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St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology

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First published: 29 February 2024

https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/NewCreationintheChristianScripturesandTradition

Citation

Humphrey, Edith M. 2024. 'New Creation in the Christian Scriptures and Tradition', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/NewCreationintheChristianScripturesandTradition Accessed: 30 July 2025

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ISSN 2753-3492

New Creation in the Christian Scriptures and Tradition

Edith M. Humphrey

This entry analyses biblical and subsequent Christian approaches to new creation, under the rubrics ‘the good’, ‘the new’, and ‘the beautiful’. The introduction sketches points of debate: ‘new creation’ as realized or eschatological, renewed or utterly new, as heaven or New Jerusalem, and characterized by beauty or truth. Section one (‘the good’) establishes as foundational the goodness of creation, so that the eschaton cannot be merely a matter of dissolving the old, but of retaining all that is good (anthropological and otherwise), and renewing it. Here the current debate concerning whether Christians should speak of ‘heaven’, rather than ‘new creation’, comes into play. The second section (‘the new’) moves from continuity in the eschaton to astonishment, investigating the suggestion that creation was given as good but not perfect. Views of the incarnation as reparatory or as inherent in the first creation are considered. The complication of the fall, with its consequences of corruptibility and death is explored: death is seen as a break between the old and the new. Intriguing, too, is the promise of a ‘new heaven’ conjoined with a new earth. Thus, the promised glory emerges as something unexpected, beyond continuity, glimpsed in the astonishing ‘miracles’ performed by Jesus and his followers. In the third section, beauty in the present age emerges as means to glimpse the final *telos* (end or purpose) of creation. The sacramental quality of God’s creation is discussed, as is the difference between a realized new creation over against a future beyond human imagination. The conclusion suggests an integrating hermeneutic, in which the inaugurated new creation invites Christians to a blessed vision and final communion that will outstrip the original Edenic walking with the Lord. This mysterious presence of the new creation, and hope for its fulfilment, dignifies human worship and sub-creative efforts, including the priestly calling to nurture the world and present it to the creator of heaven and earth.

Keywords: Creation, Bible, Heaven, Eschatology, Sin, Mortality, Imagination, Resurrection, New Jerusalem, Beauty, Sacramentality of creation, Theosis

Table of contents

1 Introduction

‘New creation’ is a key concept in the Christian Bible, anticipated in the Old Testament (OT) and integral to the New (NT). For the apostle Paul it is so significant that he closes a contentious letter by commending the new creation as all that matters (Gal 6:15). Because the gospel is worked out in time, however, new creation is not a univocal concept, and has become a flashpoint for debate: does the Bible depict the new creation as already realized, or as an eschatological hope? Is it a renovation, or utterly new? Are Christians to understand their goal as heaven, or resurrection? Is the new creation best characterized by beauty, or by justice? These themes are sometimes presented as mutually exclusive, but all find a place in scripture and may be held together despite some cognitive tension. This entry highlights common threads and debates in interpretation of the Christian scriptures concerning the new creation, establishing creation as ‘good’, more thoroughly considering how the new creation is ‘new’, and describing the final new creation as the ultimate expression of the ‘beautiful’.

2 The good

To think coherently about the new creation in the scriptures, readers must form a nuanced concept of the original creation. The narrative discerned by Christian tradition in scripture unfolds as an arc, with complications, but also with a deep integration between beginning, middle, and anticipated finale. Though some Christians have considered created matter suspect, this is not what is heard in Genesis. Unlike other ancient cosmogonies, the supreme Creator (not a subordinate) brings the cosmos into being: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’ (Gen 1:1). The world is not made from the carcass of a primeval beast, nor humanity from its blood or dragon’s teeth, as though creation were a battle waged by equal powers and the material world something salvaged from this cosmic upheaval (cf. Enuma Elish 4. 96–146, 6. 33). Rather, God makes the heavens and the earth, implicitly intended for each other, speaks the world’s components into being (Gen 1), and deliberatively creates humanity according to his image and likeness. Throughout Genesis 1 we hear God’s refrain that creation is ‘good’, and finally ‘very good’.

Even the fall (Gen 3) does not eradicate this verdict, as is seen in God’s covenant with Noah and the earth (Gen 9:8–17). Still, there has been a tendency among some to see the fall as utterly spoiling creation, and even to consider the material world as a fall from perfection. This may be due to the special use of ‘flesh’ in the NT for the fallen human condition (e.g. Rom 7:5–25), but also to the culture surrounding early and later Christian communities, affected by the Platonic dictum that ‘the body is a tomb’ (*soma sema*). Further, the influence of Gnostic groups and world-denying sects, next of those who commended the ascetic life not as remedial but for its own sake, and finally of those

who exaggerated a doctrine of total depravity, led to a devaluation of creation that is inconsistent with Genesis.

Sometimes this devaluation is not argued explicitly, but underlies unnatural exegeses of scriptural texts, as where Augustine reads Rom 8:18–25 as addressing only the hope of the *human* 'creature' (*ktisis*; 'Question 67'; see Augustine of Hippo 1982), over against John Chrysostom, who understands Paul's use of *ktisis* to mean the whole of creation (*Homily XIV on Romans*; NPNF 11). Here Paul personifies creation as 'frustrated' because of the fall (8:20) but hopeful of deliverance (8:21); just as human shame has issued in an enslaved creation, so will humankind's unveiled glory bring release (8:19). Creaturely sufferings are 'birth-pangs' of the coming age (cf. (Mark 13:8; 1 Thess 4:3; 1 Enoch 62:4); to this Paul adds the detail of the Holy Spirit groaning within redeemed humanity, as together they labour towards the new creation (Rom 8:23). Thus the present Holy Spirit anticipates the new creation as a kind of 'first-fruits', or early harvest, before the future resurrection.

Nor is the presence of the Holy Spirit in the scriptures and Christian tradition limited to the human sphere. As the Eastern Christian tradition affirms in its *Trisagion* prayers, the creating Spirit is 'everywhere present and fills all things', sustaining creation and bringing about its new birth. The metanarrative of the Bible is world-affirming, not world-denying. This is confirmed in the Psalter (Psalms 8; 19; 148) and in the Song of the Three (LXX [Greek Septuagint] Dan 3:51–90), where nature praises the LORD, aided by human vocalizing. Not only do the scriptures give assurance that God considers this world worth retaining, but there are also glimpses that what has been lost will be recovered. A helpful, if sometimes tendentious, presentation of how even inanimate objects may find their proper place in the eschaton may be found in Paul J. Griffith's *Decreation The Last Things of All Creatures* (2014).

