

## CHAPTER 3

# THE OLD CREATION IN THE NEW, THE NEW CREATION IN THE OLD

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Until recently, whenever I had to lecture or was invited to preach in English, I started with an apology for my strong Latin accent and my vandalism of English syntax. But after reading postcolonial theory, I became aware that to excuse myself for these things was outdated. As English-speaking nations accomplished the Babelic imperial endeavor to impose their language almost universally, English became what it is by my speaking it (and by the speech of other nonoriginal subjects of this empire): English is a tongue with an uncertain way of being spoken, with curious and changing grammar, with variegated shading and understanding, and with a highly nuanced vocabulary. The way of speaking in the ancient and illustrious town of Oxford, and the forms and standards adopted in England's former colonies at the time of Webster, today represent the earlier stages of a new dialect: global speech. What is correct and what is not will be decided by the use we are forced to develop under this new imposed legate.

I do not say this out of bitterness or conceit, but as a way to stage the reality that constitutes today's world. By introducing my understanding of the present state of things, a state that shapes our experience of human and divine existence, I hope to nourish our reading of the biblical texts and doctrinal traditions and provide the background for our theological expectations. What changes the temper of our theological discourse is not the disclosure of previously ignored aspects of revelation—an outgrowth of the existing theological paradigms—or the love of novelty, but the need to respond to new developments in human history. Our goal is to respond to the challenges of the present age so as to enact in today's world faith in and fidelity to the Word of God as

participants in the ongoing dialogue of salvation between God and God's creation. By participating in this dialogue, we are offered a glimpse into the new creation.

## **POSTMODERNITY AND EMPIRE**

Without claiming to give a full description of today's world, which is beyond the scope of this presentation and of my personal competence, I will try to point to some of the features that characterize the present global situation, and thus establish the location from which I read the theme "New Creation." In a brief summary, I will point to three issues that are important for our subject as they emerge in the areas of culture, economy, and political ethics. It is important to note that, according to postmodernism, these different fields are so interwoven that it is difficult to point to any element in one of them that is not in direct interaction with the others. Postmodernity has been portrayed, among other things, as a culture of fragmentation. Each segment of society has developed its own insights and claims, its own worldview and ways of acting; each one claims the right of its own logic, its own subsystem of understanding. The idea of a unified, rational goal for the whole of humankind is no longer appealing; grand narratives are drowned out by the stormy seas of local, sectarian, and partial identities.

On the one hand, this miscellany has liberated us from the exclusive claims of rationalism and positivism, which passed as the only legitimate ways of dealing with reality. We are freed from overarching conceptions of world history as a one-way road, as the inexorable evolvement of the human adventure. And we can now call into question theologies of the "history of salvation" that relied on similar understandings. On the other hand, the reaction to these modernist lineaments proposes a certain atomizing of human experience, and the extreme reach of this conception has been the installment of absolute individualism, of the private as the only valid concern. The world is represented as a giant jigsaw puzzle made of countless tiny bits, and each piece can proudly claim its uniqueness in shape and colors.

But this has not necessarily done away with all totalistic conceptions of reality. For, as in any jigsaw puzzle, there is an ordering image that can be discovered when the pieces are set in place. So, despite this apparent fragmentation, one can see the picture of global culture as an all-embracing totality, that exhibits the same signs and brands from Siberia to Ushuaia, from Los Angeles to Beijing, with few exceptions. The thrust of this globalization of culture subjects all previous identities to hybridization,

notwithstanding their resistance.<sup>1</sup> As in a finished puzzle, one can see the dividing lines on the surface, but at the same time realize that they form a single portrait, that of late financial capitalism. Postmodernity with its fragmentation has not brought to an end the belief in an ideology that can encompass all humans, though that is its pretension. Rather, it is in itself an ideology that conceals in its claim of partial identities and fragmented worldviews the fact that we are trapped in a unique economic system, a powerful empire that seeks to subject all identities to its one and only will. Postmodernity is the ideology, in the negative sense of the word, of late financial capitalism.

This new stage of capitalism differs from the previous industrial capitalism in many ways, but I will highlight only two characteristics: first, the new forms of production based on computer technology, which privileges virtual and symbolic goods over those of direct physical use, and second, the “global market” and the ruling role of monetary policies. Changes in the mode of production through the use of computer technology have altered the whole mode of economic social formation and have brought into power a new historic block.<sup>2</sup> Even if handcrafts and traditional industry survive, the dominant role of computer technology puts them in a subordinate role, dependent on the dynamics created by the new modes of production. From tourism to religion to sex, everything can be virtual. Computers are integrated into nearly all production, from architectural plans to shoe designs, and many products, such as cars and toys, are themselves built with internal computers.

Not only have the means of production been altered, but the constitution of goods, material or symbolic, has been altered as well. A whole new range of so called “services” are now available through new technologies which then become new “needs.” Today, virtual products, consumed through the culture of image, take the place of other forms of consumption. Even though some of the products are available only to the wealthy, this culture of consumption still shapes the lives and expectations of the poor by incorporating these goods within their horizons of anticipation. In other words, the culture of virtual products shapes the self-understanding and worldview of both the users of technology and those who have no access to these products but for whom they are objects of desire. They constitute “cheap virtual substitutions.” It is important to note here the similarities of this development to the mechanisms of religion, for

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1. Understandings of postmodernity and its effects on culture have been nurtured, among others, by David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990); Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas* (Méjico: Grijalbo, 1990), and Canclini, *La Globalización Imaginada* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1999).

