“Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. As early as the second century both Tertullian and St. Irenaeus of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God’s transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”


“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together in the Spirit into a dwelling place for God.” (Ephesians 2:19-22)


Lynn White’s diagnosis of the historical and cultural roots of “our ecologic crisis” remains, nearly fifty years after its publication, the starting point—the challenge—for attempts to construct a hermeneutical lens through which to read the New Testament in light of our environmental crises. White, a Medieval historian and Presbyterian layman, placed most of the blame for the degradation of the earth on anthropocentric Christian worldviews rooted in readings of the Genesis creation stories. The divine mandate granted to Adam to subdue and have dominion over the earth effectively separates humanity from the rest of creation, thereby unleashing the forces of dualism and anthropocentrism. Since the publication of White’s essay, many interpreters have ably demonstrated that there are better ways to read the creation stories. Indeed, the Hebrew Bible seems to support a more sustainable, earth-friendly worldview than most Christians realize. But the New Testament remains a more difficult nut to crack, even when

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1 So, to take but one example, the most important recent discussion of ecological hermeneutics: David Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, Christopher Southgate, Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 1-3.
read apart from the decidedly earth-unfriendly dispensationalist/rapturist hermeneutics that so many now take for granted.

Why? In the first place, it seems to most readers that very few NT texts have any interest at all in nature or the earth. Jesus’ focus seems firmly fixed on the people of Israel and, later in his ministry, the nations. A handful of passages in the Pauline writings do mention creation in arresting ways, including Romans 8:18-23 and Colossians 1:15-20, but have nonetheless resisted consensus as to their precise meaning and implications for ecological hermeneutics. The other NT passages that usually enter into the discussion seem, at least superficially, more problematic than helpful. 2 Peter 3 envisions the burning of the earth (although this might be a refining fire) and Revelation is widely, if wrongly, thought to envision the end of the earth as part of God’s solution to the problem of human evil. In short, the base of NT passages that deal with creation in clear and, especially, positive ways, is thin at best.

Second, even if we were to recover from some of these texts a more positive regard for creation, the foundational perspective of the New Testament seems resolutely oriented toward human concerns, which tilts us inevitably toward White’s charge of Christian anthropocentrism. The kingdom Jesus announces apparently concerns itself primarily with human relationships and practices. Although the economics and politics of God’s kingdom may carry ecological consequences, these usually seem secondary at best to the human story. In Paul’s letters, too, the preponderance of discourse focuses on God, Jesus Christ, and humankind. The words Paul uses in relationship to these subjects—e.g., faithfulness, righteousness, love, hope—seem to have little to do with the earth or creation. As a consequence, those exceptional passages in the Pauline writings that do mention creation (Rom 8, Col 1) seems to stand out like islands in an anthropocentric sea.

Finally, Western Christianity has told a story of salvation—one that we suppose to be based in the New Testament—that focuses mostly on making sure that someday we will leave our bodies and the earth behind. If this is indeed the right way to read early Christian (and subsequent) soteriology and eschatology, it will be impossible for Christians to make a compelling, biblically- and theologically-grounded case for creation care as an integral Christian practice. Another way to say this is that the story of salvation and of the end of the world that so many in our churches take for granted is fundamentally unsustainable.

2. A Hermeneutical Proposal

We cannot hope, in any case, to make sense of the place of creation within God’s redemptive purposes by lifting up a passage here and a verse there, nor even by adding them together. An atomized, topical reading of the New Testament’s few creation or nature texts will not produce a different worldview. A more compelling case for earth-friendly readings of the NT, will have to stand on wider and stronger foundations. David Horrell, for example, has stressed the importance of a truer picture of New Testament eschatology as a key to making sense of the ecological perspectives of the New Testament writers. The South African theologian Ernst Conradie has argued for a narrative approach that locates human life—and that of the rest of creation—within a cosmological drama, into which diverse themes are woven. This narrative drama provides a sense of identity, orientation, order, even destiny and purpose. When looking

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2 See the recent, cautious discussions of these passages in David Horrell, The Bible and the Environment: Toward a Critical Ecological Hermeneutic (Equinox, 2010), 74-87.
3 Ibid, 138-140.
for biblical responses to our environmental crises, we should focus on broader biblical narratives, not merely on one or another particular text, theme, or topic. In addressing ecological concerns, we have tended to go looking at texts either about creation or eschatology, often to the exclusion of the other. We have usually not read creation and eschatology together as parts of a single biblical story.

Conradie and others have also highlighted the use of ‘oikos’ (household) as a useful “root metaphor” in the larger narrative frame. This proposal has many advantages. The Greek word ‘oikos’ provides the etymological root for economics (the ordering and just governance of local, global, and cosmic houses), ecology (the study of the household and its long term sustainability), and ecumenics (the work together of the many parts of the household of God). The “house” metaphor thus embraces realms we are inclined to keep distinct. It compels us to consider our places within a larger household that includes not only God but the rest of creation. But there is yet another dramatic thread that I think has been overlooked in Christian circles, one that has the potential to bind creation and eschatology together within one story more clearly than does “house.” I propose that we explore the Biblical narrative that focuses on the temple. My telling of this story runs as follows:

