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John the Revelator: A spatial interpretation

Jon Warland¹

Prelude

As with many in academia, I made a sharp transition to work-from-home about a year and a half ago, coincidentally on my fiftieth birthday. This time at home has given me a chance to ruminate in new ways on how we relate to space and time, with new-found practicalities to otherwise philosophical musings. And these lessons we are learning individually and as workplace communities will be important, not just for the current crisis, or for the “recovery,” but for future large-scale disasters, which climate change ensures will be coming more frequently and with greater and greater impacts.

A colleague joked early in the pandemic: “Are you working from home or living at work?” This boundary, already in danger from technology, now has become not a matter of location and turning off the phone, but a matter of mindset as those of us working from home have to, each day, define within a single space when we are at work and when we are instead at home. Being able to define a distinct workspace within the home has helped many, but these tricks only go so far as to mimic a commute to a place of work, that critical spatial shift that delineates our “on” and “off” time and separates us from the many distractions of home.

On a more positive note, remote learning has forced us to consider what are essential learning outcomes, how can they be met and demonstrated, and what can be dispensed with. It may even come to pass that these reflections will help to remove some of the “hoops” that are embedded in our ideas of what higher education looks like. If so, we might further shift from a gatekeeping mindset to a student success focus. We now see much more clearly how important the social component of education is, and I hope this pandemic experience will push us further along towards recognizing the whole student and the whole teacher as we return to campus and class and cafeteria.

To maintain a sense of boundary between home and work, I have tried all the tricks one reads about and am currently on my fourth or fifth iteration of a home office. Ultimately, I have found I need to flip a mental switch, and go into work mode in the morning, and switch back to at-home mode in the evening. Lunch is a grey zone in between. I am in the same space but perceiving it and my relationship to it differently depending on whether it is time scheduled for work, or other time, in which the focus on work can be let go, or at least toned down. It is from this place of confusion, where time moves differently and our being is confined to home and neighbourhood, that I offer the following thoughts about the Johannine texts and the Book of Revelation, and how they might relate to our global environmental crises.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... (Rev. 21:1-2, NRSV)

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The images of the Book of Revelation are terrifying enough when read as some sort of allegorical fantasy, but the true terror for me begins when we take the above passage to mean that this world, our cosmos, is of no further value. Revelation continues its description of the New Jerusalem: “The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel” and the streets are paved with gold (Rev. 21:18-19, NRSV). Is this hard mineral city a further devaluation of the organic creation that God declared as “very good” (Gen. 1:31, NRSV)? We can see a twisted logical conclusion of reading Revelation this way in the bizarre *Left Behind* books and movie, in the so-called prosperity gospel, and in the teaching that Christians are not bound by basic ethics while still on this earth.² If it is true that Christianity teaches us to have no regard for creation, that this world is temporary and easily discarded, then not only do I want no part but must stand against such a notion.

I cannot, however, believe that this is the message of John for our own times. Yet, this is a challenging position, I find, because even a small amount of reading³ shows that the genre of the apocalypse was common in ancient Christian and Jewish writings, and it is likely that belief in the imminent physical end of this world was widespread. And so, from a historical perspective, it is daunting to argue that these writings meant something other than what they literally say.

Spatiality

To try to begin unravelling this dilemma, I propose to read these texts through the perspective of spatiality. Henri Lefebvre developed the notion of social space in relation to other uses of the word, and as distinct from, even counter to, mathematical space popularly understood through Euclidean geometry.⁴ From this perspective, our perception of the world is a creative act in which we and the world are formed together. The idea that perception is fundamentally creative is in contradistinction to our “common-sense” view, which Lefebvre mocks: “According to philosophers of the good old idealist school, the credulity peculiar to common sense leads to the mistaken belief that ‘things’ have more of an existence than the ‘subject,’ his thoughts and desires.”⁵ As this so-called “common-sense” perspective dominates a Western worldview, which at one extreme has seen some people propose that consciousness and self-awareness are mere epiphenomena in a purely mechanistic world,⁶ there can seem to be something fantastical or even insane when we speak of being co-creators of reality through our observations. And yet in the social space, it is very much our human-created mores and customs that we use to define ourselves and our place within the world.

² Elizabeth Bruenig, “How Jerry Falwell Jr found his MAGA religion,” *Washington Post*, January 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/01/02/how-jerry-falwell-jr-found-his-maga-religion>

³ Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, 2nd (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Baker Academic, 2018); P. Vielhauer, “Introduction to Apocalypses and Related Subjects,” in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, vol. II (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA: Westminster Press, 1976), 581-607.

