

Appendix 8 - The Book of Revelation
God Laments with Us: Climate Change, Apocalypse and the Urgent Kairos
Moment. (Barbara Rossing, Ecumenical Review 62, July, 2010)

"As we face rising waters, hunger, and displacement: God suffers with us.

As we mourn the distress and wounds of God's creation,

God weeps with us."

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) began a study process on climate change with a survey based on this question: "How do you see God involved in the climate crisis?" Around the world, those who had been hardest hit - victims of climate change in Asia, Africa, the Arctic and other regions - asked this haunting question in response: "Why is God punishing us?" In the Purl district of India, the village of Chhenu has already been submerged by rising seas and storm surges.

Many other villages face imminent relocation because of climate change. Village women took our hands to show us the encroaching ocean, just beyond the edge of their villages. They showed us rows of little casuarina trees, planted by the local Women's Forest Protection Committee with help from Lutheran World Service, to hold back the erosion of the shoreline dunes. The water from the village's well has already become undrinkable due to salinization from a rising sea water table.

Whether in Puri, India, or in the Arctic Lutheran village of Shishmaref, Alaska, half a world away, severe storm surges and rising seas are forcing entire communities of people to become climate refugees. Houses topple into the sea, traditional fishing and agricultural economies are decimated, and villagers are forced to relocate. In Tanzania, mosquitoes have arrived in villages higher up the slope of Mt. Kilimanjaro that had never before experienced malaria. These and other medical effects - such as the increasing spread of malaria and other vector-borne diseases, such as dengue fever - have led medical organizations to name the climate crisis as the most urgent public health crisis facing our world.

Traditional village communities throughout the world are experiencing the cruelest injustice of global climate change: it is the world's poorest people - those who have done the least to cause the problem of climate change - who are the first to suffer its catastrophic effects. That stark fact raises the theological question of theodicy.

Where is God in this crisis? That is a question that many of us are addressing in our work. "I think nature is paying us for our sins", one village leader in Orissa, India, reflects. Deep spiritual questions about God's disfavour and punishment are a common response to the

experience of calamitous disruptions in normal weather patterns that people are experiencing, whether voiced by Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, indigenous villagers or others. We all are called to reflect on these questions in our own disciplines, whether as biblical scholars, ethicists, systematic theologians, pastoral theologians or church leaders.

There is no direct link between the Bible and climate change. We must be clear on this point. The Bible does not "predict" this crisis as punishment for sinners, contrary to what some fundamentalists claim. I do think, however, that we can draw on the Bible to speak to this crisis.

I am part of the Society of Biblical Literature's "Ecological Hermeneutics" group, which seeks to read biblical texts in ways that can speak to the crisis of climate change and other environmental crises. Work on the Bible and ecology has been done mostly by Old Testament scholars, especially looking at creation narratives in Genesis and other texts.

New Testament scholars who work on ecology look at texts such as Romans 8, 2 Peter 3 (highly problematic) and the gospels as we seek to read the New Testament in more ecological directions. I work on the Book of Revelation, which is what I want to speak about here.

While it is certainly possible to read the Bible in a way that interprets catastrophic weather as God's curse or punishment, we need to draw on other biblical strands to speak to this crisis. I will draw especially on the tradition of lament- the idea that God laments with the world in this crisis, crying out on behalf of the earth and its communities against imperial oppressors. I read Revelation from a liberationist perspective, guided by its critique of empire and by its final depiction of the New Jerusalem as the world-healing vision towards which the entire book builds. I suggest framing the climate crisis as a crisis of empire, and then ask by analogy what is the current empire out of which God calls US.

Revelation places the Christian community at an ethical crossroads - a kairos moment - facing a choice between Babylon/Rome or citizenship in God's New Jerusalem. The book's urgent call to renounce empire and participate in God's healing and renewal gives a model for responding to the climate change crisis as a crisis of "empire" today.

I will propose four steps in our reading of the Book of Revelation to speak to the climate change crisis today.

"Alas" for earth, not "woe" upon earth: God does not curse the Earth

A first step towards a more ecological reading of Revelation involves a reconsideration of the so-called "woes". If God cares about the earth and its inhabitants, then how are we to explain the apparent "woes" against the earth that are so prominent in Revelation?

