to nature? In what way might true worship of God transform these relationships?

¹ While opinions vary on whether the author of the Gospel is the same as the writer of the Epistles, there is a good case to be made for one and the same authorship: the apostle John, son of Zebedee, an anonymous Christian leader, or, most likely, John the Elder (so Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, ET; London: SCM, 1989, pp. 24-108). The relative dating is more complex—whether the Gospel came first or the Epistles. In either event, there is sufficient unity between them to justify seeing them as the product of a single mind, despite the difference of genre.

² For a fuller discussion, see Dorothy Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbol, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John*, New York: Crossroad, 2002, chap 2.

³ The word ‘flesh’ occurs thirteen times in the Johannine text and three times in the Johannine Epistles and seven times in the Book of Revelation. In Revelation, flesh is used negatively, in the context of death and judgement (Rev 17:6; 19:18, 21).

⁴ Tertullian, *Treatise on the Incarnation*, edited E. Evans, London: SPCK, 1956, 5.38-40.

⁵ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John*, 3 vols.; New York: Seabury, 1980, vol 1, p. 267.

⁶ The meaning is obscured in translations such as the NRSV and the NIV, which opt for ‘human beings’, as against the RSV and ESV which translate it literally as ‘all flesh’.

⁷ On the Paraclete in John’s Farewell Discourse, see Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 2003), vol. 2, pp. 953-982.

⁸ Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, BECNT; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2008, p. 31.

⁹ See Graham Ward, ‘Bodies: the Displaced Body of Jesus Christ’ in J. Milbank, C. Pickstock & G. Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy*, London & New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 163-181.

¹⁰ Udo Schnelle, *Antidocetic Christology. An Investigation of the Place of the Fourth Gospel in the Johannine School*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992, p. 167.

¹¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On the Holy Passover* XLV.633-636, PG 36.

¹² *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 22, p. 61.

¹³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, edited by F.L. Cross, London: SPCK, 1957, XIII.7.

¹⁴ The interpretation of the garden as paradisaical is Patristic; see J.C. Elowsky (ed.), *John 11-21* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture IVb; Downers Grove: InverVarsity Press, 2007), pp 265, 335; also E. Hoskyns & F.N. Davey, *The Fourth Gospel* (2 vols.; London: Faber & Faber, 1940), vol 2, p. 604.

¹⁵ For a history of reception, see especially Judith Kovacs & Christopher Rowland, *Revelation. The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ*, BBC; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), esp. 13-38.

¹⁶ The judgement language of the Book of Revelation is not easy to comprehend. Later in Revelation, the sword which issues from the White Rider, a sword of vengeance and judgement, comes from the Rider's *mouth* (19:15), and his name is 'The Word of God' (19:13), suggesting that the language of physical violence is metaphorical (cf Isa 11:4; Heb 4:12); on the mythological dimensions, see especially Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Montana: Scholars Press, 1976),

¹⁷ John Sweet, *Revelation*, 2nd ed.; London: SCM, 1990, p. 311.

¹⁸ The style, language and imagery of Revelation suggest a different author from the Gospel and Epistles. See David E. Aune, *Revelation*, 3 vols.; WBC 52; Dallas: Word Books, 1998, vol. 2, p. lvi: 'it is not possible to identify [the author of Revelation] with any other early Christian figure of the same name, including John the son of Zebedee or the shadowy figure of the Elder.' Nonetheless the symbolic and possibly also geographical links suggest some kind of inter-relationship between the Gospels/Epistles and the Book of Revelation.