If the original creation is essentially good, then the hope for a new creation cannot imply a mere dissolution of the old, though some have envisioned annihilation as 'the first last thing', at least for some elements of the 'devastated' creation (Griffiths 2014: 15–18, 311–312). Whatever the extent of continuity between old and new creation, however, any uncritical talk of 'going to heaven' as a mere escape of this world falls short of the biblical vision. In their prophecies, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel crescendo from a sober acknowledgement of Israel's plight towards a new-creation finale. Isaiah 11:9 speaks of a coming age that includes harmonized elements of the original creation. Isa 40–66 envisions the 'regathering' and new blessed state of the chosen people whom God 'created' (43:1–7). Jeremiah glimpses a time when 'they shall be radiant because of the goodness of the LORD' – a goodness that includes even wine and oil (31:12). Ezekiel pictures the people re-gathered under the divine Shepherd (34:1–31) and placed within an immense temple-garden, supplied with healing trees and a fresh-water sea (43:1–

47:23). At first these passages appear to portray the new creation as a specific hope for exiled Israel, at the mercy of Gentile super-powers. However, the vision moves beyond the boundaries of Israel, as the glory of the LORD shines upon 'aliens' joining God's people (Ezek 47:22; cf. Isa 66:12, 18–21). Though Jeremiah does not describe the vast extent of the new creation seen in Isaiah and Ezekiel, he knows its depths: God will implant his will within his people (Jer 32:39). All this coheres with God's original design, that humankind should nurture creation, have easy concourse with the Creator, and experience peace on earth and between heaven and earth.

The NT also shows the good in creation as finally preserved. Most significant is Paul's treatment of resurrected humans in 1 Corinthians 15, patterned after the risen Jesus. Paul begins with Jesus' own resurrection as the 'first-fruits' of those who will be raised (15:20–34); he then describes different kinds of physical flesh (earthly animals), 'bodies' (heavenly and earthly), and 'glories' (15:35–41); finally, he contrasts human bodies, which die like Adam and the rest of earth's animals, with the risen body of the life-giving Christ. Redeemed humanity, now possessing *psychikon* ('ensouled') bodies, will follow the pattern of Jesus, assuming *pneumatikon* ('en-Spirited') bodies (15:42–49).

Many English translations use the terms 'natural' and 'physical' for the first body in 1 Cor 15:44 and 46, and 'spiritual' for the second. It is important to note the consensus among numerous commentators that this is misleading (e.g. Calvin 1960: 337; Fee 1996: 58; Harrisville 1987: 277; Montague 2011: 280; Thrall 1965: 113; Wright 2003: 346–355). Many offer instead the adjectives 'ensouled', 'soulish', or 'animal' for the first body. Even those who retain the common translations clarify that the apostle is not suggesting that our current bodies are material while our future state will be immaterial, as might be implied by the contrast between natural (or physical) and spiritual. Rather, the distinction is between that which enlivens the Adamic being over against that which enlivened Christ, and will enliven all those incorporated into him. Mere *psyche* (soul) is the animating principle currently shared by humans with the animals (though breathed directly by God into Adam), while the *pneuma*, the very Spirit of God, gave life to the risen Jesus, and will be the divine power by whom the redeemed person and Christian community will live eternally. The continuity is clear – Jesus before and after the resurrection is the same (transformed) person; humans will not exchange matter for soul, but will become en-Spirited embodied beings.

Paul's teaching acquires particularity in the Gospels, where the transformed Jesus walks, eats, and is visible. The tomb is empty not because Christ's body has evaporated but because he is risen, with nail-imprints still in his hands and side (John 20:27). He converses with the disciples going to Emmaus, though their eyes must be opened to recognize him (Luke 24:13–32). He is not a bare spirit, as the disciples discover when they eat broiled fish with him (Luke 24:36–43). While 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the

kingdom of God' (1 Cor 15:50), the one who was in every respect human (though without sin, cf. 2 Cor 5:21) is now incorruptible – and able so to make his followers incorruptible. With all that this entails, the whole human being is to be resurrected, but in eternal splendour. This tradition of a body-soul (or body-soul-spirit) unity is not unique to Paul, but extends OT pictures of the 'physical embeddedness of the human community' (Green 2008: 71). Recent theological emphasis upon this unity (whether construed as interaction between parts or more radically denying that the soul possesses an ontology apart from the body) provides a foundation for conversation with those in medical and neurological disciplines. This endeavour may be particularly successful when discussion can occur between theologians who value neurological studies as part of the revelatory 'book of Creation', and scientists who admit an 'explanatory gap' among their theories of brain-body coherence (cf. Preston, Ritter and Hepler 2013: 36).

Since humans are to be raised incorruptible, many have considered that work compatible with eternity will also survive. Paul distinguishes unworthy human produce (to be consumed in the final judgment) from other enduring accomplishments (1 Cor 3:14–15), while Hebrews envisions a final 'shaking […] in order that what cannot be shaken may remain' (Heb 12:26–28). This view is, however, refuted by others, who see the eschaton as either a static or 'repetitive static' blessedness and reason that '[m]aking, a remedy for lack, has no place' there (Griffiths 2014: 311). Still, in Revelation's final scene, we read of an amplified city-garden, with human work honoured, as kings bring the 'riches of the nations' into it (Rev 21:24); God, who visited the first human couple in the garden's evening, dwells with his people face-to-face (Rev 22:4); all evil is removed, and the earth now has concourse with the renewed heaven. Throughout the NT, then, writers anticipate that the new creation will embrace humanity, godly human activity, and the cosmos as a whole: the faithful look for 'new heavens and new earth, in which righteousness dwells' (2 Pet 3:13; cf. Isa 65:17).

In light of creation's original goodness, and its continuity with the promised end, some speak of creation being renewed. It is not as though God has abandoned his first plan, though that may be the impression given by an isolated reading of 2 Pet 3:12 which details the destruction of a marred cosmos. Instead, the scriptures posit life followed by death, then by resurrected glory. Paul likens human death to sowing a seed in the hope of germination and new growth (1 Cor 15:43–4), and what is true of the person seems also true of the cosmos. Genesis 1 describes God's first act as the creation of heaven and earth as a pair. Soon after, Israel understands her worship places (tabernacle, temple) as built on the model of the unseen heavenly sanctuary disclosed by revelation to Moses (Exod 25:40). This perspective persists into the book of Hebrews in the NT which considers all that preceded as foreshadowing what would come in Christ, who as High Priest enters the heavenly sanctuary on humanity's behalf (cf. Heb 8:5). Because the turning point of the human story is the incarnation, the NT does not always envisage

the new creation as future but as something inaugurated. Christ has lived the righteous life intended for Adam and Eve, has conquered death, been raised, and glorified, and the Holy Spirit has been given to the faithful. Due to the Spirit now dwelling among them, God's people already perceive reality with new eyes: 'If anyone is in Christ, behold – new creation!' (2 Cor 5:7, present author's translation).

Just as there is continuity between the original creation and the eschatological creation, so the Bible posits a continuity between believers' present and future experiences. This means that the faithful even now are 'taught of God' (Jer 31:34; Isa 54:13; John 6:47) and participate in righting the imbalances of the fall. Acts, and the longer ending of Mark, demonstrate this through miracles performed by Jesus' followers, and even by their eluding death in dangerous situations (Mark 16:18; Acts 28). Less spectacularly, the new creation is demonstrated in moral transformation, ministry, and wholehearted worship of God, for the faithful 'have come' to the 'city of the living God' and now partake of the heavenly altar (Heb 12:22; 13:10). 'The good news of the kingdom', writes Richard Middleton, 'is nothing less than the healing […] of the world […] in which we are all invited to participate' (Middleton 2014: 262). Yet it has not arrived in fullness; the scriptural visions imply something more thoroughly 'new' – the abolition of grief, divisions, unrighteousness, and death, and an unparalleled intimacy with the Creator.