2. Related issues such as the rationalization and substitution of work in the production line and the creation of virtual models through the Internet contribute to this alteration.

virtual culture enacts many of the functions of religion. It provides new symbols of meaning and shapes the feelings and relations of persons.

We can observe a major impact of this new mode of production in the way it models human relationships. The relationship itself is part of the product because the virtual presupposes an imaginative construal of the self and the other. In this way, the other becomes not the real other but a virtual other, a product of imagination. Subsequently, the relationship itself becomes the object of the production system. The global economy produces a different way to relate as human beings, a new way to mediate relationships. As a result, the previous ruling class of industrial capitalism, which still allowed a place for the local bourgeoisie, was transformed and had to give place to the new elite of globalism. Furthermore, the mode of exercising power has been reshaped accordingly. The system, then, produces and reproduces itself through a network of relationships that are controlled by the new lobbies of international financial capitalism and their local political front men through the global market.

The idea of the global market not only involves “in width” expansion of the capitalist market system over the world, but also an “in depth” introduction of market interest in fields that were previously mostly outside its domain. Education, social services, social security for retirement and health, and religion are also being “marketed.” They become “market goods” that are no longer understood as vital provisions under the responsibility of society as a whole in the form of open social offer, but are subject to commercial transactions. And, in a second twist in the same direction, these goods are valued not according to the traditional capitalist rules of supply and demand, but integrated in the global market by way of financial circulation, which becomes autonomous over against those who would be their primary producers and consumers. They become part of the “money market,” highly concentrated, highly volatile, rapidly circulating over the Internet, with little or no concern for original producers or the needs of local populations. Pension funds are the most evident example of this, but the incidence of this modality in other areas can also be shown.

Money circulates with little restraint, and world powers demand open markets for their manufactured goods, especially in relation to subordinate countries (though they largely protect and subsidize their own production). In contrast, the policies of migration are severely restricted, so that people are prevented from following their money.<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to

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3. After I had finished writing this lecture, a book appeared by Joseph Stiglitz (a Nobel Prize recipient in economy and former acting Vice President of the World Bank), entitled *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002); Spanish translation, *El malestar de la globalización* (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 2002). The book points to many of the same issues here mentioned, and provides substantive evidence and arguments as to the causes and consequences of globalism.

note that while the capitalist world rejoiced over the falling of the Berlin Wall and claimed it as a triumph of liberty and democracy, it has continued building other walls, not only symbolic but also physical. Walls have been built along the borders of rich and poor countries—the Mexican–U.S.A. border, for example<sup>4</sup>—around the protected neighborhoods of the rich within famished countries, and around the “outlawed” Palestinian territories, rendering them no better than concentration camps. Since the market cannot integrate the poor, they are excluded outside these walls. As the market undergoes globalization the poor are being excluded from the globe. The enormous gap in consumption and resources between the poor and the rich is the largest in human history and continuously increases.<sup>5</sup> How many biblical words from the prophets of old or from Jesus’ parables come to mind as we go through this description?

As we come to the political-ethical dimensions of globalization, I agree with those who see the present world system as the establishment of an empire.<sup>6</sup> As can be seen in the times of Rome, empire is not a republic. The interest in public matters, the *res publica*, is replaced by the *res privata*, the concern for the particular. Therefore, the democratic republican political *ethos* of the nation-state is substituted by the power of private benefit through corporate action. While public services, functions, and resources are privatized, private life is made a public spectacle. Democratic republican law and justice are replaced by the lobbying influence of corporations and the military force of the dominant powers. In fact, power is the only law of empires. This has been brutally asserted by Robert Cooper, foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Tony Blair, in his pamphlet published under the title “Reordering the World.” His defense of imperial military intervention, even outside the legal frame of the United Nations in “non-postmodern countries,” that is, countries that do not readily accept the practices of late financial capitalism, rolls the clock back to a

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4. The people who have died trying to cross the Mexican–U.S.A. border in recent years far outnumber those killed attempting to go over the Berlin Wall. See Noam Chomsky, *Rogue States* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2000); Spanish translation, *Los estados canallas* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2002).

5. According to 1990 United Nations reports, 20% of the world population was using 80% of the world resources, while the lower layer of the poorest 20% only had access to 1.4% of the world’s production. That means that those in the upper layer use resources in a proportion of 57 to 1. That includes not only food but also energy, health, and educational provisions. This was the situation by the beginning of the 1990s, the statistics show that this tendency to a high concentration of wealth and the use of resources has dramatically increased in the last decade.

