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Angels Run Amok:
Inverting the Problem of God’s Violence Against the Natural World
in the Book of Revelation

‘There is nothing better than imagining other worlds,’ he said, ‘to forget the painful one we live in. At least I thought so then. I hadn’t yet realized that, imagining other worlds, you end up changing this one.

Umberto Eco, Baudolino: A Novel

Interpretive Strategies for a Greener Apocalypse

The Book of Revelation is an unlikely place to look for an environmental ethic. Indeed, at first glance, it is an unlikely place to find any moral guidance. Destruction, misogyny, hatred, vengeance and coercion fill its pages. And because much of it seems to be either enacted, or approved, by God some recent interpreters have found it easier to call a spade a spade than attempt the book’s moral rehabilitation. Specifically for environmental ethics the attitude toward Revelation is expressed well by Barbara Rossing when she puts these words in the mouth of a hypothetical environmentalist: ‘There’s nothing helpful in the Book of Revelation - nothing but destruction and mutant animals there.’

Yet Rossing’s work on the moral contrast between the New Jerusalem and Babylon and the place of the environment in John’s apocalypse has moved us forward toward a rehabilitation of Revelation for environmental ethics. But she has not addressed the problem of a God who in the troubling visions of seven seals, trumpets and bowls is normally seen to bear responsibility for showering destruction upon the natural environment. By such actions the God of Revelation appears to diminish the value of the natural world for Christian ethics. This article addresses that lacuna. Using a literary critical approach it argues that that the destructive ‘visions of sevens’ do not, on close reading, cast God, via divine commands to the angels, as the one destroying the
natural environment. Instead, it argues that the angels who are the agents of this destruction do so not at God’s behest, but rather under the impact of the systemic forces of human institutions gone astray.

If one wishes to ask environmental ethics questions of Revelation, literary critical methods and perspectives work better than historical critical ones. The literary stance taken in this paper broadly uses insights from reception history and the work of Stephen D. O’Leary on apocalyptic rhetoric (both having rough correspondences with reader response criticism). This literary stance is more specifically informed by a style of reading attuned to the ethical implications of an interpretation. In addition, the work of Walter Wink on the ‘powers’ as systemic forces is used to provide a new reading of Revelation’s angels. This section will give some argument for the choice of literary as opposed to historical approaches to this crucial question and outline the other perspectives. The second will apply them to the visions of the seven seals, trumpets and bowls. The conclusion will explore the implications of this reading for a Christian environmental ethic.

An environmentally aware reading of Revelation first requires a re-imagination of the text. David Barr challenges us to think of the interpretive problems of Revelation as problems for the imagination. Anthony Weston has said, ‘The environmental crisis is a crisis . . . of the imagination.’ The historical critical method is not noted for stimulating imaginative engagement with texts. And it provides little help for an environmentally imaginative reading of Revelation. Historical critics seem to be in general agreement that the eschatological crisis against which the historically implied author interpreted his visions was centered in the overwhelming power of the socio-political structures of the
Roman Empire. It is, at least, such issues that seem to be fore-fronted in the historical context. Explicit environmental concerns do not appear to have been the burning issues capturing the Seer’s mind when it turned to the impending End. Yet, as will be argued below, John’s historical state of mind has rarely limited interpretation of Revelation in succeeding centuries. The text’s imagery lends itself to polyvalency. The unavoidably polysemous nature of Revelation means that it cries out, perhaps most loudly of all NT books, for additional interpretive strategies. One such strategy is to use literary criticism.

Literary critical readings take place against, or within, a context; a backdrop. If John interpreted his visions against the eschatological crisis of the Roman Imperium, and most specifically the imperial cult, we are confronted with a different, yet related, eschatological crisis against which our reading is contextualized. Recent studies of Revelation argue that a point of relevance for John’s visions is found in the ways in which they expose the continued insidiousness of imperialism and its negative effects. Rossing’s work has, along with that of others, helped us to see that imperialism in the first century and now has environmental consequences. Even if these consequences were only on the periphery of John’s vision, they have come front and center in ours. We are confronted by an environmental crisis of potentially apocalyptic proportions. And ‘[f]resh confrontations with the ultimate exigence . . . prompt re-examination . . . of the fundamental agreements of the apocalyptic tradition’. It is to be expected that this new ultimate environmental exigence will prompt new efforts to understand Revelation. When taken together with the innate human fascination with the future and the overpowering urge in the Western tradition to read those crises which transcend our sense
of manageable proportions via the symbolism of apocalyptic endings, this means that
we can expect readers coming to Revelation with questions about its potential
relationship to the very real possibility of the collapse of entire ecosystems in our
time. Perhaps this book’s rhetoric, ostensibly about the future, perhaps even our future,
provides some resource we can bring to understanding, or responding to, this particular
End which has come upon us.

The future, however, is usually seen as problematic in academic readings; yet it is
to be taken seriously here. Revelation gives us a lens with which to imagine various
futures and offers a rhetorical strategy about appropriate actions to be taken now to
achieve (or avoid) these futures. To read Revelation for our eschatological crisis the first
hermeneutical move must be away from historical critical concerns toward an interest in
how this book speaks to the present. One of the first practitioners of such reading was, of
course, St. Augustine. But the hermeneutical shift cannot end there. The reading needs
also to hold the present in tension with a future as imaginatively envisioned from the text.
For Augustine’s emphasis on the present over the future is problematic. Historically,
those groups that have most needed the coming of the New Jerusalem have found the
power of this book precisely in its futurist aspects held in tension with their experience of
the present. Clerical readings emphasizing the present over against futurist concerns must
be seen as moves to dis-empower futurist readings of the text and to align appropriate
readings of Revelation with concerns for the status quo. A still more effective means of
protecting the status quo against critique by Revelation’s message is to confine its
interpretation to first century history, the normal outcome of historical critical
evaluations. Such readings emphasizing either past or present without the tension of a
futurist vision nullify the way in which futurist readings seek change in the status quo. But, in disarming this text’s manifest claims to be about a future we forget that, ‘imagining other worlds, you end up changing this one’ either for good or ill depending on the particular vision of the other/future world. It is the fecundity of variously envisioned futures in tension with the present that gives Revelation its extraordinary power. And this is what has also made it, historically, such a dangerous text. But if this fertile futurist tension is used together with ethical consideration of the resultant reading it can provide a hermeneutical fulcrum useful for an ecological interpretation. Such an interpretation requires what Stephen D. O’Leary calls a ‘first order rhetorical’ re-imagining of Revelation against our environmental future.