The terrifying exclamations of "woe" throughout Revelation's middle chapters have led some interpreters to think that God has consigned the earth to suffer plagues of ecological disaster and destruction. For example, between the fourth and fifth trumpets, an eagle flying through mid-heaven cries out, "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth" (Rev. 8:13). Later, a heavenly voice announces what sounds like a curse: "Woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" (Rev. 12:12).

However, in these so-called "woes" of Revelation, God is not pronouncing a curse but rather offering a lament, bemoaning earth's suffering and abuse. In my view, Revelation's "woes" must be read in light of the book's overall imperial critique.

The Greek word *ouai* is not easy to translate into English. It is a cry or sound that can be used to express lament or pain - like a mourner keening in grief, wailing out repeated cries of "oh, oh, oh" at the death of a loved one. Some Spanish Bibles simply use the exclamation or sound "Ay, ay, ay." In my view, the Greek word *ouai* is better translated consistently as "alas!" or "How awful!" rather than "woe" throughout the entire Book of Revelation. Lamentation or "alas" is clearly the sense of the word *ouai* that is used in Chapter 18, in the formulaic lamentations pronounced by the rulers, merchants and mariners weeping over Babylon. For example, the kings of the earth say,

Alas, alas, the great city Babylon, the mighty city!

For in one hour your judgment has come. (Rev. 18:10; see also 18:16, 19)

Most translators render their three-fold expression as "Alas, alas, alas" (18:10, 16, 19, The Revised Standard Version and The New Revised Standard Version). This standard translation of *ouai* as "alas" in Revelation 18 should inform our translation of earlier references to *ouai* in Revelation as well. The so-called "woes" then declare not a curse against the earth, but rather God's lament on behalf of the earth, which has been subjugated by evil powers. It is as if God is crying "ouch" or "alas" on behalf of our suffering world: "Alas, earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" (12:12). This subtle but important distinction between a pronouncement of "woe" and a lament of "alas" makes an enormous difference both ecologically and spiritually. "Alas" conveys God's sympathy and concern for the earth in a way that the English word "woe" does not. Moreover, there is no "to" in the Greek text, so typical translations of "woe to the earth" are particularly inaccurate.

If we translate *ouai* as "alas", God can be understood as sympathizing in mourning and lament over the earth's pain, even while God is threatening plagues as a means to bring about the earth's liberation from injustice. Such a translation is supported by recent interpretations of similar passages in the Old Testament, such as Jeremiah 12:7-13, about which Terence Fretheim has written, "These verses are a divine lament, not an announcement of judgment".

End of Empire, not End of Earth: Liberation of Earth from Captivity to Rome So why does God lament or mourn on behalf of the earth in Revelation? In my view, the cries of "Alas" in 12:12 and throughout the middle chapters are best understood as part of the book's larger political critique against Roman imperialism. This leads to my second point: Revelation's primary polemic is not against the earth as such, but rather against the exploitation of the earth and its peoples. The voice from heaven expresses God's cosmic cry of lamentation because God is outraged that the lands and the seas have been subjugated by Satan's emissary, the Roman Empire. God cries out in a cosmic lament against the violent conquests and predatory economic system of the empire that has enslaved both people and nature.

Crucial to such an anti-imperial reading of Revelation is God's proclamation that "[the

time (kairos) has come] for destroying those who destroy the earth" (11:18). This statement attributes blame for the destruction of earth not to God but to unjust destroyers who decimate and devastate the earth. What God plans to destroy, according to this crucial verse, is not the earth itself but rather the idolatrous destroyers of earth - that is, Rome, with its entire political economy of exploitation and domination. This point makes a crucial difference both eschatologically and ecologically in the way we interpret the book.

The great insight of Revelation is that God will no longer tolerate Rome's destruction of the earth, despite Rome's own claim to rule forever ("Roma Aeterna"). In fact, the author's so-called end times language - the sense of an "end" that is so prominent in this book and in the entire New Testament - was chosen deliberately in order to counter Rome's imperial and eschatological claims to eternal greatness.

Revelation's insistence on the imminent "end" assures its audience that Rome will not rule the earth forever. God's kairos moment puts an end to Roman imperial oppression.