6. See, for example, M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000). Quotes will be taken from the Spanish translation, *Imperio* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2002). A critique of some of the assumptions of Hardt and Negri’s thesis from Third World perspectives can be found in A. Borón, *Imperio e Imperialismo* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2002).

time prior to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Conventions, which, by the way, have not been endorsed by today's leading military power. Cooper is not advocating anything new but is saying aloud what the powerful West is already doing, which includes the indiscriminate use of power and the imposition of their economic needs on others.<sup>7</sup>

This ideology can be seen, for example, when considering the choice of words to describe the bombings of civilian populations. When done by U.S. forces or its allies it is called a mistake or "necessary action of restraint," but when done by others it is considered an act of terrorism. The new doctrine of "preemptive attack" is but a justification of the use of arbitrary and indiscriminate violence. I cannot but recall the times of the military dictatorship in my own country when the killing and disappearing of innocent people were explained as "mistakes" or "excesses in necessary repression actions," and, therefore, beyond any rule of justice. Empires are built on corruption and are free from any prescription of justice, as are all institutions built on the absolute use of force. Their acts of corruption do not occur as exceptions in a more or less transparent system. Rather corruption is the ethos of empire,<sup>8</sup> as recent events in the economic field are showing. It is conceived and born, it grows and matures, through the use of power and prevarication, its only means and goal. As Lord Acton is quoted to have said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." As we will see when we turn to the book of Revelation, John's vision in chapters 17 and 18 grasps this logic: the great Babylon is characterized as a corrupt reality that corrupts others and as the place of shameless accumulation. For the capitalist empire that is built on the quest for profit (or "greed for money")<sup>9</sup> and cherishes the ideal of the rational maximization of gains and of endless accumulation, to act in any other way or to admit any other goal than these would be against the system; it would be considered corruption. So, what we as Christians call corruption—to set the mind on the things of the flesh and to walk in the ways of the flesh (Rom 8:5-10)—is considered virtue in the empire.

So in the theology of today's world, "now postmodernity, financial capitalism, and empire abide, these three; and the greatest of all these is the capitalist empire." This is the doctrine, the ethics, and the eschatology of the present empire.

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7. For an extensive documentation on these matters, see N. Chomsky, *Rogue States*.

8. M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire*, 352-55.

9. *The Wordsworth English/Spanish Spanish/English Dictionary*, Wordsworth Reference (Great Britain: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1993), *ad locum* "lucro."

## THE OLD EMPIRE, THE NEW CREATION

### *Empire and the New Creation in the Hebrew Bible*

Why do I linger so much in the description of today's empire? Because my working hypothesis is that the concept and appeal of the new creation sprouts in biblical theology in times of oppressive extended empires. When creation meets the challenge of extreme corruption—of corruption as the core of social, economic, and political life—men and women of faith recall with renewed strength God's promise to replace this wretched reality. This occurrence is obviously related to the conditions of the emergence of apocalyptic faith, though it would be a simplification to consider all references to the new creation as "apocalyptic."

The poem on creation in the opening passages of Genesis is really a narrative that points to the new creation. Many Old Testament scholars would consider aspects of this poem to be constructed as a counter narrative to the Babylonian myth, the *Enuma Elish*.<sup>10</sup> Genesis stresses the goodness of creation against the dichotomous conception of the prevailing religious ideologies at the time of its composition in the Babylonian Empire. This prevailing ideology assigned a good origin to the spiritual, masculine, and kingly powers in the victorious god Marduk; and to the earthly, females, and servant people a lowly, dark, and evil origin in the goddess Tiamat. Humans were created as slaves, but the King and his court were thought to be of godly origin and identified with the celestial bodies.

In response to the understanding of the world from this oppressive myth, the Israelite poem claims that heavenly beings are not gods but part of God's creation that culminates with the blessed creation of human beings, male and female alike, in the image of the one Creator God. In a second moment of the canonical narrative, the creation of the human being combines the earthly material and God's spiritual breath into human existence. The Genesis story goes on to give an account of how God-given equality degenerates into oppressive regimes, not because God begets kings but because of human pride. The paradigmatic empires of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon all arise under the sign of Nimrod, the first to become powerful on earth, a mighty hunter against the face of God (Gen 10:8-12).<sup>11</sup> So the first human attempt to become like divine beings, knowing good and evil, is completed with the imposition of an empire that wants to reach the sky, to come face-to-face with God.

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10. Among others, see G. von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961); J. Severino Croatto, *El Hombre en el mundo* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1974).

11. See my "Comparative Bible Study, Genesis 10–11: An Approach from Argentine," in *Scripture, Community and Mission: A Festschrift in Honor of D. Preman Niles*, ed. P. Wickeri (Hong Kong: The Christian Conference of Asia and the Council for World Mission, 2002).

The creation story, then, is shaped under that empire and in opposition to it. The primeval story of Genesis (1–11) expresses the possibility of understanding creation as the gift of God to be preserved and renewed by productive work, in relationships of freedom and equality with families, nations, lands, and cultures. The emergence of empires appears as a menace to that possibility. The story of creation, thus, is a challenge to live in the world in a new way, to go beyond the imposition of the imperial forces and their tales and affirm the earth and all its creatures as the outcome of God’s loving care.