3 The new

3.1 Continuity and newness

The scriptures emphasize the newness of the anticipated world. For example, the second part of Isaiah emphasizes the 'new things' to be declared (42:9): a 'new song' (42:10), a 'new thing' done by God (42:19), newly revealed mysteries (48:6), a 'new name' for God's people (62:2), and enduring 'new heavens and new earth' that shall endure (65:17; 66:22), that cause former things to be forgotten. A sense of wonder is thus elicited. Some scholars such as Michael Allen, while acknowledging 'the need to keep alert to both emphases' of continuity and newness, insist that the eschatological 'heaven on earth' is 'something so radically new that it can be likened to starting from scratch' (Allen 2022: 117). Despite this apparent overstatement, it is clear that the scriptures and the ensuing tradition speak of the incarnation-ministry-crucifixion-resurrection-ascension of the God-Man as something unprecedented. God 'assumed' (i.e. took on) humanity, including a body, in Jesus. Though God's Word speaks and acts from the beginning of Genesis, it is 'in these last days [God] has spoken through His Son […] who is the express image of His person' (Heb 1:1, 3, present author's translation). At least three insights follow from this: the 'last days' have already begun in 'God-with-us;' astonishment concerning the present new creation is a natural expression of the church; and Christians anticipate

mysteries beyond comprehension, what ‘no eye has seen nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, [t]hat God has prepared’ (1 Cor 2:9; cf. Isa 64:4).

Part of the novelty is that heaven itself is changed and united with earth. Christian talk about ‘heaven’, however, has sometimes been distorted so as to neglect the resurrection. This debate may be known even to non-specialists through the plea of N. T. Wright that Christians should reclaim the doctrine of resurrection and be ‘surprised by hope’ (2008; see also his more scholarly volume, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 2003). He attributes the popular misunderstanding of an ultimate heavenly hope – with bodiless souls or humans-become-angels – to an unfortunate influence of Middle Platonism on the developing church (Wright 2008: 18, 36, 80, 160). This negative evaluation of Platonism, however, is critiqued by Hans Boersma, who makes a strong claim for Christian Platonism as essential to classical Christianity (Boersma 2021). Wright’s description of the general resurrection has become so well known in popular Christian circles that it has been countered in *Christianity Today* by academic Todd Billings, who considers the Wrightian hope for a renewed earth ‘too small’ – simply a projection of human desire into the future (Billings 2018), and by Michael Allen who urges a ‘chastened […] confidence’ regarding what kind of human activity will endure, save for worship and the contemplation of God (Allen 2022: 124). This controversy, among others, has been expressed in a book entitled *Four Views on Heaven*, where Richard Middleton generally represents Wright’s position, anticipating ‘fresh projects’ for humanity (Wright 2008: 185) rather than ‘a perpetual worship service as our ultimate purpose’ (Middleton 2014: 174).

3.2 Heaven and resurrection

In assessing this debate it is helpful to recollect that, throughout the entire sweep of scripture, ‘heaven and earth’ are paired. Besides the creation of ‘heaven and earth’ in Gen 1:1 and 2:1, we hear in Gen 14:22 about the LORD who is, to read literally, ‘the possessor of heaven and earth’. There is a distinction made between these two realms (or, as some would prefer, dimensions), but the boundary is not impermeable. For example, in the story of Jacob they are joined by an ethereal gate (Gen 28:17), and for the Hebrews during the exodus the holy mountain emitted a divinely-kindled fire that reached into ‘the heart of heaven’ (Deut 4:11, RSV and other translations). This twinning of heaven and earth is amplified in the eschatological teaching, where Jesus declares that ‘heaven and earth’ will pass away (Mark 13:31), and both Peter and John the visionary catch a glimpse of ‘new heavens and new earth’.

In the singular or plural, the word ‘heaven(s)’ may sometimes simply mean ‘the sky’ or ‘the expanse’. However, the transcendent nature of Jacob’s dream of the ladder reaching to heaven (Gen 28:10–17), the event at Sinai with Moses (Exod 24), and John’s final vision (Rev 21–22) show that not only the sky but also God’s own abode (described often as

nested heavenly courts, cf. 1 Enoch 14; 2 Cor 12) are paired with the created earth. Thus Isaiah sees the glory of the LORD spilling over into the 'whole earth' (Isa 6:3). Due to the second stage of the human drama, the fall, the pairing is less obvious. Even so, the first chapter of Colossians retains this unity, presenting Jesus as a turning point not only for the earth but for heaven: 'For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace by the blood of his cross' (Col 1:19–20). In this regard, John Chrysostom makes no distinction between an expectation for the resurrection and for heaven:

> For since you have taken a body mortal […] the earth too has received a curse […] But that the heaven, when it is waxen old along with the earth, is to change afterwards to a better portion, hear from the Prophet […]: You, O Lord, from the beginning hast founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands […]; You shall fold them up like a cloak, and they shall be changed (Ps 102:25–26). Isaiah [51:6] declares [the same…] For neither do they that dwell therein, mankind, that is, undergo such [an eternal perishing] but a temporary one, and through it they are changed into an incorruptible state, and so therefore will the creature [i.e. creation] be. And all this the apostle Peter showed […] (2 Peter 3:13), that which Paul also says farther on […] Not yourself alone, but that also which […] partakes not of reason or sense […] shall be a sharer in your blessings. (Chrysostom, *Homily XIV* on Rom 8:19–21; NPNF 11)

Here the 'Golden-Mouthed' Chrysostom unapologetically uses the language of a renewed heaven to clarify St Paul's teaching on the resurrection. Yet in the contemporary context it seems that exegetes feel compelled to choose. Allen understands this final scenario as the establishment of heaven (wherein the pre-resurrected dead presently dwell) upon a glorious new earth, yet his description sounds as though earth becomes heaven, jettisoning much of what made it congenial to humans (Allen 2022). Richard Middleton, on the other hand, 'repents' of the term heaven, both as a description of the interim state of believers prior to the resurrection, and the eschatological new creation (Middleton 2014: 237). N. T. Wright concedes that 'heaven' might be suitable for describing the interim (though, he says, the scriptures do not use the term thus, Wright 2008: 190), while considering any reference to a final heaven too spiritualized. Yet he does suggest that in the end the dimension (not locale) of heaven will embrace the new earth (Wright 2008: 104–108).

3.3 Heaven in the scriptures

It may be helpful to note that throughout scripture heaven is described as the proper dwelling of God (even if in metaphor), so that prayers are directed towards the heavens: 'Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it' (Deut 10:14, RSV); 'Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases' (Ps 115:3); 'Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you upon earth; therefore let your words be

few' (Eccl 5:2); '[H]ear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place; may you hear from heaven your dwelling place; hear and forgive' (2 Chr 6:21); '[T]here is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries' (Dan 2:28); 'For Christ did not enter into a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf;' (Heb 9:24); 'Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple' (Rev 11:19).