Revelation's lament, its "Alas for the earth" (12:12), concedes that Rome's own imperial claims of domination over the earth have temporarily come to pass. But Revelation makes clear that Rome's unjust exploitation of the earth is only temporary. Demonic Rome will not last forever.

In summary, in Revelation God does not seek to destroy the earth. Rather, God seeks to rescue the earth - the land, the seas and the creatures who inhabit them - from the oppressors and the sickness of empire that are devastating the world, so that creation can be brought to fulfillment.

The Exodus Story in Revelation: Plagues as Warnings

How will liberation come about for the earth and its peoples? This leads to the third The entire point: the most important biblical model for Revelation is the Exodus story. The Book of Revelation draws on the Old Testament, especially the Exodus story, to suggest a parallel between the Christians' journey out of Rome and the Israelites' journey out of Egypt. Revelation calls explicitly on Christians to "come out" of Babylon (18:4). As such, the Book of Revelation constitutes a "re-reading of the Exodus, now being experienced not in Egypt but in the heart of the Roman Empire".

In Revelation's rereading of the Exodus story the Roman Empire is scripted in the role of the predatory system analogous to ancient Egypt. As Ellen Davis points out, biblical writers aptly called Egypt "the Iron Furnace" or the "iron-smelter" (Deut. 4:20). Egypt was "the biblical archetype of the industrial society: burning, ceaseless in its demand for slave labour (the cheapest fuel of the ancient industrial machines), consuming until it is itself consumed". The Exodus liberated God's people and healed them from all the "diseases" of Egypt (Ex. 15:26). John of Patmos applied that same biblical critique of Egypt to diagnose the sickness of the all-consuming Roman imperial economic system of his own day.

In our own time, if we want to apply the biblical critique of Egypt to the illness of climate change, we can ask what manifestations of "empire" analogous to Egypt or Rome may pose comparable threats to the world and to God's people today.

From the perspective of climate change, for example, we might diagnose as a new "Egypt" our unsustainable system of carbon consumption, which poisons and enslaves the world, imposing a kind of climate slavery on the world's poorest nations and on future generations. The healing vision of New Jerusalem (Rev. 21-22) is the key that can help us envision an alternative way of life in contrast to the "iron- smelter" of fossil-fuel consumption that characterizes our current trajectory.

Understanding the profound ways that Revelation borrows from the Exodus story can also help us to interpret what is perhaps the most ecologically difficult imagery of the book - the plague sequences described in the middle chapters (6- 16). Like the so-called "woes", Revelation's terrible plagues can give the impression that the destruction of rivers, scorching heat, burning forests, waters turning to blood and other environmental calamities are somehow an expression of God's will to destroy the earth. I argue that Revelation's plagues are threats and warnings to oppressors, not predictions of inevitable destruction. The plagues are modeled on God's threats of punishment against Pharaoh in Exodus. The plagues serve as wake-up calls, warning of the consequences of Rome's unjust actions. God does not predict that these ecological disasters must happen; rather, they are urgent warnings of what may happen if oppressors do not repent.

The plagues project out into the future the logical consequences of the trajectory that the Roman Empire is on, so that people can see in advance where the dangerous imperial path is taking them. John of Patmos has an amazing kind of vision that can project out into the future the trajectory that the world is on. So, in my view, the plague visions of Revelation function somewhat like the nightmarish visions that Ebenezer Scrooge experiences in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol- visions that reveal a terrifying future if Scrooge does not change his life. The plague visions of Revelation issue dire threats of consequences if oppressors continue on their current path. But they also make clear that there is still time for change. Disaster is not inevitable.

Threats of dire consequences await oppressors if they continue in their unjust ways. As Revelation 16:5-6 shows, it is "axiomatic" or "fitting" (*axios estin*) that the consequences of oppression on the earth will come back in boomerang-like fashion upon those who commit injustices. Revelation projects out into the future the axiomatic consequences of the trajectory the world is on. We can apply a similar logic of consequences to describe the danger of global climate change. Global warming is not punishment from God, but rather a consequence of the physical fact that in this universe created by God, with its finely tuned atmosphere, certain actions cause other things to happen. It is a physical fact that carbon dioxide, methane and other greenhouse gases trap heat. Scientists are clear on that point and I believe them. In terms of a biblical logic of consequences, what may be "axiomatic" (*axios estin*) for our world today is that we cannot continue on our present trajectory of carbon consumption without heating up the planet to dangerous levels. Perhaps the angel of the third bowl is issuing an axiomatic warning that can help us today. We must alter the course of our life before it is too late.