We encounter a similar perspective when we come to the creation poems according to Isaiah, but Isaiah makes more explicit the perceived contradiction. Recurrent metaphors throughout the text depict the Creator God’s power and the dispersal of kings and the powerful as they try to snatch away God’s power. This is a concept that occurs often within the Isaian tradition as a whole. In the first part of the book we find the notion that the destructive power of empire (i.e., Assyria) is contrasted with the peaceful reign of God’s chosen One who renews creation (Isa 11). The concept develops in Second Isaiah during the exile under the Babylonian Empire. In the midst of his praise of the Creator God’s knowledge and might, the prophet states that it is the same God “who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble” (Isa 40:23-24).<sup>12</sup>

Chapters 42 and 43 continue with this theme, and little by little the notion of a total renewal is introduced. God will liberate God’s people from this empire as God delivered them from the Egyptians. We see here that the creation story is retold in the image of the Exodus (Isa 42).<sup>13</sup> But now, this reinterpretation has radical consequences:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people. (Isa 43:18-20)

The previous liberation will be small compared to the new: not only will a way be made in the desert, but all of nature, including wild animals, will praise God for God’s miracles.

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12. Biblical citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted. Occasionally I have slightly changed the wording in order to follow more closely the original languages.

13. See Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1978), *ad loc.* Also, J. Severino Croatto, *Isaías, La palabra profética y su relectura hermenéutica: La liberación es posible* (Buenos Aires: Lumen, 1994), *ad loc.*



This Isaian trajectory peaks in the last two chapters where the concept of new creation becomes explicit. The author is in dispute on two fronts simultaneously. On the one hand, he speaks against the unchecked power of the empire (probably by now the Persians), explaining that it will have to surrender to Yahweh and to Yahweh's chosen people, for they will have to worship humbly in the places that they previously destroyed and be guided by the people that they previously despised. On the other hand, he speaks against those Israelites who had given up their faith and had joined the ideology of the empire, including not only those who had worshiped its gods (Isa 65:11), but also those who, under the cover of having rebuilt the Temple and reinstated the true cult of Israel, had espoused ideologies of power. Isaiah speaks in the name of God: "All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says Yahweh. But this is the one to whom I will look, to the oppressed and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word" (Isa 66:2). Yet, for those who take pride in the temple worship, strong words resound:

Whoever slaughters an ox is like one who kills a human being; whoever sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog's neck; whoever presents a grain offering, like one who offers swine's blood; whoever makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and in their abominations they take delight; I also will choose to mock them, and bring upon them what they fear; because, when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, they did not listen; but they did what was evil in my sight, and chose what did not please me. (Isa 66:3-4)

In this circumstance a word of condemnation was not enough. The whole of reality had become so rotten that a new creation seemed the only possibility. Corruption is not merely the privilege of the foreign empire; it is also the behavior of the local accomplices, so they too must die and be recreated under a new name (Isa 5:15-16). Thus God is impelled to create again, in a certain sense, *ex nihilo*: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" (Isa 65:17). The verb *barah* (to create) is used here with the same sense as in Genesis 1.

The following verses of this chapter reiterate some of the metaphors of First and Second Isaiah and cast them under this new term that will eventually serve as a model for similar words in the book of Revelation. For the first time, the expression "new creation" appears in the Old Testament, to be repeated in the following chapter toward the end of the book. Yet, in those last verses (Isa 66:22-23) is a clear statement that in the new creation "so shall your descendants and your name remain," and all

will come to adore God. In this way the expression “new creation” is introduced into the biblical vocabulary and imagery. It emerges, as we have seen, in faithful response to the situation in which God’s people were living, an understanding that sprouts in the salvation dialogue between God and the people. It grew out of the experience of the Isaian community, a community that was subject to the oppressive powers of more powerful nations, as well as suffering inflicted by the elite of its own people who negotiated humbling alliances with its oppressors for the sake of their special interests.

New creation was a concept that grew as the people confronted three successive empires: Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia. It was a breakthrough that retrieved and developed the prototypic story of the first liberation from imperial rule, that of the enslaved people in Egypt. Now this concept meant not only a new land for this people, a land that flourished in milk and honey, but a new creation altogether, for this and every people, for animals and nature alike. It is true that we still find traces of Israelite self-centeredness in the scriptures, in spite of the more inclusive scope of Isaian theology. However it is not the pride of a powerful nation that rules the world, nor the political calculation of its complacent ruling class, but the vindication of a humiliated people that still clings to the one hope that can keep them from being erased and excluded from the telling of human history. The whole order that has brought about this state of affairs will be changed by the magnificent will of God; it will be replaced by a new harmony created in the blessing and goodness of the primeval creation.

### *The New Creation in Pauline Theology*

During the hard times of Hellenistic rule, with the arrival of new empires and the struggles among them, these seeds of hope sown toward the end of the Persian epoch matured differently. Not all theological responses followed the same pattern, but a significant part of the intertestamentary period literature evolved along apocalyptic lines that, in many of its expressions, fostered a hope (sometimes a radical hope) in the destruction, even violent annihilation of the existing world and the appearance of a totally new reality according to God’s determination. We cannot examine the whole field of exegesis for this period, but the book of Daniel, the most vivid example of apocalyptic literature during this period, does have some metaphors along these lines, particularly in its announcement of the end of this time’s order and the destruction of every imperial power. Daniel does not, however, venture into the idea of a new creation, which comes to light again more notably in the Christian New Testament.