O’Leary examined the processes of first order rhetorical interpretation of apocalyptic. O’Leary was interested in how apocalyptic takes on a living relationship to a believing community’s experience of life. First order rhetoric is what we might think of as the popular applications and re-applications of the text in the life of believing communities. Central to this way of thinking about Revelation is to take a stance from within the received apocalyptic logic and mythos of Revelation. From within the received logic of the apocalyptic tradition one agrees with Paul that whatever one finds in scripture has been ‘written down to instruct us, on whom the end of the ages has come’ (1 Cor. 10.11). The praxis of apocalyptic rhetoric by those receiving it as an inspired tradition sets the context for interpretation in the present, not the historical situation of a first audience.

The work of Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland is also helpful. Their concept of an ‘actualized reading’ is similar to O’Leary’s first order rhetoric.
Actualized readings understand the images of Revelation as real, and highly ambiguous, visions. John of Patmos had as much trouble interpreting them as we do. Revelation, in this view, is not a reasoned literary production. Its visions are not the conscious logical constructions of the implied author. They are instead sights and sounds that flowed across the author’s perception apart from the control of his reasoned mind. This shift away from authorial, historically restricted intent toward multivalent visionary experience makes John and us together interpreters of the continuing life of these visions. Such a process accounts for some of the rhetorical life of, the motivation for, the ongoing practices of interpretation that O’Leary explicated. The history of actualized readings indicates that the text has multiple meanings. The idea that the text can have and has had various actualizations across its history leads to a new visioning of how it is the text might be actualized in contemporary situations. The visions of Revelation become fresh interpretive problems in new situations of crisis. They require a fresh unveiling leading to deeper meanings latent in the text. In the exploration of latent meanings that can be actualized in a new historical context we can find a new vein, an untapped lode of actualization from which to mine an environmental voice in Revelation and understand it to envision an ecological future for us.

A more specific literary lens that this paper uses is to be attentive to ethical considerations in reading. As noted, Revelation is a dangerous text, and checks must be provided against reading whatever one wishes to read from it. The multivalency of the text cannot lead to a position in which any interpretation is equal to any other. Such a view of the polysemous character of this text would only continue to reproduce the historical instances of readings that have led to death and destruction for countless
thousands. Ethically critical reading shows us that interpretations focused on the violence of the text (for example) are inadequate especially when such readings seek divinely authorized enactment of the violence.\textsuperscript{20} An effective means of supporting such an ethical reading is to demonstrate that the text itself either does not accept, or subverts the violence it displays.\textsuperscript{21} One might think of Harry Maier’s reading of Rev. 19.11-16.\textsuperscript{22} The apparent violence of the text undergoes a Bakhtinian inversion if the blood on Jesus’ robes is his own rather than that of his enemies. Or, one can argue that the violence is not caused by, and thus not sanctioned by, divine agency (the purpose of this article).

And from a literary critical viewpoint it must be remembered that ‘[t]here are certain things a text cannot be made to say.’\textsuperscript{23} Texts resist some readings. This study claims only that the reading put forward here is ‘a’ reading, not ‘the’ reading. But also that it is a reading the text does not resist. Indeed, it seems to be a reading the text welcomes, while it seems to resist readings which accuse its God of ‘geocide.’\textsuperscript{24}

Also central to an ethical reading of Revelation is to bring comic and tragic interpretations of the apocalyptic tradition into interaction.\textsuperscript{25} A comic interpretation conveys an open future of possibility. A tragic reading sees the future as predestined. Tragic interpretations lead to fatalistic passivity before the End. Comic readings offer hope through change. A comedic reading sees a future that offers an ‘open horizon of possibility.’\textsuperscript{26} On this horizon the destabilizing forces of apocalyptic evil have receded. Equilibrium has been re-established through change.\textsuperscript{27} It is instructive that in O’Leary’s analysis tragic and comic modes of discourse exist in tension in Revelation. The tragic with its harsh light of inevitability reveals ‘rents in the fabric of history,’ while the comic can enable their repair.\textsuperscript{28} My reading offers such tragic diagnosis together with such
comic hope. Once our ignorance is lifted and the forces leading to the destruction of the natural environment have been revealed in their starkly predetermined contours, we can hope for change. We can hope that destruction will be replaced by the healing waters of the River of God flowing across our planet.

The reading proposed here also could not be done without insights drawn from Walter Wink’s Power Trilogy.29 It is important to be precise about the manner in which Wink’s work is being used here. I do not intend to use his work on the understanding of ‘power’ in the NT as an historical basis for my analysis. Even amid the general applause given the initial volume, early reviewers noted that his analysis did not fit all cases. While Revelation’s angels of the churches (2.1 - 3.22) seem to confirm his analysis there are other NT passages where the framework he provides is less than useful (Gal. 4.3, 9; Col. 2.20; Paul’s treatment of ‘death’ as a power).30 Leaving historical questions open I will use his analysis as a heuristic devise. In this way his general insights are particularly useful for a literary critical appropriation of Revelation. We have just emerged from a century in which humanity became theoretically, historically and often times painfully aware of its own Systemic forces. We have begun a century whose hope lies in our taking control of those forces rather than allowing the System free reign. In this context Wink’s work offers a fruitful hermeneutical frame from which to re-examine the angels of Revelation. Using Wink’s work in this manner the task is more about our possible understandings of angels than John’s.