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, Massachusetts, USA: Wiley Blackwell, 1991).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶ John R. Searle, “The Mystery of Consciousness,” *New York Review of Books* November 2 (1995), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/11/02/the-mystery-of-consciousness>

The notion that the very act of observing the world shapes it has been affirmed by twentieth century physics, yet the philosophical implications have been largely ignored.⁷ A notable exception is the work of Owen Barfield. In *Saving the Appearances*,⁸ Barfield begins from the perspective of modern physics to develop a clear analysis of how we not only necessarily participate in the construction of the world, but how our beliefs about the nature of reality greatly shape our perception. Barfield argues that modernity has fundamentally changed the way we see the world, and, like Lefebvre, our view of “things” blinds us to significant aspects of reality.

To take a slightly different perspective, when we see the world as purely object, it is easy to read Revelation as wiping it away, with little regret. Yet if we can shift perspectives and see ourselves in a subject-subject relationship with the world (akin to Martin Buber’s “I and Thou”⁹), perhaps then we can re-interpret Revelation as a text that precipitates a change in our perception, a shift in our location within the relational landscape.

My thesis is that when we read in 1 John: “And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever” (1 John 2:17, NRSV), or in Revelation: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1, NRSV), what is changing is not the world around us while we remain static, but our perception of ourselves, our world, and our relationships. In other words, it is our old ways, our old self, being swept away, which makes the world appear shiny and new, and impels us to change our way of relating. Further, I propose that the intense Johannine language full of light and darkness, and the graphic imagery of Revelation, are intended to help shock the listener out of their mundane state of mind and invoke that shift in perception, rather like a Zen koan. Finally, I argue that this way of reading these texts aligns well with how Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, not as a place somewhere else or a future reality, but as arising within.

Who/What is Changing?

To begin, let us step back and consider some of the imagery of the New Jerusalem: “And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:2, NRSV). This image is similar to the baptismal event reported in all four gospels (Matt. 3:16, Mark 1:10, Luke 3:22, John 1:32) when the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends like (or as) a dove. Given that we do not read the baptismal story as Jesus being bodily replaced by a new Jesus (let alone a dove), but as a sign of the Holy Spirit coming to inhabit him or bless him, can we not then also read the New Jerusalem as coming down to be with us in a similar fashion? If we consider that a city is defined as much by the people in it as it is by its buildings, and that Jerusalem is symbolic of the Jewish people, this city descending from heaven like the Spirit could be a new community forming, a new Israel, composed of those who are within its social space, who can perceive from a different perspective. In other words, I suggest, tentatively to start, that the holy city coming down from heaven is much like the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, and while the dove changed one man, the city will

⁷ For an interesting discussion of some of the implications of quantum physics, and how they have largely been ignored, see Dan Burton and David Grandy, *Magic, Mystery, and Science: The Occult in Western Civilization* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), especially ch. 10 which discusses this in the context of psi phenomena and the writings of Carl Jung.

⁸ Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, 2nd Edition (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).

⁹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York, New York, USA: Scribner, 1958).

change the community of believers. And so the descent of the New Jerusalem is the Kingdom of God emerging among us.

The English Standard Version, the Revised Standard Version, and the New Revised Standard Version all translate Luke 17:21 as “the kingdom of God is among you,” yet the Greek word translated as among is *entos* which most other translations render as “within.” The prominent translation of “among” significantly changes our understanding of what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God. It works well conceptually in the context of our communal identity, but I wonder for us as individuals what it means for the kingdom to be “within” us. Is it a state of possession, as a devil within, or a metaphor for a Pentecostal experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit (e.g. Acts 2:1-4)? A clue may be in another difficult translation of the word *metanoia*, usually rendered as repentance, but having a meaning, at least in its roots, much closer to “perceiving differently” or “seeing anew” or “turning around.” In Luke 5:32, Jesus compares himself to a physician who restores health to the sick: he came to call “sinners” to *metanoia*, that is, turning around, seeing anew, and perceiving differently.

Our positionality is the context in which our identity resides, and how our identity shapes the way we view the world. In terms of spatiality,¹⁰ it is where we are positioned in the social and cultural landscape and the viewpoint from which we see and interpret that landscape. Positionality is related to the “imaginary” of Charles Taylor.¹¹ The *imaginary* is the collective worldview, which includes how we understand the cosmos to function. Our *positionality* is our understanding of our individual places within the world. Both the imaginary and positionality embody underlying, usually unconscious, assumptions and biases. In most daily situations these assumptions “work,” but in certain circumstances we may be confronted with events or phenomena that violate those assumptions and become a source of psychological trauma. On the other hand, many religious practices, from shamanism to Zen Buddhism, purposefully try to create circumstances for the patient or devotee in which some aspect of their worldview is challenged. At that moment when this unconscious ground slips out from underneath, the seeker sees the world and their relationship to it in a new way.