We can trace these lineaments in the apocalyptic discourses in the Gospels, especially Mark and Matthew. We find that they uphold the idea of an end to the present world and history. But once again, the idea of new creation does not hold a significant place in Jesus' statements, unless we equate new creation and the reign of God, a theological move that would be problematic for some.

It is Paul and the Pauline tradition that recover the idea of new creation and develop at least one strand of the intense and fertile Pauline thought upon this theological prophetic *locus*. Paul's letters can be read from many perspectives, which will not necessarily contradict each other. Being able to live with differences is one of the benefits of the postmodernity I so heartily denounced at the beginning. In contrast to the glorification of fragmentation that we often find in postmodern hermeneutics, however, my approach to Paul's theology assumes a coherent eschatological paradigm which functions to critique culture, more specifically Roman Hellenistic culture, as well as certain aspects of Paul's own Jewish culture. In working out this assumption, we will see that Pauline theology conveys certain countercultural resources for a Christian critique of culture today. When I say a critique of culture I also mean fundamentally a critique of the ideologies of power or the mechanisms of hegemony imbedded in all cultural systems.

Although I am not an expert on John Wesley's writings, I suspect that a similar approach would offer a good hermeneutical key to his works. Like Paul, Wesley does not provide a systematic and comprehensive analysis of culture but rather gives a timely reflection on practical matters as they emerge. When these diverse responses are brought together, however, we can see a basic coherence underlying the occasional contradictions due to the ambiguities of human reactions and of changing cultural contexts. Furthermore, Wesley and Paul have both suffered the misfortune of being misread in such a way as to be integrated in some ways into the thought systems supporting the power ideologies of the day. It goes without saying that every critique of culture is also culturally conditioned, and in some sense it participates in the same limitations it criticizes. But for Paul the eschatological horizon in which he places himself provides him with a hermeneutical distance that constitutes the cutting edge of his discourse.

Romans, the major and probably the last of Paul's letters, is a good example. From the opening chapter it points to the gospel as the power of God's saving will for Gentiles and Jews alike, because the gospel reveals by faith God's justice. Paul says, "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven

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14. I have slightly modified the NRSV translation, since it does not follow the Greek wording, which makes a direct reference to injustice that the NRSV avoids.

against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who with their injustice are withholding the truth" (Rom 1:18).<sup>14</sup> This establishes from the outset what I understand to be a structural opposition that organizes the discourse of the entire letter: God's justice is set over against human injustice. God's justice is resolved to set free all human beings, while human powers, through sin and law, enslave and subject people, indeed the whole of creation, to corruption and death (Rom 6:23).

Consequently, the opposition of justice-injustice issues is a new related opposition that circulates throughout the entire text, the freed over against the enslaved. Paul uses the term "free" in more than one sense. It refers to the practice of human liberty, but free means "gratis," God's gift in Christ, that makes human beings instruments of God's justice (Rom 6:13). Faced with God's justice and our freedom in Christ we find what is costly. Human corruption and slavery are known by the price they set on human life. Thus redemption within the realm of the law or worldly powers becomes something expensive, requiring hard work. Since it is branded by the same law that enables sin, it is, finally, not able to grant the true freedom of justice. What we think sets us free turns out to be another form of enslavement—a false way. Thus God creates another way to redemption (remember that the origin of the word "redemption" is freedom from slavery) that does not work according to the logic of prices and rewards but recovers the gratuity of life as creation. It uncovers or reveals the love of God in truth.

So truth and falsity are set as a complementary antithesis in order to discern the latter, which in turn reveals the difference between the falsity of a peace that conceals life as conflict leading to death and the true peace of God that brings about eternal life. As can be seen, we are dealing with language that is related to the main features of imperial ideology: justice-injustice, freedom-slavery, costly-gratis, conflict-peace, and falsity-truth. Paul sets up an opposition between the liberating power of love and the enslaving love of power. In this confrontation the possibility of God's justice is at stake, and with it, the life or death of humans and all creation.

Although an application of this hermeneutic to the whole book of Romans is not possible here, I will point to some salient passages that can give a glimpse of this understanding. The opening statement in Romans 1:18 points to the fact that the truth is no longer accessible because it has been concealed by the practice of injustice. This is a good pre-modern definition of a hegemonic ideology. The concept is then expanded by listing the wicked practices of those who deny God, beginning with the fact that corrupt human creatures elevate themselves as divine beings. (Among other things, this is a critique of the cult of emperor worship.) Many exegetes view this list of practices as descriptive of the dominant Roman elite. It is, undoubtedly, a catalog of corrupt, unjust conduct, as stated in

verse 29. The fact that those who do such things rejoice when others also practice them (v. 32) indicates that this is a pre-modern description of the role of ideology.