As the Judeo-Christian tradition asserts, a bodiless and omnipresent God cannot be contained in a location: yet the Christian tradition insists on belief in the risen Christ who is understood, with his body, to have entered this heavenly temple. The persistence of topical imagery may lead us to question whether it is sufficient, as most contemporary scholars do, to interpret Matthew's reference to 'the kingdom of heaven' as a simple metonym for 'the kingdom of God'. For example, Matt 8:11 uses concrete imagery concerning the eschatological banquet given for those who come from east and west and recline at table 'in the kingdom of heaven', while others are thrown 'out'. 'Heaven', however understood, appears to be the context in which the banquet is given. Further, Jesus' opening words for the Christian community's prayer are addressed to 'our Father in heaven'. In this same vein, St Stephen sees the 'heavens opened' and the Son of Man in the presence of the Father (Acts 7:56). Where the Father is, there too is the Son, by virtue of his divine nature, and as assured by the ascension.

3.4 Ascension and humanity

The question remains whether the ascension is unique to the Son of Man among humans, because of his divine nature; that is, does the ascension to heaven speak only to the divinity of Jesus, with nothing specific to show concerning God's plans for humanity? In surveying the way that ascension language has sometimes been used in the Christian tradition, both N. T. Wright and Douglas Farrow show concern about an ecclesial co-opting that robs Jesus of his unique calling, spiritualizes the Christian imagination in a Gnostic manner, and claims exaggerated authority for the church or even the state (Wright 2008: 109–117; Farrow 1999). However, since Farrow is a Roman Catholic he is unlikely to agree completely with Wright, who considers the assumption of Mary and the saints' mediation as erroneous beliefs (Wright 2008: 113 cf. Humphrey 2023).

Keeping in mind these cautions, readers of scripture must still grapple with Jesus' taking his human body into heaven. This surprise is compounded by narratives concerning other humans who entered heaven bodily – intimated in the OT and expounded more fully in parabiblical and rabbinic literature. Enoch and Elijah are famous for walking with God and being caught up into heaven (Gen 5:22; 2 Kgs 2:11; 1 Enoch 1:12–14; perhaps Rev

11:12), and Isaiah decries the proud with language that suggests that they will never attain heaven, though they lust for it:

> You said in your heart,
> I will ascend to heaven;
> I will raise my throne
> above the stars of God;
> I will sit on the mount of assembly
> on the heights of Zaphon;
> I will to the tops of the clouds;
> I will make myself like the Most High'.
> But you are brought down to Sheol,
> to the depths of the Pit. (Isa 14:13–15)

However, when Jesus alludes to this passage, the language he uses suggests that such exaltation might be given to the humble: 'And you, Capernaum, will *you* be lifted up to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades!' (Matt 11:23, present author's translation).

The 'Son of Man' figure, adopted by Jesus in the gospels, also appears in Daniel 7 as an ascending corporate figure:

> I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Dan 7:13–14, RSV)

The angel interprets this vision thus: 'And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; His kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him' (Dan 7:26–7, present author's translation). After an ascent to the Ancient of Days, the kingdom and dominion are given to the 'people of the saints of the Most High', as a whole. Strangely, in the Aramaic and more decisively the Greek LXX the next sentence ascribes an everlasting kingdom to 'him' (singular) rather than to 'them' – something that the RSV and NRSV translations obscure. A natural reading leads the reader to see both a symbolic Son of Man, indicative of God's people, and a specific agent of God (the 'him'). This leaves room for later Christian associations of this figure with Jesus, in whom the faithful are incorporated, without forgetting that this vision pictures the reception of God's people at the heavenly throne.

It would seem, then, that the Bible does not present ascension as restricted to the archetypal Son of Man, Jesus. There is also the force of Jesus' warning: 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the

will of my Father who is in the heavens' (Matt 7:21, present author's translation). The word for 'kingdom' (*basileia*) can be translated as 'kingship', implying the action of 'ruling' on the part of the faithful. But the 'kingdom' or 'kingship' of heaven is here associated with the Father who is in the heavens: the mysterious 'locale' is emphasized. Similarly, when asked about the eschatological resurrection by the Sadducees, Jesus tells them that in the resurrection the saints will be like the angels in heaven (Matt 22:30) who neither are given or taken in marriage and who never die (Luke 20:36). There is a continuity and a discontinuity implied here; it is not inappropriate to appeal to angelic hosts in heaven as an analogue for eschatological humanity.

3.5 Jesus as the model

Therefore, the One who models the Christian hope marks a path of life, sacrificial death, resurrection and ascension. Jesus' ascension is no mere stage exit, since the human body is retained by the Son, and the ascension is ineffably interconnected with the empowerment of Pentecost (John 16:7; Eph 4:9–14). Moreover, Paul explains the resurrection by reference to heaven:

> The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven (*ex ouranou*). As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust, and as is the heavenly man (*ho epouranios*), so also are those who are heavenly (*hoi epouranioi*). Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly man (*tou epouraniou*). (1 Cor 15:47–49, present author's translation)

The apostle does not seem nervous that language of heaven will obscure the resurrection. Similarly, in 2 Cor 5:1, we read about the difference between our present 'tabernacle' or 'tent'-like body that is 'our on-the-earth home' (*epigeios oikia*, present author's translation), and the permanent dwelling (*oikia, oikodomē*) to come. That home for which Paul hopes is 'made without hands' and 'eternal in the heavens' (*en tois ouranois*.) Unlike 1 Pet 1:4, Paul does not merely speak of a gift 'kept' in the heavens (or even 'prepared' there) but locates the dwelling there (cf. Wright 2008: 151; cf. Middleton 2014: 214). His language is reminiscent of the dwellings (*monai*) in the Father's house (*en tē oikia*) that Jesus promises in John 14:2 as the place (*topos*) that he will prepare. Neither Paul nor John's Jesus are reserved about using heavenly language to speak about humans dwelling where God is (vs. God coming to dwell where we are). It may be that the Johannine Jesus is here speaking of a transitory resting place prior to the resurrection, as some have suggested (Wright 2008: 41). However, the word *monē* does not always mean a temporary dwelling (and cf. John 14:23 with Phlm 1:22), and there is no hint of that qualification in John 14.2. It seems unlikely that Jesus would have encouraged his disciples with merely a transitional state, since similar critical moments in scripture elicited the particular hope of resurrection (e.g. 2 Macc 7:23; 14:45).

3.6 The rapture or glorification

For many, especially in North America, the idea of heaven is mingled with interpretations regarding 1 Thessalonians 4 and the 'rapture'. These have become entrenched in some circles since the time of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) but turn out to be a misreading of the text. Many exegetes, including N. T. Wright, have helpfully adduced the classical advent of the emperor to claim his city as an explanation of this letter's scenario where believers greet Jesus as he returns (Wright 2008: 119–128). Reading Paul's words in this way puts to rest any dispensational notions of a rapture resulting in unmanned airplanes and the faithful disappearing while the world continues on without them. A closer analysis of 1 Thess 4:13–18 shows, however, that Paul is not entirely closing the door to heavenly habitation. The apostle outlines a sequence in which Jesus died, rose again, has ascended, and will return. Those who are dead will rise first, and they, along with those who are still living, will be caught up in the cloud to meet the Lord in the air, so that all the faithful will be with him. The passage says nothing about escorting Jesus back to earth and dwelling only there, nor does it stress a human initiative to go out and greet the Messiah. Rather, the faithful are elevated, leading to their communion with God. The word that Paul uses for what happens to the faithful is that they are 'caught up' (*harpagēsometha*) – the word used of the Spirit seizing Philip after he had witnessed to the eunuch (Acts 8:39), of Paul's elevation to the third heaven (2 Cor 12), and of the transport of the infant Messiah in John's vision (Rev 12:5). Therefore, as Wright insists, a triumphal finale limited to heaven is not detailed here. Neither do we hear about humans staying with him 'in the air'; after all, the Lord is descending to earth when the saints are caught up.