The Present Moment as a Kairos Time: The Call for Repentance and God's Vision for New Jerusalem

The fourth step is hope. Revelation's focus on the urgency of the present moment, and its

vision for New Jerusalem, are two hopeful aspects of the book that can help us face the crisis of global climate change. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has called the climate change crisis a "kairos moment" for our churches and for the world. He warns that the time is short for the world to take decisive action on climate change:

"As individuals we are often conscious of a kairos, a moment when we make a choice that will affect our whole lives. For the human race as a whole, there is now a kairos, a decisive time in our relationship with God's creation. We will either act in time to protect life on earth from the worst consequences of human folly, or we will fail to act."

Patriarch Bartholomew ended the 2007 Symposium on the Arctic in Greenland with this sobering prayer: "May God grant us the wisdom to act in time." Forty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used the expression "the fierce urgency of now" to refer to the civil rights movement of the 1960s - an expression that could also be used to frame the climate crisis as a civil rights crisis today. That is because scientists tell us that we will soon reach thresholds of carbon dioxide levels past which it will be impossible to reverse runaway catastrophic changes, such as the melting of the Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets, or the melting of the methane-rich Arctic permafrost. Consequences of climate change will fall most heavily on the poorest people of the world. The 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report recommended the safe level of atmospheric carbon dioxide at no more than 445 parts per million. A growing number of scientists now recommend an even lower target for atmospheric carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, 350 parts per million, because of worse-than-expected changes since 2007. The world's premier climate scientist, James Hansen, believes there is still time to avert irreversible tipping points. But in Hansen's view we have less than 10 years to act.

Theologians, ethicists and biblical scholars must take seriously such mounting evidence from science. We must help the church to name this 10-year window as a kairos moment, a moment of hope and urgency.

As climate negotiations break down, we must resist the tendency to despair.

Despite all the threats and warnings in the middle chapters, Revelation is a book that holds great hope for our world. Hope for the future is communicated in at least two important ways in Revelation that can help us face the climate crisis: first, in the book's repeated calls for repentance, and, second and most importantly in its New Jerusalem vision.

Revelation is hopeful first of all in the sense that it believes that there is still time for people to "come out" of empire (Rev. 18:4) and live according to God's vision for the world. It is not too late for repentance. This explains why Revelation departs from the Exodus tradition at one crucial point. While Revelation largely follows the Exodus story for its terrifying plagues - the seven-fold sequences of trumpets and bowls that are poured out upon the earth and its waters in chapters 8-9 and 15-16 - Revelation refrains from using the Exodus motif of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Hearts are never hardened in Revelation.

To be sure, the book's positive calls for repentance (the imperative of *metanoeo* [Rev. 2:5, 16; 3:3, 19]) are concentrated in the seven opening letters, whereas later references to

repentance are all phrased in the negative ("they did not repent from ..." [Rev. 9:20, 21; 16:9, 11]). Yet Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza has made a persuasive case that even these negative references to repentance in chapters 9 and 16 serve as part of the book's rhetorical appeal to the audience to repent: "John writes this grotesque and brutal vision not for cruelty's sake but rather for the sake of exhortation to repentance".

In chapter 11, Revelation lifts up a model of successful repentance in the "rest of the people" - nine-tenths of the population - who do respond to the testimony of the two witnesses and are persuaded give glory to God (Rev. 11:13). This turning on the part of the populace is a hopeful aspect of the book from which we can draw.

The two witnesses of Revelation symbolically represent God's people. These two witnesses give the kind of public testimony and witness that John wants the Christian community of his own time to emulate in its prophetic testimony against the worship of Rome.

An analogy to the role of the two witnesses today may be the way churches and faith communities are joining in the call for such a public metanoia or repentance. We must all join together as religious communities, scientists, public policy makers and other prophetic leaders to give public testimony that calls upon the world - and especially upon our own countries, the richest nations - to turn away from our addiction to a dangerous, carbon-consuming way of life.