Wink’s study of ‘powers’ in the New Testament offers new ways in which we can understand the role of the heavenly angels in the Apocalypse, who, at first reading as the apparent agents of God, rain down destruction upon the earth.31 In his analysis the
language of power in the New Testament reflects a view of reality in which all entities have inner spiritual and outer material aspects. *Angel* refers primarily to a spiritual (inner) aspect of human social, political, or economic institutions. An angel can be thought of as the corporate personality appropriate to various parts of what we might call The System. Thus, the seven churches of Revelation each have an *angel* addressed by the Risen Lord. That is, these *church* angels are beings that are given life from the institutional and corporate life of a church. Thus a church, as a human social system, is more than a collection of individuals. The church as a corporation gives rise to a life in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Such systemic entities are, in Wink’s view, a part of God’s good creation. Their God-given purpose is to promote the flourishing of human relationships (including our relationship with the natural world). However, under the influence of human sinfulness they can become *fallen* and work instead to our harm. In this function the NT often calls them demonic. And such twisted social forces can manifest themselves in the phenomenon the NT speaks of as demon possession (for example the Gerasene demoniac - Mk. 5.10). So the *angelic* forces of human social life can stand in need of redemption as much as any individual human.

A second aspect of Wink’s work relevant to Revelation is his analysis of the *stoixeia*. Wink identifies them with the most ancient gods and goddesses in their functions as natural forces or phenomena (earthquakes, storms). In one of numerous passages in Wink’s work which strike at environmental implications he indicates that to the extent that Christianity killed the ancient gods it depersonalized nature, making the natural environment a thing to be exploited, rather than a *thou* with which to enter into relationship.32 Wink also emphasizes that the elemental forces of the universe are powers
so basic to the ordering of existence that ‘we cooperate with them, or we are judged by
them.’ He quotes Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), ‘[creation is given to humans to
use, but] if this privilege is misused, God’s justice permits creation to punish humanity.’

**Finding Green instead of Red in Revelation**

**A. Where to Begin?**

Narrative scenes in Revelation do not hang together neatly in logical temporal
causal chains, for time is confused in the Apocalypse. (note Smalley) For example, the
time of narration stands in tension with various narrated times. Therefore, a sequential
beginning to end reading which searches for a logical unfolding of meanings in an
interconnected causal chain is not necessarily the best reading strategy for Revelation.
Interpreters have used cyclical recapitulation as an interpretive schema since the 4th
century. This effectively dismantles beginning to end sequencing of meaning by
telescoping some narratives into other narratives. Contemporary interpreters have
offered interpretive frames that describe Revelation’s temporal development as a conic
temporal spiral, or as a never arriving future casting a proleptic shadow on a ‘special
kind of middle’ time. Or, alternatively, the End has been disconnected from temporality
altogether. Instead one finds an always present ethical Judgment. Another strategy
abandons horizontal temporal development for a vertical, time-above/time-below/future-
in-the-present tension. Thus, one can imagine constructing a meaningful interpretation
from the end. This reading will adopt this strategy. I take the ‘end’ of Revelation to be
chapters 18 and 21-22. These chapters tell of Babylon’s final exit from the stage and the
New Jerusalem’s climatic entrance.
B. The Urban Context of Revelation

Yet, the New Jerusalem itself could be mistaken as the negation of an environmental interest in Revelation. Given that modern cities are problematic for the environment, it is unfortunate that John’s vision focuses on a city as salvific space (and a city with urban sprawl gone cosmic!). It would have been helpful for environmental ethics if instead of seeing the restoration of Eden as a tamed park within the city (22.1-2), he had seen a restored city contextualized within a vast park land.\(^{42}\) But the city image itself does not countermand reading an environmental concern. Duncan Reid has suggested that the silences in the texts describing the New Jerusalem presuppose the existence of an external ‘environment’ outside its walls.\(^{43}\) After all, the nations who bring their glory into the city (21.24) will need space to exist. And Rossing has emphasized that the New Jerusalem has a relationship with its external environs that is based on healing.\(^{44}\) What is essential for this reading is that the New Jerusalem functions as a center of healing not only for those inside, but also for all persons and *all things* that lie outside.