Paul goes on with a critique of the dominant trends in Jewish culture, and his critique of culture continues in the opposition of Adam and Christ and certainly in the so-called “justification by faith alone” passages. His critique is especially strongly stated in chapter 8 where he lays out the issue in terms of a new opposition: flesh and Spirit. When we consider what it means to act according to the flesh, it turns out that it means to act against the will of God; one cannot avoid referring to a similar enmity to God as that described in the first chapter. “Flesh” refers to the conduct that brings about death as opposed to life and peace.

It is that form of life that cannot submit to God’s law and, therefore, cannot live in accordance with God’s justice. In contrast, life in the Spirit is to live through justice. In this context Paul reintroduces the language of freedom and slavery. Because of God’s love, we are adopted as children of God and heirs of God’s eternal life in Christ and so set free from the bondage of slavery. In this sense, God liberates us from the spirit of slavery so that we can receive the liberating Spirit of God. In addition to our being redeemed, God makes our presence redemptive for the whole of creation. What characterizes flesh is that it is subject to corruption because it cannot resist sin and death. This corruption is so pervasive that the whole of creation has been marked by it. So, Paul recalls, the whole creation is subject to futility, not because of creation itself, but in the hope of liberation (Rom 8:20-21).

So groaning with birth pangs, this worn-out creation is giving life to a new one, in which the liberty of God’s children will be manifested in plenitude. Thus creation itself will be liberated from its slavery to corruption to a new dimension of life, life in the Spirit. Our bodies themselves anxiously await that moment of adoption and redemption because that is the whole meaning of our hope. So our bodies, now subject to the powers of corruption that enslave and rule the world, cherish the moment in which the Spirit will manifest itself as the new life that God’s creation awaits. The redeemed, in the hope of the manifestation of the coming glory, are to testify to the liberty of creation in God’s justice.

Since this is said in an apocalyptic framework, Paul could be misunderstood as advocating a passive attitude, but this is not Paul’s intention. Instead, this certainly is an ethos of an impetus to witness that allows the believing community to anticipate life in the Spirit in this world. The Spirit of God bears witness to our spirit that we are God’s children, so we can bear witness to the world. So the powers that pretend to rule this world, through hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, or sword, will not be able to separate us from Christ’s love, just as

these could not separate Jesus from God's will and love for humanity. So "neither death, nor life, nor angels [as expressions of invisible powers], nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38–39).

In another context, when speaking of the hardships of the apostolic task, Paul had advanced, though in a much less detailed way, the same idea: We no longer live according to the old power ideologies that set the standards of success and failure in this world, but in the new dimension of God's love in Christ. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:17).

Once again, in the context of the Galatian controversy, Paul depicted the gospel of freedom as a critique of Jewish and pagan culture. In the fifth chapter of that letter, which in many respects is a draft version of the arguments in Romans, Paul exhorts the believing community: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1). Freedom, as used by Paul here, is a positive freedom to be used in service to the other. That freedom, however, is but loss and a way to death when, far from the guidance of love, it becomes competition: "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another" (Gal 5:14-15). According to Paul, love is the manifestation of life in the Spirit as opposed to life in the flesh. Like Romans, Galatians includes a catalog of "fleshly" conduct, which is set in contrast to the fruits of the Spirit. In his brief summary and farewell in his "own" hand Paul comes again to the subject: "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!" (Gal 6:15).<sup>15</sup>

### *New Creation as the Climax of the Book of Revelation*

Of the entire New Testament, the book of Revelation has been recognized as the most severe critique of imperial culture. The images of violence, permanent conflict, sorrow, and suffering reflect the imperial milieu as seen from its lesser subjects, its oppressed peoples, while the doxologies, the rejoicing of the faithful, and the final triumph of the Lamb conforms to the counter-hegemonic thrust of the book. For the sake of brevity, I will only briefly refer to the last chapters of Revelation that portray the symbolic ending of the cosmic drama.

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15. This issue is reprised in the deutero-Pauline tradition, but we cannot include that trajectory in the present work.

Through successive visions, John describes the state of the world as he perceives it and the necessary outcome of its estrangement from God's loving purpose. The consequences of estrangement, John explains, pervade the whole creation and produce innumerable victims throughout history. This history, driven by a lust for power, is judged and condemned by the God who identifies with victims through the slaughtered Lamb. God promises to give life to those victims and they will testify against and judge the wicked; they will be the criterion by which the powers are to be judged. These rebel powers peak in the corruption of Babylon, "for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities" (Rev 18:5). Babylon, the symbolic essence of *all* empires, not only the Roman, is corrupt and perverts all other powers, submitting all the earthly kingdoms to its unlimited cupidity. Chapters 17 and 18 depict that power as a power of arrogance, as economic accumulation that bargains with human lives and bodies as if they were merchandise (Rev 18:13). In doing so, it deprives itself of the true products of life, from productive work and joy to the arts and the light, for it has killed the saints, the prophets, and "all who have been slaughtered on earth" (Rev 18:24).<sup>16</sup>

Babylon, as the place of iniquity and corruption, of senseless accumulation and arbitrary power, of pride and death, is to be completely obliterated and, after the cosmic struggle, replaced by the new creation and the new Jerusalem that will descend from the New Heaven (Rev 21:1-2). In all of God's tenderness after this superb victory, God will not parade around as a victorious general or a proud emperor, but will join the people and live among them. Like a loving grandfather or a concerned mother comforting a wounded child, God will set the victims of history on God's lap and "will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Rev 21:4). Free access to the waters of life will be granted to the faithful, who will live as God's children. God's freedom and love will replace totally the arrogance of power, the imperial way of being.