Metanoia

To put all this together, I am proposing that Jesus taught that when we can see from a different perspective (*metanoia*), we can become aware of the kingdom of God within us. This experience changes who we are, and we can join those to whom Jesus referred when he: “[pointed] to his disciples... [and] said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’” (Matt. 12:49, NRSV). The earliest Jesus followers were those who had such an experience, forming the early Christian communities, supporting each other when they left behind the security of home, replacing the traditional household with “fictive” or “ritual” kinship.¹²

The Johannine letters speak to a community struggling to maintain its identity and cohesiveness in a time of crisis, and of a community that finds its strength within the bonds of love between its members. The author writes: “the darkness is passing away and the true

¹⁰ Halvor Moxnes, “Landscape and Spatiality: Placing Jesus,” in *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, ed. Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris (New York, New York, USA: Routledge, 2010), 90–106.

¹¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA: Belknap Press, 2007).

¹² Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Kinship and Family in the New Testament World,” in *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, ed. Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris (New York, New York, USA: Routledge, 2010), 29–43.

light is already shining. Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling." (1 John 2:8-10, NRSV). The author clearly believes that at least some members of the community are already living in the light, which seems similar if not synonymous with seeing the kingdom of God within, of having experienced *metanoia*, of living in a new space.

To briefly summarize the argument so far, we have hypothesized that "living in the light," experiencing the kingdom of God within, and *metanoia* are all similar experiences in which a person is moved to perceive their positionality differently, and this shift also means they perceive the world around, physical and social, in a new light. Communities formed among people who had this experience, who occupied this space.

This brings us back to the Book of Revelation. I believe that the story of Revelation can be read as a dramatization of the psychological struggle of one coming to experience the kingdom of God within; however, as I discussed at the beginning of this essay, this seems a stretch from what we know of first-century apocalyptic thinking. Yet clearly the author of Revelation intended people to read the book and wanted them to be inspired to turn from sin to live in righteousness, and hope. In modern times, we have fire-and-brimstone preaching, often based on Revelation, as a way to frighten people into "good" behaviour. Revelation, however, was meant to inspire hope of a better world to come in the midst of suffering.

If we come to know the kingdom of God within through a destabilizing psychological experience in which we perceive ourselves and the world from a new perspective, then perhaps part of the intent of Revelation, with its horrific imagery that makes a Dali painting seem tame and Bosch banal, is to help "shock" the reader into a new perspective. Some of the beasts described are truly unimaginable, and the events so cataclysmic, it is possible to see that a reader in the correct receptive state of mind could be moved further on the path to a *metanoia* experience. To illustrate, picturing "a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads" (Rev. 12:3, NRSV) is as much of a disruption to our ordinary perception as trying to hear Hakuin Ekaku's one hand clapping. Just as a Zen koan asks us to break our habitual linear patterns of thought, so Revelation asks us to imagine the impossible, and through the destruction of what we know, enter into a new realm of light.¹³

The Book of Revelation is more detailed, though, than a koan, which tends to be a simple statement or question asked at just the right time. If finding the kingdom of God within is an experience in which we shift our perspective and change how we see ourselves and the world, the destruction of the world and the descent of the New Jerusalem can be read as allegorical, describing how the world as we once knew it disappears. Though this essay has been treating the experience of "living in the light" as fundamentally a good thing, a radical shift in perspective, moving oneself to a new position on the imaginal landscape, is no doubt a traumatic and unsettling experience. The Christian mystic Saint John of the Cross wrote of the dark night of the soul, and stories from the Desert Fathers speak of epic struggles with demons. These experiences were essential for them to reach a new way of being in Christ yet are described in cataclysmic language.

¹³ Stevan Davies, *Spirit Possession and the Origins of Christianity* (Dublin: Bardic Press, 2014).

Pandemic, an apocalyptic?