Time is of the essence in Revelation. But, interestingly, the book's perspective is not simply of time hurtling towards an inevitable end. There is a kind of rolling sense of urgency in this book. Revelation puts great emphasis on the importance of the present moment as a moment for decision and repentance, a fact noted by a number of scholars. Shifts from past tense to present and future, along with calls for repentance and use of deliberative rhetoric, all serve to draw the audience into what Canadian Lutheran scholar Harry Meier calls "an abiding sense of the imminent" - extending the urgency of the present moment. The entire Book of Revelation calls on the audience to "come out" of empire before it is too late (Rev. 18:4), in order not to fall prey to the catastrophic judgment and plagues, in order not to share in the collapse of the empire.

Revelation places the Christian community at an ethical crossroads - a kairos moment - where it is always facing a choice between the doomed empire of Babylon/Rome or citizenship in God's New Jerusalem.

This leads to the second and most important hopeful aspect of the book: the New Jerusalem vision. The heart of the message of Revelation is God's call to us to come into the vision of the New Jerusalem, embracing its promise of healing for our world rather than destruction. Revelation calls upon the Christian community to live already now as citizens of the New Jerusalem.

While Revelation's plagues and Armageddon may be its most famous images, Revelation offers the most earth-centred vision for hope and healing for creation in the entire Bible--the vision of New Jerusalem of chapters 21-22. The entire book leads up to this wondrous vision of renewal and joy. The book seeks to make God's vision of beauty so persuasive and real that the audience will "come out" of the evil empire in order to enter into the promised land of blessing and healing.

Contrary to popular apocalyptic thinking, there is no "rapture" or a future snatching of born-again Christians up from the earth in Revelation. Instead, God is "raptured" down to earth to take up residence among us. Revelation declares God's commitment to the earth as the location of salvation. God's bridal city will descend to earth, and God will dwell in the midst of the renewed city. With great tenderness God wipes away people's tears and takes away their sorrow.

This city of beauty is the very opposite of the toxic political economy and ecology of Rome/Babylon that is destroyed in chapters 17-18. Whereas Rome was built on deforestation, mining, slavery and unjust globalized trade - all critiqued in the list of cargoes of the merchants' ships in Rev. 18:12-13 - New Jerusalem centers on the tree of life, with its leaves for healing. Whereas Rome was a place of famine and violence, New Jerusalem's tree of life bears fruit each month for hungry people.

Greenspace and God's river of life fill out the final description of the city. Revelation 22:1-5 recreates the garden of Eden in the centre of a thriving urban landscape, drawing on the prophet Ezekiel's vision of a wondrous tree-lined river flowing out from the temple (Ezek. 47:1-12).

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river, is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Rev 22:1-2)

This vision is what we need to lift up today as a model of hope for our world. We need those healing leaves today. Our world is ill--very ill. Scientists tell us that the planet is heating up with the fever of global warming and other ecological crises that we all must urgently address. The Book of Revelation can help us imagine a different vision for our future before it is too late.

The heart of the message of Revelation is not that God plans to destroy our world, but rather that God wants to heal. Healing in Revelation comes not directly from God but from the leaves of a tree, from creation. The tree of life is an image common to Christianity, Judaism, Islam and many other religious traditions.

As we face crises such as global warming, the question for us is this: How can we take to heart that healing tree and its medicinal leaves today? How can we reclaim our ecological and spiritual vision for planet earth to be shaped not by Armageddon and war, but by a healing vision for our world?

It is interesting that the notion of a "shared vision" is a technical term for one element of the work of the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen. Under the Bali Action Plan, nations of the world must agree on what it calls a "shared vision" for long-term cooperative action to "ensure the full, effective and sustained implementation of the Convention". This shared vision is to include a "long-term global goal for emission reductions".

The Book of Revelation also offers a shared vision for the healing of the polis, the healing of our common life. Perhaps in this kairos moment in Copenhagen, Revelation's vision

of God's life-giving river in the centre of our cities can give a shared vision that will motivate churches and faith communities to make the changes necessary for our healing.

The Book of Revelation can help us in the ways it calls upon people to live as citizens of God's New Jerusalem even now, fight in the heart of empire. Revelation's glimpses of a renewed earth can inspire and motivate us to undertake the exodus journey out of the unsustainable ways of empire and to live as citizens of God's renewed world. It is not too late. As Patriarch Bartholomew prayed, "May God grant us the wisdom to act in time."