Let us look briefly at this new creation and New Jerusalem in its magnificent dimensions and amazing construction. John Wesley has vividly and imaginatively described his perception of it in his sermon "The New Creation."<sup>17</sup> It is a city without a temple or a castle. The symbols of religious and political power are absent; since God's glory does not need a special dwelling place and everyone is a king or a queen. Of this surprising city, the wall that surrounds it is no less surprising, not only because

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16. For a more detailed analysis of the political and economic elements in Rev 18, see my "Revelation and the Victims of Economic Exclusion: Reading Rev 18 from a Latin American Context," in *Reading from this Place: The Global Scene, Social Location and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Fernando Segovia and Mary A. Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

17. Sermon 64, "The New Creation," *Works* 2:500-511.

of its colossal dimensions but also because of its open doors. As all cities of antiquity, the New Jerusalem has walls and doors. But, in contrast to most cities, the doors are open to the four winds. This is surprising because city doors are usually closed to offer protection, as are the gates that surround private neighborhoods today, which are opened only in the direction that can be more easily guarded and securely closed in the other directions. But in the city of God, we have doors open in every direction, doors that never close. The doors are guarded by angels, who are there not to exclude people, but to call the nations to come. The richness of the city is open to all peoples, except for those whose practice of abomination or falsehood has denied the life of others.

The doors bear the names of the patriarchs of Israel. This poses a problem, for the list of the tribes of Israel in Revelation 7:5-8 does not coincide exactly with the Old Testament list in Genesis 49 or Ezekiel 48. So whose names are written on the doors? And what have these patriarchs done that their names should be perpetuated in the new creation? If I am not mistaken, we know very little of them. We do, however, get a reference to Joseph, whose ten older brothers sold him as a slave and were afraid when later confronted by him. Only at the end of their lives are the brothers reconciled. Furthermore, the history of the tribes that they generated is less than glorious, filled with internal struggles, infidelity, and mutual oppression. Yet, these are the names that endure in the New Jerusalem.

A similar case can be made for the names of the twelve apostles that adorn the foundations of the city. We actually know little of these persons, and, once again, the list of names in Revelation does not conform to the lists in the Gospels. What do we know, for instance, of Bartholomew? And who is the twelfth apostle? Is it Judas the traitor or Matthias, of whom we know nothing else? Or is it Paul, who was never included among the Twelve, yet, in time, became the most influential apostle in the church's life throughout the centuries? Obviously, we are dealing with the symbolic meaning of the names. But they are the symbols of God's dialogue with humanity, of God's dealings with the ambiguities of human history. And these names that represent an enduring divine-human relationship are written on the doors and foundations of the city. To come into the holiest city and to feel secure in it one must face those names that recall the not-so-holy life of human reality. Even though the new creation is new, the remembrance of human history and the reality of the creation as we know it today will not be denied but incorporated as a valid instance of God's action and human response as an essential dimension of human identity.



## **LIVING AS THE FIRSTFRUITS OF THE NEW CREATION**

Is God's announced new creation entirely new? Is the old creation such a waste that nothing of it shall survive? A radically affirmative answer to these questions would entail dramatic consequences for an ecological concern proper to a creation theology, as well as for Christian ethics and anthropology. Many fundamentalist and dispensationalist approaches to Revelation lead to such an unqualified answer, as do some apocalyptic readings endorsed by certain radically left perspectives. From these perspectives, all that exists today will be thrown away and replaced by a totally new reality. All human achievements and efforts will come to nothing, human history is just a farce, and the creativity of culture, the blood shed in social struggles, and the sweat of ecological stewardship will be rendered meaningless. From this perspective, one can even question the sense of God's first creation and God's power to sustain it. Creation becomes simply an ephemeral scenario for the drama of salvation, and human ethics are reduced to a series of moral tests that determine who is fit, faithful, and bound for the new heaven.

This is not, however, as our short journey through selected scripture has shown, the biblical understanding of the new creation. The new creation salvages and redeems human dignity and liberty and in so doing also redeems human dealings, as ambiguous as they might be. Can God be a loving God and simply ignore or set aside the exertions and accomplishments of God's loved ones? Given my own context, I think not. In the struggles and sufferings, but also in the hopes and tenacious faith of the people of Latin America as well as in other parts of the globalized world, we find a dialectical tension between the old and the new, the things attained and the things strived for. This illuminates our reading of the Bible, just as the Bible illuminates our understanding of human fate. History is not a dammed excrescence closed to God's will and decision; it is open to the presence of the new and gives place to the yet-to-come, the future endeavors that take place in new ways and settings in communion with the old.