The never-arriving denouement of Revelation (see 22.20) is ‘A Tale of Two Cities’ – Babylon and the New Jerusalem.\(^{45}\) If these two cities are read first and as alternative futures and only then does one read the seven cities of the seven churches in chapters two and three, we see Revelation as bracketed by urban concerns. Babylon and the New Jerusalem represent opposed moral systems and resultant futures. Thus, the seven cities/churches have their futures before them. They stand in ‘what is’ (α$\,\varepsilon\iota\,\sigma\iota\,\iota\,\tau\iota\,\nu\,\rho\;\iota\,\sigma\iota\,\nu\,\iota\,\nu\,\iota\,\sigma\iota\,\tau\iota\,\alpha\,\gamma\,\iota\,\iota\,\eta\,\omicron\,\iota\,\rho\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\nu\,\omicron\,\pi\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\varepsilon\iota\,\iota\,\alpha\,\varsigma\,\tau\iota\,\nu\,\sigma\iota\,\omicron\,\nu\iota\,\nu\,\nu\,\tau\iota\,\alpha\,\gamma\,\iota\,\iota\,\eta\,\omicron\,\iota\,\rho\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\nu\,\omicron\,\pi\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\varepsilon\iota\,\iota\,\alpha\,\varsigma\,\tau\iota\,\nu\,\sigma\iota\,\omicron\,\nu\iota\,\nu\,\nu\,\tau\iota\,\alpha\,\gamma\,\iota\,\iota\,\eta\,\omicron\,\iota\,\rho\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\nu\,\omicron\,\pi\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\varepsilon\iota\,\iota\,\alpha\,\varsigma\,\tau\iota\,\nu\,\sigma\iota\,\omicron\,\nu\iota\,\nu\,\nu\,\tau\iota\,\alpha\,\gamma\,\iota\,\iota\,\eta\,\omicron\,\iota\,\rho\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\nu\,\omicron\,\pi\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\varepsilon\iota\,\iota\,\alpha\,\varsigma\,\tau\iota\,\nu\,\sigma\iota\,\omicron\,\nu\iota\,\nu\,\nu\,\tau\iota\,\alpha\,\gamma\,\iota\,\iota\,\eta\,\omicron\,\iota\,\rho\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\nu\,\omicron\,\pi\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\varepsilon\iota\,\iota\,\alpha\,\varsigma\,\tau\iota\,\nu\,\sigma\iota\,\omicron\,\nu\iota\,\nu\,\nu\,\tau\iota\,\alpha\,\gamma\,\iota\,\iota\,\eta\,\omicron\,\iota\,\rho\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\nu\,\omicron\,\pi\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\varepsilon\iota\,\iota\,\alpha\,\varsigma\,\tau\iota\,\nu\,\sigma\iota\,\omicron\,\nu\iota\,\nu\,\nu\,\tau\iota\,\alpha\,\gamma\,\iota\,\iota\,\eta\,\omicron\,\iota\,\rho\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\nu\,\omicron\,\pi\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\varepsilon\iota\,\iota\,\alpha\,\varsigma\,\tau\iota\,\nu\,\sigma\iota\,\omicron\,\nu\iota\,\nu\,\nu\,\tau\iota\,\alpha\,\gamma\,\iota\,\iota\,\eta\,\omicron\,\iota\,\rho\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\nu\,\omicron\,\pi\,\omicron\,\omicron\,\varsigma\,\iota\,\varepsilon\iota\,\iota\,\alpha\,\varsigma\,\tau\iota\,\nu\,\sigma\iota\,\omicron\,\nu\iota\,\nu\,\nu\,\tau\iota\,\alpha\,\gamma\,\iota\,\iota\,\eta\,\omicron\,\iota\,\rho\,\omicron\,\omicro
(a$ dei~ gene&sqaI). The imperatives in chapters 2 and 3 place the churches in the situation of choosing a future. Which city of the future will their cities emulate? This urban inclusio guides the unpacking of the intervening visions. The visions prod the seven cities (and also us) to ask: ‘Will your future be that of Babylon, or that of the New Jerusalem?’ ‘Will your cities, in the end, seek the mark of the Beast, or the mark of the Lamb?’ The answers, we must assume, were as obvious for them as they would be for us. The difficulty lies in how the texts obscure the differences between the City of God and the City of the Beast.

Recent work on the rhetorical situation of Revelation has emphasized that the problem for John’s churches might not have been too much persecution, but too little.46 His churches find life in the Empire to be too good, not too evil. It is easy to accommodate their Christian faith to the blessings offered by the Imperial system. The Seer must convince them that a crisis exists; he must help them to see the system’s evil with the clarity his visions have given him. The extravagance of John’s language seeks to expose the negative spiritual forces working incognito. The very familiarity and apparent good of these demonic entities masks them. And so the visions function to defamiliarize the normal. They show that ‘beneath the comfortable surfaces of life in the cities of this world, a spiritual warfare is in full tilt.’47 As I tell my NT students, the historical identity of the Beast is not hard to discern; it is the nature of the beast that eludes us. The difficulty is to understand why the Beast is beastly.

But a sharp moral contrast divides Babylon and the New Jerusalem.48 The New Jerusalem produces healing for all. Babylon produces domination, exploitation and destruction. Yet, in Babylon’s exit scene (18.1-24), with the exception of human
trafficking (v. 13), the evil of Babylon is left unspecified, or only vaguely implied (e.g. vv. 6-7). On the surface one finds what we normally perceive as good. Indeed, some of these goods are the same as those found in the New Jerusalem! The city has beautiful, rare, and priceless things (v. 13). Its economy is vibrant. It creates wealth for itself and others (vv. 11, 17c). It is elegant, evoking pride (v. 18b). Nevertheless, in John’s moral vision it is the ‘domicile of Systemic Evil and a hang-out for the Forces of Human Self-destruction’ (v. 2- author’s translation). If we ask after the central ethical failure leading to this evaluation, Rossing’s analysis helps us to see the culprit as the city’s conspicuous consumption. The institutional forces associated with rapacious consumption lead to an exploitive and destructive relationship with its environs.

In terms of Wink’s categories the angels of this city – that is, the personalities of its human institutional structures – have gone awry. Appearing to produce desirable goods, they, in fact, produce destruction. The fruits of urbane consumption are actually rotten. Armed with this insight we then approach the troubling destructive visions at the heart of the Apocalypse. For the central visions reveal the nature of the beast and the reasons a reader would not want to choose Babylon’s future.

C. The Seven-Sealed Scroll

The central chapters of Revelation have a well-known contrast between heavenly and earthly scenes. Taking our cue from having first read the ending with its contrast between the earthly Babylon and the heavenly Jerusalem we are prepared to read this contrast in the central sections as a further delineation between the two cities. And with a cue from Wink’s theological analysis we are also prepared to read these contrasts between heaven and earth not as a contrast between a vertical and spatial here and there,
but, rather, as contrasting interiorities of the human situation in relationship to God – Babylon, an interior spiritual condition against God; New Jerusalem, an interior spiritual condition with God. Thus, in these contrasts each of the cities is further revealed in their essence. The earthly scenes of destruction relate to the nature of Babylon’s angelic powers, not those of the New Jerusalem.