It is possible that the final locale is elided in 1 Thessalonians 4 because it is not Paul's purpose to be specific about the mysterious hope to come. The major hope he presses on his readers is that all believers – those passed on and those still living – will be made like Jesus and be with him eternally. As Augustine puts it, 'For we shall go to meet Him as He comes, not where He remains; but 'so shall we be with the Lord', that is, we shall be with Him possessed of immortal bodies *wherever* we shall be with Him' (*City of God* 20.20, emphasis added; see Augustine of Hippo 1994). Paul's concern was not to speculate concerning the whereabouts of believers' final state, but to address his contemporaries' fears that those who had already died would miss out. Certainly this passage proves unfriendly, as Wright and others have indicated, towards dispensational rapture theology. After all, it has nothing to say about a literal thousand-year reign, or what would amount to a third final coming, after the rapture. It would seem, however, that this passage also does not exclude ascension as a future experience of resurrected humanity. Students interested in more detail concerning Jewish and Christian expectations of human ascension and glorification in the Second Temple period and later may find helpful the detailed study

of David M. Moffitt (2013: 145–180). Moffitt argues that Jesus' high-priestly 'elevation to the throne at God's right hand provides [the faithful] with the guarantee that they too will attain to their promised inheritance' (2013: 302) – an inheritance that is shaped not only by resurrection but also by ascension.

3.7 Two strands in the ancient theologians

It may be difficult to see how resurrection and ascent to heaven fit together. John Chrysostom seeks to clarify this in his comparison of the resurrection with our present life:

> Is this [present] body not en-Spirited? It is indeed en-Spirited, but will be much more so. For now frequently both the abundant grace of the Holy Spirit departs when people commit great sins, and again, while the Spirit continues to be present, the life of the flesh depends on the soul […] But in that day […] He shall abide continually in the flesh of the righteous […] the natural soul also being present. For either it was some such thing which [St Paul] intimated by speaking of 'an en-Spirited' body, or that it shall be lighter and more subtle, so that they can even be wafted upon air; or rather he meant both these. (*Homily 41.390*, 1 Cor 15; PG 34, present author's translation)

Here Chrysostom suggests that Paul uses the term *pneumatikon* ('en-Spirited') when speaking of the future state, so as to suggest a body that will be permanently animated, nourished, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit – though there is a partial present fulfilment. He also speculates concerning its difference with our present 'gross' bodies and posits a more agile eschatological body that can be at home in different places.

Though more tentative when he considers the composition of the new body, Chrysostom does not simply repeat a Platonic view of matter over against spirit. Rather, he is trying to understand why Paul refers to the final en-Spirited body as 'heavenly', and why the apostle appeals to the cosmic bodies as an analogue. Thus he holds together the two debated strands: that of 'heaven' and that of a renewed earth. Chrysostom's both/and method sheds light also on the picture in Hebrews concerning the gathered '*ekklesia* (assembly/church) of the firstborn' who behold innumerable angels, those who have been made perfect, and the heavenly (*epourouranios*) Jerusalem (Heb 12:18–24). These firstborn are registered in heaven (or perhaps they are 'the assembly in heaven of registered firstborn'), gathered with the angelic assembly and the divine judge of all. Here, present and future comes together, as all those gathered, those on earth and those already with the Lord, are pictured as a single company, spoken for by the blood of Christ. Ambrose glosses this as 'Jerusalem, built not of earthly stones but of living stones, with ten thousand angels and the church of the firstborn and the spirits of those made perfect and the God of the just, who spoke better with his blood than Abel' (*Flight from the World* 5.31; Ambrose of Milan 2010). These stones are substantial, made of embodied worshipping believers: 'spirits' here cannot not mean that they are disembodied, for these have been made perfect or complete. It would seem that, for the author of Hebrews, worship joins together those who

are at present earthly pilgrims with those conceived of as already in the perfected new creation, even though elsewhere he speaks of the pious dead as ‘waiting’ for believers to receive their redemption (Heb 11:40).

Basil likewise speaks about this ‘celestial city’ as a community ‘established because of the unchanging manner of the life of the saints, and […] administered according to the heavenly law’ (*Homilies on the Psalms* 18.4; Basil 1963). He seems to envisage a continuity with the present idea of order, and yet a mysterious difference: ‘[I]t is not the privilege of human nature to learn the arrangement of that city and all its adornment’, since ‘no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’ (*Homilies on the Psalms* 18.4). Photius (810–893 AD), in interpreting Hebrews, comments: ‘from heaven speaks the one who promises heaven itself as an inheritance […] the things of the New Testament are “from heaven” because they are divine and exalted and cleanse the soul in a truly divine manner and bear it up into heaven’ (*Fragments Ep. to Hebrews* 12.25; see Photius 1933). Photius’ emphasis upon heaven and the soul, however, does not compromise belief concerning the resurrection, a doctrine well-established by the ecumenical creed which Photius recited during every liturgy. It seems that there were those in the ancient and early medieval periods who saw no dissonance between a hope for heaven and the bodily resurrection. Chrysostom represents this mysterious collation: ‘[W]e require a new and heavenly rule of life […] *because both the heaven and the earth, and all the creation, shall with our bodies be translated into incorruption*’ (*Homilies on Gal 6:15–16*, emphasis added; NPNF 13).

It is perhaps impossible to say much about how heaven will be renewed, since the scriptures stress the narrative of humankind, not the angels. However, something about this dynamic can be detected in Eph 1:10 and Col 1:20. These verses may have in mind a world in which angels no longer guard paradise, nor send messages to an estranged humanity, but join with them in fulsome praise (cf. Rev 4–5). In contemplating the arrival of Christ with his body in the heavenly temple, ancient liturgical uses of Psalm 24 (LXX 23) interpret the lifted-up ‘heads’ to be angelic custodians of the heavenly gates. The ancient (or very early medieval) hymn *Aeterne Rex Altissime* declares: ‘Angels tremble as they see how changed is our humanity’. If redeemed humans are so transformed, this may inform the enigmatic statement in Ephesians that redeemed humanity will ‘instruct’ angels concerning redemption (cf. Eph 3:10) – even as angels presently instruct humanity in how to praise God (Rev 4–5). From the perspective of several church fathers, the incarnation itself implies the ascension both of Jesus and humanity in general:

> [T]oday the temporal bond was broken, the Devil was put to shame, the demons fled, death was broken, Paradise was opened, the curse was destroyed, sin has gone out of the way, error has been driven off, truth has returned […] The citizenship of those above was planted in the earth, angels have fellowship with humans, and humans speak confidently

> with angels. Why? Because God came to earth, and man in heaven. (‘On the Birthday’, attributed to Chrysostom; PG 56: 385–396)

3.8 Emerging principles: creation’s maturity, inherent incarnation, time and eternity

When images of continuity and newness, resurrection and heaven are brought together, several principles emerge. First, the original goodness of creation need not imply initial perfection. Some parts of the Christian tradition even see room for the growth of the original sinless couple, and separate the couplet ‘image and likeness’ in Genesis 1, suggesting that the likeness is not innate but must be acquired. Though it is far more likely that first readers read ‘image and likeness’ as a synonymous parallelism, both the wording of the LXX and the omission of ‘likeness’ in the description of the creative act in 1:27 (in contrast to its presence in God’s deliberation at 1:26) have been cited to support the distinction between image and likeness. Irenaeus of Lyons, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, John of Damascus, and contemporary Orthodox interpretations all suggest that humans were meant to grow into the divine likeness: ‘We possess the one by creation; we acquire the other by free will […]. Let him possess by creation what is in the image, but let him also become according to the likeness’ (Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Origin of Man* GNOS 10; cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, v.vi.1; v.xvi.2; Origen, *On First Principles* 3.6.1; John of Damascus, *Orthodox Faith* 2.12; Ware 1993: 218–221).