I cannot believe that the current environmental crises we face, which are rapidly becoming existential, can be justified based on some notion of God destroying God's creation to make a new home for believers. That sort of apocalyptic thinking has helped get us in this mess, and we must learn to see it from a different perspective. There is much throughout Christian tradition and scripture that clearly and unambiguously invites us to love God by caring for God's creation. Leaving aside our holy traditions, our secular space has also become radically disconnected from the world we inhabit, allowing much destruction to proceed essentially unnoticed. In such a situation, we – individually and collectively – are in desperate need of a fundamental shift in perspective, a *metanoia*, that will allow us to see the interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings. The climate crisis is a penetrating trumpet call to abandon our ways which seek immediate pleasure over deep connection; it is a dragon's roar damning our hubris and pride, a pride that allows us to think we can re-engineer God's creation to better suit us without any consequence. As a global society we are enticed by the woman "clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations..." (Rev. 17:4, NRSV), and we accept the sacrifice of our brothers and sisters in "essential services" to preserve our own comfort in the midst of pandemic.

I have worked in environmental sciences for many years and entered my own dark night of the soul realizing that, from the evidence of impact rather than the myths we tell ourselves, our science is a part of our existing systems, and not working to change the deadly course we are on. Over several years of struggle, I realized that we need a fundamental shift in our values, a change in what we prioritize, and how we define a good life. This is not to deny the value and importance of science; it has done great feats such as vaccines and life-saving weather forecasts. The deeper understanding it gives of the complex dynamics of the physical and biological world around us is awe-inspiring, and for some, a way to more deeply appreciate Creator and Creation. And we continue to need environmental professionals working in policy and research, assessment and remediation. It is not an either/or: we need technical knowledge *and* to recognize that deeper knowledge of the material world does not directly translate or automatically lead to renewed participation in our fundamentally interdependent relationships with other beings.

A story Robin Wall Kimmerer told helped clarify this for me. She wrote about a fellow ecologist, Carol Crowe, who went to her tribal council for funding to attend a conference on sustainability. They asked her to explain what sustainability was, and she gave a familiar description. Then,

They were quiet for a while, considering. Finally one elder said, "This sustainable development sounds to me like they just want to keep on taking like they always have. It's always about taking. You go there and tell them that in our way, our first thoughts are not 'What can we take?' but 'What can we give to Mother Earth?' That's how it's supposed to be."¹⁴

The shift in our thinking, in our perception, in our way of relating and acting in the world, must happen at the collective level, as well as the individual, and the book of

¹⁴ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 198-190.

Revelation can be read as a warning about the calamities we face if we do not change our ways, as well as providing hope that we can enter the kingdom of God with a change in how we perceive ourselves and our relationship to the world. Barbara Rossing speaks of an eschatological imagination, in which “...the future healing is imaged as New Jerusalem, with its world-healing tree of life.”¹⁵

The various Johannine texts have always presented great challenges in interpretation, and all the more so since the development of modern fundamentalism, for which these texts are full of damning certainty when read too literally. To reclaim these texts, the lens of spatiality, in terms of our social positionality, as well as the imaginal space we inhabit, and as the perspective from which we see our relationship to the world, provides a fruitful way to see that the kingdom of God and the New Jerusalem are not some cataclysmic future, or some far off land, but meaningful identity and action here and now, if we can but open our eyes and imaginations to their true revelation.

Postlude

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the urgency of doing things in a new way. Right now, as second doses are rapidly ramping up in Canada, we see all around a rush to return to “normal”: a rush to forget the inequities and fragility of our systems, a rush to polish up our old idols. Yet as Sonya Renee Taylor said, “We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was never normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.”¹⁶ COVID-19 has brought to light for many the need for a radical shift in how we do things, we need to maintain that momentum against the lull of the familiar.

Perhaps Revelation’s vision of a new world can give us hope through COVID-19 and guide us as we make our way through re-opening, return-to-office, and recovery from our isolation. Arundhati Roy writes of the pandemic: “It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”¹⁷

To make this happen, we need to see through the purple garments and gold gilding covering the destruction our “normal” enacts each day to ourselves, each other, and the planet. The pandemic has pulled back the curtain enough to expose the destructiveness of our systems in new ways and to more people; we now need to resist the temptation to return to our familiar, comfortable ignorance, we need the courage to envision our New Jerusalem, and we need the grace to let go our old ideas of consumption and competition, and work with each other to create new ways of doing and being that put our relationality and interdependence first.

¹⁵ Barbara R. Rossing, “Reimagining Eschatology: Toward Healing and Hope for a World at the *Eschatos*,” in *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women’s Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*, ed. Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 325-347.

¹⁶ Sonya Reese Taylor, (2020), url: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-fc3ejAlvd/?hl=en>

¹⁷ Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic is a Portal”, *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>