The events revealed by the scroll with seven seals (6.1-17) do not highlight environmental destruction. But if we read the seven trumpets (8.2-9:19, 11.15) and the seven bowls of wrath (16.1-21) as recapitulations of events revealed in the seven seals, then the seals become important for establishing the context of the environmental destruction revealed with the trumpets and bowls. A helpful way to read the scene is suggested by David Barr. He calls the seven-sealed scroll (5.1) the ‘Worship Scroll,’ and argues that the previous scene (4.1-5.14) is designed to recall a Sunday service. The scroll contains the lesson to be read. The crisis is that with no one capable of opening the scroll the lesson will remain opaque (see 5.3-4). The Lamb is found to be worthy of opening the scroll, but what, exactly, is the lesson? Jacques Ellul reads the lesson of the scroll as a revelation of the hidden forces driving human history. The scroll does not show fated destructive acts sent by God, but, in this reading, unmask the angels of Babylon for the demons they are. And so the angelic forces driving Babylon’s human institutional unfolding are actually shown to be demonic forces of conquest and war with concomitant famine and plague (the infamous Four Horsemen of 6.2-8). And, like a distant warning of thunder, the 6th Seal (6.12-17) with its descriptions of earthquakes, a blackened sun and bloodied moon, and the displacement of oceans and
mountains, intimates the recoil of the environment against a human world driven by such forces.

Using Wink’s categories clarifies God’s relationship to the ensuing mayhem. For Wink God, as Creator, is primary in all things. In John’s symbolic world God’s throne is at the pinnacle of a hierarchical universe. The scroll is in God’s hand (5.1). The ensuing actions are connected to God through the four living creatures that surround the throne. These factors can be read as illustrations of Wink’s understanding that the human institutional forces driving events cannot exist apart from their creation by God. All that happens happens, in some sense, as the action of God. Yet at the same time that the vision emphasizes the origin of all things in God, the text works to distance God from what these all too human institutional entities do, the specific actions they perform.

We can begin to see the distancing by reading against the standard interpretation that says God commands the Four Horsemen. And so God is the causative agent behind their destruction. But the standard interpretation is made problematic by the fact that Rev. 6.1-8 embroils us in a number of visual, auditory and semantic ambiguities. These verses describe four parallel scenes, each connecting one of the four living beings that surround the throne of God (4.6) with one of the four horsemen. The first scene (6.1-2) provides the model:

1. ‘Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!”

\[\text{(!Erxou)}\]

2. I looked (kai_ ei~don), and there was a white horse \[54\]...
It is important to determine exactly what the command “Come” means and who hears it. The sequence εἰρξου καὶ εἰδὼν is exactly parallel for the scenes depicting the first, third and fourth horsemen. For the second horse καὶ εἰδὼν is absent and εἰρξου is followed by καὶ εἴχθλην (vv. 3c-4a). In addition for the first horse καὶ εἴχθλην is also used near the end of verse 2, ‘and he went out conquering and to conquer.’ The second use of εἰρξομαί for the first and second horses, where it clearly means ‘go’ (that is, ‘went’), may determine the meaning of the imperative form preceding it. In each of these two instances then the interpretation would be that the command is addressed to a horseman: ‘Go!… and he went.’ If so, the parallelism of the scenes suggests that the first two instances set the meaning for all the imperatives in these verses. Indeed a number of exegetes do understand the command εἰρξου as addressed to the horsemen and the seals as causally linked to the ensuing violence. But this can at best be a grammatical possibility, it is not grammatically required. εἰρξου can mean either ‘come’, or ‘go’. The construction remains inherently ambiguous for the meaning of the imperative. That its referent is equally ambiguous is attested by a number of early manuscripts that understood it as a command to John to ‘come’ adding ‘and see’ (καὶ ἰδέ) at the end of v.1 to make this clear.

After all the arguments have been examined, what remains is ambiguity.

Any interpretation requires a backdrop of theological and visual assumptions against which the grammatical ambiguity in the text may be resolved. In many interpretations the assumed backdrop to these arguments is that the texts in question seek to protect and project divine sovereignty. The Seer’s visions are, in this view,
theologically motivated to portray God as in control of all apocalyptic events. Thus the horsemen ‘go’ at God’s command. This argument seems strengthened if the imperative is taken as ‘go.’ But this understanding of the text’s theological commitments is what needs to be questioned. And the ambiguities of the scene justify such questioning.

So, even if two of the four horsemen ‘go out’, we must still ask just who it is that hears the command: $\text{e}!\text{rxou}$? The Horsemen, or is it the Seer? Does it mean ‘come’ or ‘go?’ Exactly how are we to envision the movements being conveyed here? Do the horsemen move out from God’s throne, or does John move closer to read the mysteries of the scroll? Or, does John see the horsemen ‘going out’ across the earth from nowhere in particular? This scene is a stage manager’s nightmare. No answers to these questions are specified in the script. If I am an omnipotent stage manager and the voices of the creatures are directed to the horsemen, then God seems to be directly and causally linked to their destructive impact. They move from God to enact their violence. But if, instead, we resolve the scene’s ambiguity away from pre-concerns with divine omnipotence and, with some ancient readers, understand the command as ‘come closer [to view the contents of the lesson]’ very different stage directions emerge. If the voices crying “$!\text{Erxou}$” are meant not for the horsemen but for other ears (and the horsemen, being, after all, metaphors, are, in fact, deaf), then another reading is possible.

In this reading the Lamb opens the seals, but does not cause the ensuing violence. Instead the slowly opening scroll enables a Freudian-like analysis of the unconscious forces driving the human condition. But, to emphasize, in this reading there is no action taken by God, or the Lamb, to cause the following destruction. Instead we find that with the breaking of the first four seals each of the four creatures in turn calls out for John to
come. What follows is not causation of destruction, but causation of perception. Coming, John views the mysteries of the Scroll. The light bulbs of the Seer’s cognition turn on. He sees the reality of Babylon’s angels run amok: conquest and its aftermath.