Even if critically-trained exegetes find this unconvincing, it must be admitted that a canonical reading of Genesis 1 suggests that all is not yet accomplished. The finality reached in God’s ‘rest’ after creation is supplemented by the story of Genesis 2 where humankind is given a mandate to cultivate creation and to bring forth children. Creation’s goodness is characterized by a developing vitality in which humanity participates. This insight is confirmed in the final scene of the Bible, where the tree yields its many crops of fruit and its healing leaves, and the faithful participate in Christ’s reign. The human story, following the pattern of Christ, is not simply that of ‘paradise regained’: the scriptures do not graph it as a V-shape but as a check-mark. The first human couple begins in a garden, while the faithful community is consummated in an infoliated, fruitful city, inhabited by a multitude (Rev 21–22). The full answer to godless Babylon (Rev 17) is not simply a razing of that city but the divine gift of a new heavenly city that includes ‘the glory of the nations’ (21:24), while also excluding anything ‘unclean’. Despite the declaration by a minority that Christianity teaches a total recapitulation (cf. Hart 2019), traditional Christian interpretation stops short of confident universalism, only daring (perhaps) to *hope* for the salvation of all (Balthasar 1988). Yet the eschatological situation appears not to be static but dynamic: just as God blesses humanity, redeemed humankind is pictured as having the wherewithal to bless the rest of the new creation.

Secondly, it becomes apparent that the incarnation is inherent in the original story of creation, not simply introduced as a 'Deus ex machina' external to the cosmos. The language of 'invasion', used by some for eschatological discourse (e.g. Martyn 1997), obscures the principle that this is God's own world. A contemporary case for 'incarnation anyway' is vigorously argued by Edwin van Driel (2015) and has been suggested throughout the ages – perhaps beginning with St Athanasius, who give human participation in the divine nature as a reason for the incarnation, besides the reparation of humanity (*On the Incarnation* 54.3; Athanasius 2012). Van Driel reads N. T. Wright as denying this perspective, when Wright pictures Jesus as accomplishing what Israel could not (the incarnation seems to be God's 'plan B'). However, a more careful perusal of Wright's works will note that he speaks of the incarnation as fitting for God and not a category error. Wright, in exegeting the gospels and Paul's letters, sounds the theme of Jesus fulfilling the calling of Israel to be a light to the nations, yet he also sees the incarnation as the fulfilment of Adam's call (e.g. Wright 2014: 35).

The two themes of New Israel and New Adam are not after all incompatible. What Paul sees up close, in the reunion of Gentile and Jew forged by Jesus, is given cosmic dimensions in Col 1:15–20 as the union of heaven and earth; Jesus is both the firstborn of God's faithful, and the firstborn of creation. Both the story of humanity and of Israel are fulfilled in the NT vision of the new creation. As Timothy Ware puts it: 'The true image and likeness of God is Christ himself; and so, from the very first moment of man's creation in the image, the Incarnation of Christ was in some way already implied' (1995: 71). This is confirmed by John 1:1–8, which presents the 'Light that comes into the world' as that very Light of the World from before the dawn of creation, who becomes incarnate and illumines the human mind so that people can understand who God really is. Along with John, other NT writings imply that the same God who has spoken in the past is now fully explicated in the Son, who shows forth not only God's nature but also the true nature of humanity and of the whole creation. In the hands of Jesus during the evangelical ministry, nature becomes what it was always meant to be – offering physical and spiritual nourishment (cf. Mark 14:22–24; Luke 24:13–32; John 21:9–12), pliable to human direction (cf. Mark 4:39; Luke 4:39), and responsive to God's activity (Luke 19:40; 23:44–45). The incarnation, with all that this entails, is the key to the entire story.

A striking element of the incarnation is the way in which 'miracles' (as they have come to be called) both surround and feature in the narrative. Between the incarnation and resurrection – which speak of God's design for full humanity – are found the fitting and startling actions of the God-Man on behalf of the creation. Jürgen Moltmann is famous for pointing to these as indications of the true nature of the world:

> The lordship of God to which the healings [of Jesus] witness, restores creation to health. Jesus' healings are not supernatural miracles in a natural world. They are the only truly

> ‘natural’ thing in a world that is unnatural, demonized and wounded […]. Finally, with the resurrection of Christ, the new creation begins. (Moltmann 1993: 98–99)

C. S. Lewis has a more expansive notion of these mighty acts, and uses a typology of ‘old’ and ‘new creation’ in explaining how they fit into the grand narrative. If the multiplication of loaves and fishes pictures up close God’s customary provision for humankind, then the ‘miracles of reversal’ indicate the inbreaking and anticipated new creation in which nature is appropriately obedient to the Spirit, death is swallowed up in life, and the true nature of humanity is seen in the transfigured face of Jesus (Lewis 1974: 136–167). There is, as would be expected, an interlocking between the old and new natures, since part of the role of the ‘new’ is to rejuvenate the old and to bring it to completion. The miracles of Jesus demonstrate in an astonishing manner how God is intimately involved in creation, showcasing the ‘Grand Miracle’ of the incarnation, and pointing forward by the resurrection of Jesus to the fulfilment of all things (Lewis 1974: 112–135). Creation, incarnation, and resurrection are compatible, and indeed may be said to require each other within the logic of the biblical story.

Thirdly, biblical passages on the new creation and hope for its fulfilment leave some uncertainty concerning the interim after death and ‘before’ the general resurrection. As part of the material world, humans are not intended to be ‘naked’ or stripped of their present bodies, but transformed into en-Spirited bodily beings (2 Cor 5:2–3; 1 Cor 15). This raises the question: what about the space between death and the resurrection? The scope of this article does not permit a discussion of the various answers offered (interim paradise, soul-sleep, purgation). Further, this question may be raised by the impact of eternity upon time, and their inter-relationship. Some have taken Jesus’ response to the thief on the cross (‘Today, you will be with me in paradise’, Luke 23:43) not as encouragement concerning an interim blessing but as an indication that for Jesus and the thief the final resurrection will have occurred. Moreover, the use of the same term *paradeisos* in the promise of Rev 2:7 suggests that ‘paradise’ cannot always be understood as referring to an interim state: this promise of Jesus to the ‘one who conquers’ is connected with ‘the tree of life’, and clearly refers to Revelation’s final vision, the very new creation of God.