The new creation, therefore, as informed by Isaiah, Paul, and John the Revelator, is a critical horizon against which the imperial culture of power is judged. It is the internal criterion for the possibility of the new. It is the perennial confirmation that the end of history does not come about when the happy advocates of postmodern arrogance decide, but when God enacts God's saving judgment for the poor, the despised, and the excluded who are victims of this ambiguous history. It allows us to think that an alternative way of life is possible, a life inspired in the free-

dom to which we are called in Christ, in which justice understood in terms of plenitude in equality can become a guiding vision for human dignity.

At the same time, new creation stands as a reminder of the limits and permanent ambiguity of human action. We cannot create the new creation. It comes from God as a new earth and a new heaven, which is beyond any human possibility to achieve. Yet, it preserves human identities as memory and vision. New creation is also an invitation to the hope that becomes an impelling force to join in God's labor of giving birth to the new creation, a labor conceived, from our side, as a creative participation in the life of God that manifests the liberty of God's children. Therefore, the *locus* of the new creation is not only a critique of what exists today, but also an invitation to witness and construction. Wesley's much-discussed synergism is in line with this calling.

The certainty of God's new creation empowered the advice of the angel to God's people at the apocalyptic Babylon: "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues" (Rev 18:4). To come out of the empire presupposes an alternative cultural option. We cannot fly from human history, as some unbalanced evangelicalism pretends, but we can distance ourselves from the ideology of the idol of endless accumulation. To come out of the Babylon of our time is to deny the right of the powerful to unlimited retaliation. Revelation reminds us that the imposition of terror is not simply a preclusive strategy of terrorist groups, but also a practice of the empire. Brutality, fear, terror, persecution, and violence are characteristics of imperial behavior, as the biblical witness has shown, both literally and symbolically, in its description of Assyria, Rome, and Babylon. Empires hold together through the exercise of power and the imposition of their *hubris*. In its damnation of terror, empires condemn themselves in their ideology of might-equals-right; in their claim that their aggression is justice, they conceal the truth precisely in injustice. Only confidence in the loving mercy of God as a mark of the faithful allows us to overcome fear as *ethos* and violence as *pathos*. This confidence, along with peace and life, are the marks of faithfulness, the seed and fruits of faith in the new creation.

To "come out of Babylon" in order to be ready to receive the New Jerusalem is also to perceive how the practice of accumulation and irresponsible abuse of the present creation has enslaved God's gifts to the vanity of oppression. Everything in creation has been priced by the global market, as if the market had the exclusive right to administrate human life and its needs and achievements. Not only everything created, but also life itself, holistically conceived, gets transformed into a monetary value and circulated in the financial market, subordinating the

needs of real persons to the dynamics of the stock market, “so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name” (Rev 13:17). The real becomes virtual, the virtual becomes real as the public is privatized and the private becomes public. When we are able to appreciate this inversion that the ideology of the global market has built, we realize that apocalyptic thinking is not an inversion of reality, but reestablishment of right order. This means that the new creation is revealed not as the destruction of the present creation but as its true goal.

What saves is not what is priced, but what is free. Market logic is the opposite of God’s justice. Consequently, the much-cherished doctrine of justification by faith alone, as a doctrine of the gratuity of life, needs to be interpreted anew in a manner that is confrontational toward the global market ideology. Grace, the *gratis* that cannot be made merchandise, is what sustains life. As the cross of Christ demonstrates, grace extends beyond the computation of cost and benefit. It is the token of life and liberty. It is the test of obedience to God’s will or an occasion of slavery to human greed.

Corruption is the earmark of empire. Just as king Midas’s touch turned everything into gold, wherever market forces reach, corruption appears. Obviously, corruption is not exclusive to a particular economic model but pervades every action of historic humanity. But since the global market claims unregulated freedom, it must answer to unregulated corruption. What is called the “free market” is really turning loose the unchecked ambitions of the worldly powers, the invisible hand not of God but “of the rulers of this world, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” In such a context, Christians are called to put on the armor of God in our struggle to be firm, “so we may be able to withstand on that evil day” (Eph 6:13).

Even though the whole of creation has been enslaved to futility in its flesh, the Spirit of God brings us the opening to the new creation by making it possible for us to become, ourselves, new creations in Christ. This does not destroy our identities in a meta-narrative that postmodernists abhor but recovers the sense of the small narratives of everyday life, the ordinary witnesses to God’s unending love, that cares for the small things in life, that comes to encounter the woman by the well, the man with the unclean spirit that dwells in the tombs, the ten lepers in the field, and the people for whom the market has no place or sensitivity. Life in the Spirit, as opposed to life in the empire, does not nullify human identities, but redefines them with meaning and vision.

Corruption is the imperial *ethos*. The new creation is the counter-empire, the hope of what is not yet seen and the advance of what is incorruptible. The presence of the new creation in the old generates the

possibility of new human relations, of freedom and justice, of God and God's people, of becoming children instead of slaves. The memory of the old creation in the new by the grace of God gives meaning to our precarious existence, makes sense of our ambiguous identities, brings hope to our afflicted yet joyful witness to Christ's endless love.