**D. The Four Living Creatures**

The one thing that is absolutely clear about the commands “Come!” is that they are uttered by the four living creatures surrounding God’s throne. Thus their role, not only with the seven seals, but also with the bowls of wrath, is central to my reading of Revelation. They are first encountered in the heavenly throne scene in 4.6. It seems clear that John has Ezekiel’s vision of God’s throne and its attendant creatures in mind (Ez. 1.5-25). But what is the meaning of that connection? A rabbinic text suggests that the four creatures represent the created world. The text is Midrash Shemoth R. 23, ‘[Humanity] is exalted among creatures, the eagle among birds, the ox among domestic animals, the lion among wild beasts; all of them have received dominion’. The four function as archetypes. In them the whole of the created order fulfills its purpose, praising its Creator. Additional support for this interpretation can be found in the cardinal function of ‘four’ to represent the earth. The earth has four corners and four winds and four horsemen go out to destroy the earth. The four living beings thus encompass the created (and animate?) cosmos. Catherine Keller also interprets the four as symbols of the created order. She begins with the hermeneutical indeterminacy of the text. She then plays with the ambiguous nature of the ‘almost human’ creature (number three: “with a face like a human face” 4.7) and its relationship with the other clearly animal creatures. Using the Derridean concept of the *trace*, she envisions humanity’s egalitarian place among the four as a dissolution of the dualisms of nature/culture,
animal/human. This leads her to hope for a reading in which the four ‘incarnate . . . the sacred sentience of all creatures. . . . signaling a future in which we humanoids sing along, just third of four’. Shifting our interpretive lens to Wink’s analysis we can see the creatures as the spiritual reality of nature (stoixeia): that is our environment.

E. The Seven Trumpets

This reading takes the seven trumpets of chapters 8 and 9 as recapitulating, while also amplifying, the seven seals. Thus they are already grounded in the role of the four creatures in revealing the destructive forces of human institutions driven by the angels of Babylon, even though the creatures do not reappear in this scene. The seven angels are first revealed in one of the heavenly scenes (8.2). But when they blow their trumpets the characteristic scene shift to earth takes place. If, as argued above, earthly scenes reveal the interior institutional (Wink: angelic) nature of Babylon then we again find the same pattern as with the seven seals. The seven angels stand before God (8.2) indicating God as their ultimate source and showing their primal connection with the source of all good. Then the text begins to distance them from and to obfuscate their relationship to God. The scenes shift in each instance to earth. The angels receive trumpets, but it is unclear who gives them the trumpets. Using Wink’s insight that ‘angels’ are entities given life from human institutions it is to be suggested that humanity gives the angels their trumpets. That is, in reading angels as the (interior) personalities of human social structures, it is we who give them their attributes (trumpets). Their natures and actions reflect our choices and qualities writ large. The angels are further distanced from God in that God does not command them to sound their trumpets; they take this action on their own (8.6).
The earthly scenes of destruction precipitated by each trumpet contrast with the heavenly worship of chapter 7. There, angels, creatures and elders join in the harmonious praise of God. Remembering that heavenly scenes reveal the institutional characteristics of a humanity living in accord with the New Jerusalem, we see, via Wink’s eyes, how the heavenly (again, ‘interior’) representations of human institutions (and the sentient created order) following the New Jerusalem behave. But the trumpets of chapter 8 show us the result of the ethics (and interiority) of the earthly city, Babylon. Its angels, corrupted by its conspicuous consumption and exploitation of the natural environment wreak havoc on the flora, fauna, rivers and oceans (8.7-12).

**F. The Seven Bowls of Wrath**

The Creatures re-emerge in 15.7 in connection with the seven bowls of wrath. The creatures distribute the bowls to the angels. This reading takes the bowls as recapitulation with amplification of both the seals and trumpets allowing us to enter into the vision of the bowls (15.7-16.21) already understanding that the angels pouring out wrath upon the earth are a revelation of the spiritual side of the human institutions of Babylon. They reflect and act out the policies and practices of Babylon’s people and institutions. The patterns we saw in the seals and trumpets are repeated. These angels come out of the heavenly Temple. They are from God in their origins. But in exiting the Temple, a disconnect from God takes place. Note that God does not give them the bowls of wrath. The environment, represented in one of the living creatures, gives them the chalices filled with destruction (v. 7). And although the wrath is identified as belonging to God (v. 1b), it comes only indirectly from God to the angels through the living creatures. (‘God’s justice permits creation to punish humanity’ Hildegard of Bingen.) An
unidentified voice from the Temple tells the angels to dispense the contents of their cups. The voice is not God’s. It speaks of God in the third person.62 ‘Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.’ (16.1b NRSV) When the bowls are emptied the recoil of the environment against the practices of Babylon intensifies. The trumpets brought the destruction of one third of the rivers and oceans (8.9, 11). The bowls bring total devastation (16.3).

Recapitulation added to the way in which this scene works to distance God from the Bowl’s destructive consequences allows us to see that God did not cause this destruction. What happens with the Bowls is the same as the previous scenes of destructive sevens. What is revealed is not God’s causation of destruction, but divine understanding of the destruction that is already taking place. ‘[The plagues are events] that the Empire itself causes.’63 Recent comment on this passage tends to emphasize the reflexive nature of the judgments of the bowls of wrath. David Barr calls the judgments ‘karmic’.64 Certain types of environmental actions bring in their wake certain types of environmental responses. These responses can take the form of a ‘judgment’ against destructive human activity. Our angels have run amok.