The Christian scriptures approach this question of the interim from different angles, giving rise to different answers regarding the anomaly of human beings stripped of their bodies and awaiting the resurrection. Perhaps the most that can be said is that this is an abnormal state, if it takes place in any ‘time’ at all, and that both the original and new creation present embodiment (however understood) as integral to human goodness. The confidence that human beings presently exist as a body-soul participant in the cosmos, and in the new creation as a body-spirit unity, provides a strong foundation for present ecological effort in pursuing the wellbeing of the created order wherever it is exploited or afflicted.

In the end, biblical passages and their interpretations lead the student to appreciate two elements of the new creation – continuity with the original creation, and something unprecedented. We may be reminded of a story about two German monks who pledged that whoever died first would appear to the other in a vision, and only say one word regarding the unseen world – *taliter* (it is as we thought) or *aliter* (different). The one who returned said two words – *totaliter aliter* (completely different). Though the tag is memorable, it is probably too extreme: more aptly we might imagine *taliter et aliter* – the same and different. Resurrection corresponds to *taliter*, whereas heaven and ascension correspond to *aliter*. Holding these together retains the wonder of heaven and of earth, keeps the interpreter focused upon the God's reign, acknowledges the importance of human activities, and admits the difficulty of relating eternity to time. The idea of 'heaven on earth' may yield an end in which too much of what it is to be human is banished (Allen 2022). The view of humanity inhabiting a renewed earth may threaten to elevate 'cultural production', 'national diversity', and ongoing creature care so that they vie with worship, or devalue the beatific vision (Middleton 2014: 173–174). Yet, the disparate views may be mutually corrective, directing us to 'first things', so that there is an appropriate reserve concerning the activities entailed in the new creation, and a corrective to any spiritualized view of the eschaton that renders the resurrection irrelevant. Augustine puts it this way:

> But because there shall thence flow, even upon earthly bodies, the peace of incorruption and immortality […] that He may, as it were, pour Himself from things above to things beneath, and make men the equals of the angels. By 'Jerusalem', too, we should understand […] our free mother, eternal in the heavens […] He does not say what we shall see; but what but God, that the promise in the Gospel may be fulfilled in us, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God?' (*City of God* 20:21, 440; Augustine of Hippo 1994)

4 The beautiful

This eschatological contemplation and adoration of God responds to the Psalmist, who presents God's beauty as the apex of human desire: 'One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple' (Ps 27:4). Though the scriptures do not picture the eschatological life as static, since redeemed humanity 'reigns', the dominant hope offered is joyful worship in the dynamic presence of the Creator. The character of humanity as an adoring and eucharistic being is stressed by the Christian Bible, despite speculations by some (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses) that the resurrection will amount to little more than human resuscitation and restoration of Eden. By the light of God's mysterious – though now imperfectly seen – beauty (1 Cor 13:12), humanity appreciates the glory of the original creation, rejoices in present signs of the new creation, and pictures the eschatological city in precious stones and breath-taking natural characteristics. Past generations assumed they were gesturing outside themselves when they deemed

something beautiful, and not simply talking about their own subjective disposition. The current generation needs to heed the argument of C. S. Lewis's *Abolition of Man* (2015) that beauty, along with truth and goodness, cannot be utterly relativized without the loss of our humanity.

Jesus said of the weeping woman washing his feet prior to his death that 'she has done a beautiful thing for me'. As they read further in Mark 14:3–9, Matt 26:6–13, and John 12:3–8, readers are invited to applaud this woman's lavish actions as rebuking not only avarice, but also pragmatism. Jesus commends what David Bentley Hart refers to as the 'prodigality' of beauty, which doesn't count the cost (Hart 2003: 15, 21, 127) when it sees 'overwhelming givenness in the beautiful' (Hart 2003: 17). Like the hope of the new creation, the beauty of the unnamed woman's tribute entices the reader by signalling the (incarnate) God's present and coming beauty. Beauty thus both characterizes the new creation and encourages the one perceiving it to yearn for more, just as Paul suggests that it is through the cosmos that humanity sees God's majesty (Rom 1:20). To those fixed on justice, it may be that beauty appears as a trivial luxury, but this interpretation suggests that justice provides the context whereby divine beauty can finally be enjoyed.

Because beauty unfolds in time and space, it creates a longing for what is delightful. Thus the beauty of the original creation serves to communicate what is to come. In this light, we can understand the affirmation that the church is God's own 'handiwork' (*poiēma*, Eph 2:10), and the centrepiece of his new creation. The beauty of God's people is envisaged in OT passages about glorious Zion (Ps 48), the beautiful Branch (Isa 4:2), the garments in which eschatological Zion is clad (Isa 52), and the desire of the nations, who stream to join God's people because 'He has made you beautiful' (Isa 60:9b). Though contingent or reliant upon God, this beauty is imparted within, not simply superimposed. Just as God has a 'many-colored wisdom' that humans declare to the angelic orders (Eph 3:10), his people are described as possessing a many-colored beauty – a beauty refracted in the gifts of the Spirit, marked by unity, symmetry, and even surprise. Isa 62:2–5 delights in the prospect of God recognizing his pure bride:

> The nations shall see your righteousness,
> and all the kings your glory,
> and you shall be called by a new name
> that the mouth of the LORD will give.
> You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
> and a royal diadem in the hand of your God […]
> [Y]ou shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
> and your land Married;
> for the LORD delights in you,
> and your land shall be married.
> For as a young man marries a young woman,
> so shall your sons marry you,
> and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,

> so shall your God rejoice over you. (ESV)

This poignant passage leads readers to recognize the attractive energy of beauty. As C. S. Lewis puts it,

> [w]e do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. (Lewis 2001: 43)

In similar extravagant language, von Balthasar exclaims: 'Before the beautiful – no, not really *before* but *within* the beautiful – the whole person quivers. He not only "finds" the beautiful moving; rather, he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it' (Balthasar 2009: 240, original emphasis).

In the Christian tradition, beauty has an ecstatic force, calling human beings out of self-confinement and restricted projects and directing towards something (or Someone) larger – most particularly, towards the beauty of God that will be seen in the eschaton and reflected in that new creation. No plausible claim may be made that the scriptures, taken as a whole, should be classed as 'high literature' in the sense that term is used today, describing a sophisticated work with well-rounded characters, complex plots, and subtle language or literary devices. Rather, the loveliness that the Bible envisions springs from the response of ordinary people rather than trained artists, and is intimated by domestic images and tones, by rhythm and symmetry, by suspensions and surprise.