Conclusion

Revelation does not present us with a God who wills destructive judgments against the natural world. Its God has created nature replete with entities (the four creatures) that emerge from it and are intended by God to promote wholeness and healing for all (the New Jerusalem). Human systemic functions such as economic institutions and political structures similarly were created for our good and with systemic entities (angels) emerging from them as well. But when these systems are exploited and
corrupted through human practices of conspicuous consumption, imperialistic acquisition and global domination (Babylon) our *angels* are drawn off task and begin to become destructive. Drawn far enough from their God-given purposes the angels of human systems begin to destroy the very environment they depend on for existence and trigger the ecosystem itself to rebound against us, violently judging our practices as the whole system seeks to purge itself. When the angels of human social systems run amok, they bring judgment in their wake. This future moves toward us with tragic inevitability. Remembering that this reading seeks to avoid fatalistic passivity before The End, what actions, what orientations does the text provide by which such a future might be averted? If, instead of the ethics of Babylon human systems are guided by the ethics of the New Jerusalem there is hope for a river of life that would flow from our cities and bring healing and wholeness to the planet.

What does such a reading of the Seer’s visions contribute to Christian environmental ethics? First, it provides additional biblical warrant for abandonment of the traditional Christian environmental ethic: stewardship. This has rightly fallen into disfavor because of its utilitarianism, paternalism and anthropocentrism. The utility of natural systems, especially for human provision, is not emphasized in the Apocalypse (except negatively in Babylon). Paternalism and anthropocentrism are out when it is remembered that the four creatures representing nature actually stand closer to God and worship God prior to the 24 elders, who directly represent humanity (4.9). Eco-justice seems rather to serve as the frame in which to describe the place of the environment in this reading of John’s visions. In the New Jerusalem John envisions a balance of all the
parts to the whole; and when in balance the whole produces healing and good for all. It is an ethic based in the dynamics and balance of whole ecosystems.

Secondly, this reading re-envisioned the relationship of Christian ‘transcendence’ to the environment as a dialectic rather than an opposition. Doing so addresses the problems with ‘otherworldliness’ first articulated by Lynn White, Jr.\textsuperscript{65} The disquiet with the ‘otherworldliness’ of Christianity has been voiced more recently in theologies seeking a ‘worldly Christianity’.$^{66}$ Catherine Keller’s work on apocalyptic expounds this worldly faith with its concomitant retreat from the next world.$^{67}$ For both White and Keller the very notion of a \textit{world beyond} makes the construction of a workable environmental ethic for this world problematic. But all proclamations of the end of the future seem premature. Keller herself acknowledges that there is no escaping apocalypse as a form of thinking. Any effort to speak of its end must itself borrow from apocalyptic.$^{68}$ Human beings imagine futures for themselves, for their species, for their planet and for their universe. What is essential is that we understand how it is that often this imagination becomes destructive for our present.

It is not otherworldliness per se that is ethically suspect, but, rather, specific types of otherworldly constructs. Recalling the superscript from Umberto Eco, all thinking of other worlds has some type of impact on \textit{this} world. Scholars such as Rossing, Maier, Barr, O’Leary and Keller all affirm that an ethical critique of the type of impact an envisioned future has on this world enables us to judge the adequacy of that envisioned future. What this observation means is that Lynn White’s critique of Christian transcendence, when more finely nuanced, is directed against a neo-platonic construct of Christian otherworldliness, not the vision of another heaven and earth per se. This paper
explores a positive dialectic of the future with the present for the environment. It suggests a new rhetorical strategy and appropriation of Christian apocalyptic traditions and logic that confronts us with a clear diagnosis of the tragedy of current destruction balanced with comedic hope for change.

This reading also contributes important means of addressing Anthony Weston’s insight about the need for imaginative insight into a new relationship with our environment, mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Revelation alters our imaginations, enabling us to ‘see’ good(s) in a new light. Things we have assumed to be goods are not (in the long run). Other goods essential to our well-being have been overlooked. And the very fact that these insights are packaged in fantastic visions requires an opening of the imagination to engage them. Also, if Max Weber was correct in identifying a major feature of the modern bureaucratic world as disenchantment, Revelation’s ethical visions re-enchant nature as not just having existence, but also as having being. In the presence of God we can relate to creation as thou.

Finally, John provides a metaphor for ethical change. He challenges his city churches to pack up and move. Metaphorically, Christians are to relocate from Babylon to the New Jerusalem. This change in urban settings is an image of ethical transformation. This metaphorical relocation also implies that the church casts off the mark of the Beast and instead takes the mark of the Lamb. With such a move comes the need to practice the chief virtues of Revelation: endurance and witness. These will now come to mean, at least in part, a change in our relationship to the environment and a resistance to the identification of abundant life with the reification of global consumerist excesses. Revelation’s God is not responsible for the destruction of the environment; the
natural world is not thereby robbed of ethical value. Instead, Revelation enhances the value of our ecosystems, making them central to a Christian ethic.

This centrality can be seen in two ways: 1.) Ecosystems are of primary and independent value to God (evidenced in the relationship between God and the four living creatures). 2.) Our relationship with and impact upon the natural environment are barometers of our relationship with God. Our stance vis-à-vis nature reveals whether we follow the Beast or the Lamb. The mark of the Beast is, at least in part, a destructive and broken relationship with the environment.

An End has come upon us. Whole ecosystems are advancing through various stages of destruction as you read. The horsemen ride, bowls empty, trumpets blare. With each passing season; with each new study the evidence mounts. The time to adapt grows short. Read in our context Revelation can help us see why, at an ethical level, this crisis has come upon us. Our institutional entities have run amok. Much of what causes this destruction appears to be good: an expanding economy, ever increasing standards of living, ever increasing ease, speed and amount of travel and the growing consumer demand to manipulate our living spaces to achieve an Epcot Center-like managed environment (to list only a few examples). Revelation helps us to see these ‘goods’ in a different light. Such institutional ‘goods’ driven by desire for domination, exploitation and imperialist expansion merely mask demonically destructive agents. John’s visions also help us toward an ethical vision of a new relationship with the environment that might enable us to avert the disasters it foretells/reveals. Rather than running roughshod over creation, the Seer’s visions call us to re-vision ourselves as simply one partner with all of the created order in an egalitarian dance of praise to our mutual Creator. John’s
revelation entices us to let the River of Life flow freely from God bringing healing, not only to the nations, but to whole species, ecosystems and ourselves.

1 A version of this article was presented in the Ecological Hermeneutics Consultation at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in Philadelphia in 2005.


She briefly mentions the problem in, ‘Alas for the Earth!’’, 191.

Space does not allow consideration of 21:1 as also possibly diminishing environmental responsibility.


‘[John] was not a modern environmentalist’ (Rossing, “Healing of the Earth,” 166). But Rossing has also shown that awareness of environmental impacts did exist in the first century (“River of Life,” 492-494).

Fiorenza, 21.


O’Leary, 197.


While historical critical approaches *can* find contemporary relevance in Revelation, it is often severely restricted. For example Fiorenza, 199, argues that only if an identical rhetorical situation to the one she has historically reconstructed for Revelation is found in the present can the book’s message be authentically re-appropriated. Or, even more restrictive, Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament, Vol. 2, History and Literature of Early Christianity*, (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 248, 256; argues that the book was not (historically) intended to be about the future at all, and that only a late first century historical situation provides any understanding of the text. Such approaches fail to deal with the independent life of the text that transcends its historical origins. This is particularly true of canonical texts. They come to provide meaningful content never thought or intended by historically constrained writers and first audiences. Texts of such power demonstrate Umberto Eco’s concept of being so full of potential meaning that they *overflow* original constraints.

‘Few writings in all of literature have been so obsessively read with such disastrous results’ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986), 512). Weber’s narrative offers a running list of the disasters the book has foisted on history.

See Barr, “Ethical Reading;” Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*; O’Leary, 213-224; for applications see


19 Although the production of a text ordering and editing these visionary experiences IS the implied author’s reasoned attempt at interpreting them.


26 O’Leary, 201.

27 Compare Rossing’s treatment of Revelation as “prophetic,” *Rapture Exposed.*
28 O’Leary, 222.


31 Aspects of Wink’s views were anticipated by Stringfellow, 18.


33 Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 131.

34 Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 141.


38 Fiorenza, 5.

40 ‘[The End] has already occurred; it is always about to occur; it is here and now and always has been.’ O’Leary, 219-220.

41 Ellul, 24, 50

42 See Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2001), for a useful discussion of the ways in which the tension between these two different conceptualizations of salvific space play out in subsequent Christian spirituality.

43 232-245.

44 “River of Life,” 487-499.

45 Stringfellow, 34, reads this tension as a canonical theme uniting the whole biblical witness as dealing with the confrontation of these two cities.


48 Rossing, “River of Life,” 487-499; *The Choice between Two Cities*. 
Given the way in which ancient thinkers viewed slavery as either natural (e.g. Aristotelians) or as not truly injurious of the person (Stoics e.g.) one would have to doubt if an ancient reader found even this morally evil. Christians shared in the ambiguity regarding the moral status of slavery. For example: Paul’s failure in Philemon to censure the practice unambiguously and later Christian *Haustafeln*.

Royalty, 4.

Barr, *Tales of the End*, 61.

Ellul, 145.


One interpretative tradition identifies the white horse as Christ (Ellul, 146-149). This is strongly argued by Michael Bachmann, “Noch ein Blick auf den ersten apokalyptischen Reiter (von Apk. 6.1-2) NTS 44, 1998, 257-278. Space does not allow a detailed response to his argument, but see John C. Poirier, “The First Rider: A Response to Michael Bachmann,” *NTS* 45, 1999, 257-262. In addition to Poirier’s responses my reasons for rejecting the white rider as Christ are: 1. such an interpretation disrupts the cohesion of negative images found in the visions of sevens. This presumes that we read them via recapitulation. But when this view is taken the seals, trumpets, and bowls combine to form an overwhelmingly negative context. Nothing good comes from the visions of sevens. The possible exceptions are the 5th and 7th seals. But these are, at best, ambiguously positive. The 5th seal reveals the souls of the slaughtered martyrs under the altar of God. Positive? Only ambiguously so when one considers that they call for vengeance and still more deaths are required to fill up their number. The 7th seal produces 30 minutes of silence in heaven. This is usually taken to signify God laying aside all else to hear the prayers of the saints.
Positive? Only ambiguously so when it is taken into consideration that the 7th seal leads (8.3-6) to the blowing of the seven trumpets. 2. White in the ancient world symbolized military victory. Roman generals rode white horses in triumphal processions. As such it is negatively applicable to the Roman Imperium.


56 Aune, Revelation, 6-16, 379-80.


59 Other interpreters reading the creatures in this manner are: Aune, Revelation 1-5, 379-380; Witherington, 118; Harrington, 80; Ford, 75; G.B. Caird, A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 64; Keller, God and Power, 77; Mounce, 124; Barr, Tales of the End, 81; Farmer, 60. The reading seems to have originated with H.B. Swete, The Apocalypse of St. John (London: Mcmillan, 1906). M. Eugene Boring, Revelation, IBC, (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 107; proposes that John’s opponents, castigated in the opening letters, are, at least in part, guilty of a Gnostic denial of creation. The four creatures counter this by emphasizing that the created order is close to God and worships God.

60 Keller, God and Power, 68-94.

62 Against Farmer, 106.


64 Barr, *Tales of the End*, 87; also Ellul, 65-72; Royalty, 204; Collins, 117.


67 Especially, *God and Power*.

68 Keller, *God and Power*, 87. Jacques Derrida, in an effort to make and end of the end, famously put himself in the position of declaring the end, ended, a position he admitted was itself apocalyptic, O’Leary, 219.