A dominant expression of this beauty is worship, which is described in the Bible as inculcating a desire for God in another more solid home promised to humanity. From the Pentateuch onwards, liturgy is oriented towards heaven and the eschaton. This is evident in the prescriptions of Exodus, where everything is done after the pattern shown to Moses in ineffable glory on the mountain, with the robes of the priests beautifully decked in gold, blue, purple, and scarlet and adorned with stones memorializing Israel's tribes (Exod 28:2). This prescribed detail serves as a training in beauty for God's people, who perceive the meeting place with God as beautiful and understand their position in it. Yet the beauty does not consist in the people's participation, but in words engraved in the sanctuary and on the priestly turbans – 'Holiness unto the LORD' (Exod 28:36, 39:30). Rather, the liturgy is beautiful because the worshippers mirror the beauty of the heavenly temple and the One who dwells there. In Christian understanding, their worship intimated the coming of Christ, when the whole creation was imbued with the glory of God, and tending towards a new creation. The cosmos then became (for those with new eyes) the active sign or sacrament of God's promise. As Alexander Schmemann puts it,

> the world […] becomes an *epiphany* of God, a means of His revelation, presence and power. […] We *need* water and oil, bread and wine, in order to be in communion with God and to know him […] There is no worship without the participation of the [human] body […] because the Holy Spirit 'makes all things new'. (Schmemann 2018: 142–143, original emphasis)

Paul Blowers notes the early patristic stress upon the 'beautifying' actions of the Creator as an artisan, seen even in the refrain of Genesis 1 which Basil translates as '[a]nd God saw that it was beautiful' (*Homilae in hexaemeron* 3.10). The implication is that 'the beautifying of creation begins (and ends) in the triune Creator's own delight in his good work', where 'authentic beauty' is established by the divine 'Beholder', and points forward to the fulfilment, or designed end, of the creation (Blowers 2012: 299–300). Here we see the traditional tracing of the biblical narrative as an arc that begins with the beautiful creation and will end, with all the complications of fall and of subsequent history, in a beauty that is both restored and transcendent of the first. This unbreakable link between divine intent and fulfilment is seen in the liturgical retention, both in the weekly cycle and in the Paschal season, of a significant seventh day, coupled with the joy of a new eighth day (cf. Blowers 2012: 338–344). God's restful enjoyment of the first creation and Christ's rest from his work on the cross are followed by the dawn of a new creation, patterned on the resurrection. If the apostle Paul speaks of believers moving 'from glory to glory' (2 Cor 3:18), the Christian tradition more generally implies that creation moves, as a whole, 'from beauty to [more] beauty'.

Beauty not only characterizes the creation and the new creation but also directs the imagination towards its fulfilment. Human 'sub-creative' work, whether aesthetic pursuits, projects to heal the world, or worship, remains humble alongside divinely revealed beauty. What is pleasing and true about it points away from itself to the ultimate Giver of all (cf. Luke 17:10). If not, the scriptures warn, beginning with the Decalogue, that the one who perceives something as beautiful may be afflicted by covetousness or envy. In such cases, the beholder or artist falls into the syndrome (approvingly) described by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: 'in art man enjoys *himself* as perfection' (Nietzsche 1990: 34, emphasis added). Contrastingly, the Christian tradition judges such desire as solipsistic, because it forfeits the truer beauty of an ecstasy that glorifies the Creator (cf. Ps 8; 19; Phil 4:8). As von Balthasar insists, true artistry demands 'the hardest kind of asceticism', since the believer recognizes that he or she is 'at one and the same time artist and artifact' (Balthasar 2009: 215). That is, even while aiming to make something beautiful in the present, the perceptive artist understands that the divine Maker is directing the whole creation, including the artist, to a glory that is scarcely imaginable.

Scripture's remedy for this bent response of solipsism is to confess that the mystery of beauty lies hidden in poverty. At first it seems that beauty must correspond to expectations

of symmetry and grandeur; yet real beauty surprises. Central to the Christian story is the vulnerability of the LORD, prefigured according to the Christian tradition in Isaiah's servant songs:

> Behold, my servant shall prosper;
> he shall be exalted and lifted up,
> and shall be very high.
> And many were astonished at him
> – his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
> and his form beyond that of the sons of men […]
> Who has believed what we have heard?
> And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
> For he grew up before him like a young plant,
> and like a root out of dry ground;
> he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him,
> and no beauty that we should desire him.
> He was despised and rejected by men,
> a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
> and as one from whom men hide their faces
> he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isa 52:13–53:12, RSV)

Hidden within this uncomely one, called demon-possessed by some in the gospels (Matt 11; 18; John 2:20), is divine beauty. Even in the crucifixion, the 'principalities and powers' got more than they bargained for (1 Cor 2:8), as John Chrysostom elaborates: 'Hades seized a body, and, lo! It encountered heaven; it seized the visible, and was overcome by the invisible' (*Paschal Sermon*; see Chrysostom [n.d.]). The Christian Bible presents this hidden beauty as the assurance that God will 'make everything beautiful in its own time' (Eccl 3:11) in the new creation, following the path of humility, resurrection, and exaltation.

In this vein, von Balthasar points to the unique conjunction of finite form and infinite light in Christ – 'the most sublime of beauties – a beauty crowned with thorns and crucified' (Balthasar 2009: 33). Extending this insight, Orthodox theologian Timothy Patistas insists that those with sound eyes will see beauty in a child with Down's Syndrome, in the suffering of those who give their lives, and especially in the cross (Patistas 2020: 353). Corresponding to the incarnation and ascension, he discerns a dual anointing for the faithful – a call to sacrifice and to rule. In that humble reign is found the meaning of artefacts that point beyond themselves, and the desire to establish God's righteousness. God's work at the foundation and fulfilment of creation means that Christians should neither diminish nor exaggerate the significance of creative work or efforts for justice. As Patistas suggests in his 'beauty-first' ethic, 'the first rays of Beauty in our lives represent the onset, incipient but real, of our deification' – that is, our full reflection of God in the new creation (2020: 111). Without such a humble recognition of our reflective nature, the artist, liturgist, or activist becomes tyrannical or narcissistic, with eyes

only for his or her own work. It is over-reach to say that humanly-created ‘beauty’ can save (as some artists interpret Dostoevsky’s ideas, cf. O’Brien 2007). Yet the scriptures present the true human being as the one who *is* beauty and truth, and the faithful as participating in his work in anticipation of that final new creation.

In considering the incarnate one as the source of all beauty, Karl Barth gave caution while writing of God’s beauty ‘as an explanation of His glory’ – a glory that not only creates awe, but also arouses our desire and inculcates joy (Barth 1957: 653). It is not that we can evaluate God by an external standard that is beautiful, or think of beauty as a quality possessed by God, but that God is ‘the standard of everything that is beautiful’ (Barth 1957: 650–656; but cf. Balthasar 2009: 122). The apostle Paul tells his readers that to look in the face of Jesus is to see the luminous glory (the beauty) of God (2 Cor 4:6), and to be illumined by it (2 Cor 3:18). In this way, creation looks to the coming of the sons of God into their own beauty, with creation also beautiful beyond measure (Rom 8:18–25) and marked by the embrace of steadfast love and faithfulness, righteousness and peace (Ps 85:10). In the Western tradition of Christianity, the emphasis has tended to be upon the personal contemplation of God’s glory in the fulfilled new creation (‘the beatific vision’); in the Eastern Church, the stress has been upon *theosis*, a process from present towards final deification that transforms each believer, but also the corporate body of Christ and even creation more generally (Ware 1995: 124–126; Nellas 1987 cf. *Catechism* 2000 1.2.3.12). These two visions depend upon the final scene of the Bible, where both justice and radiance are apparent in the new garden-city that is also a bride who has descended from heaven and who shares in the glory of God. In the words of von Balthasar, ‘a wonderful geometry of her beauty is properly to be called “uranometry”: the measure, form, and splendour of heaven’ (Balthasar 2009: 662). In this final new creation, resurrected humanity and heavenly glory are joined in a beauty that far outstrips the initial charm of the creation where God united Eve to Adam, and the two (however briefly) reigned in Eden.

Attributions

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Further reading

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