God creates “heaven and earth” (the creation), with humans in the role of servants and guardians. Creation—heaven and earth, together—is the first (and final) temple. Human distrust and disobedience lead to alienation from God and from the earth. The original unity of heaven and earth is broken and the vocation of humans is distorted and eclipsed by violence and idolatry (e.g., human empires, sometimes Israel’s own). In the wake of the rupture of earth from heaven—the fracturing of the original temple—God and Israel preserve a model of God’s intention for the whole of creation, the temple. It, too, becomes distorted and fractured. God then sends a new son of God, a new Adam, Jesus, who announces and inaugurates the rule of God on earth, thereby initiating the repair of the relationships between God, humankind, and the creation—i.e., the primal temple. Jesus embodies in his ministry the fulfillment of the intentions of the temple for restoration of Israel and light for the nations, for release from bondage and demonic powers, for God’s abundant provision, and especially for forgiveness and the restoration of human relationship with God and the creation. Jesus announces the end of the temple “made by hands” and its fulfillment of the temple ideal in his own body. His body constitutes the first fruits of the “new creation.” The death and resurrection of Jesus is the model for the passing of the old heaven and earth and its replacement by the new heaven and earth, which fulfills the original canonical vision of the whole of creation—comprehending both heaven and earth—as the fit dwelling place for God.

This story pays particular attention to the two accounts of creation (and fall and cursing) in Genesis 1-4, which set forth the foundational cosmogony (origins), cosmology (how the world is...
ordered), anthropology (the role and predicament of humans), and the framing for the eschatology (the end) for this dramatic narrative. \(^5\)

3. A ‘Homology’: Creation = Heaven and Earth = Temple

In Israelite, Jewish, and early Christian imagination the terms “creation,” “heaven and earth,” and “temple” function homologically (in places, other terms are worked into this homology, including: “Jerusalem,” “Mount Zion,” and “house”). The New Testament writers often presume this correlation. While we find relatively little in the NT about “creation,” the fate of the “temple” is a major element in the gospel story. Revelation brings this story to a close with images of a new “heaven and earth” that unites city, garden, and humankind as a dwelling place for God—the temple that brings an end to all other temples.

The Hebrew Canon begins with creation as temple and ends in 2 Chronicles with an account of the fall of Jerusalem, exile (a forced “Sabbath” of 70 years), and a vision given to Cyrus, ruler of all the kingdoms of the earth, by the God of heaven, to build a house for God in Jerusalem (2 Chron 36:15-23). The New Testament then continues this story, focusing on Jesus as the temple; he is the fulfillment of God’s vision for humankind and the whole of heaven and earth. I do not regard this as the only way to tell either the gospel story or the story of the Bible; it is, however, a more prominent storyline within the canon than Christians usually imagine. This story has the advantage of providing a sweeping canonical frame for other narratives, linking disparate materials across the Hebrew and Christian canons. It provides a comprehensive frame for making sense of the common destiny of humankind and creation in God’s redemptive purposes and thus may have significant implications for developing a compelling eco-theological narrative. Finally, although this story is not as well known among Christians as many others, there is wide evidence for its circulation in ancient Israel, in early Judaism and Christianity, and even its prominence in the art and architecture of Jews and Christians long after the New Testament era. \(^6\)

4. “Heaven and Earth” and “Temple” as God’s Dwelling Place

The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament affirm God’s intention to dwell among humankind and the creation. The final visions of Revelation do not describe the destruction of the earth and the transportation of the souls of the saved to the heavenly realm, but the displacement of old heaven and earth by a new heaven and earth, where God dwells with humankind (21:1-4) in a new city/garden (22:1-5). The new heaven, new earth, and new city apparently are all identifiable in relation to their predecessors (i.e., they are in some ways continuous), yet seem also to be discontinuous from them. (There may be analogies for these relationships in Jesus Christ, who as the “new Adam” is both like and unlike the first Adam, and as the resurrected Christ is both fully identified with the crucified Jesus, yet possesses a body with transcendent qualities.) Revelation forcefully identifies one element in the New Jerusalem that is discontinuous with the earthly Jerusalem: the absence of the temple, for “its temple is the

\(^5\)Lawrence Sullivan’s classic survey of South American religions, *Icanchu’s Drum* (Macmillan, 1988) identifies four “cornerstones” of religious mythology: beginnings (cosmogony) and, often, catastrophe or disordering; the present ordering of the world (cosmology); the human condition (anthropology), and the end or goal of the story (eschatology or terminology). In order for a religion to be sustained, these elements have to tell a coherent, enduring, and meaningful story.

Lord God Almighty and the Lamb” (21:22). The presence of God and the Lamb transforms the whole of the new heaven and earth and all its inhabitants into the ideal temple. With this image, Revelation brings to completion a narrative thread first established at the beginning of the canon, in the opening chapters of Genesis. In Genesis the temple is never mentioned, yet the imagery and language used in the creation accounts establish numerous points of identification between creation (heaven and earth) and the temple.8

Like other people of the Ancient Near East, Israel affirmed a strong association between cosmos and temple. The first creation account (Gen 1:1-2:3) depicts the ordering of creation—“heaven and earth”—from formlessness and void, a process that reaches its fruition not at the end of the sixth day when humans are created, but on the seventh day, when God declares Sabbath. Between void and Sabbath lie three parallel panels that focus first on light (days 1 and 4), then seas and sky (days 2 and 5), and finally the land and its inhabitants (days 3 and 6). Scholars have long noted the literary and verbal connections between the prologue of Genesis and the accounts of the building of the tabernacle in Exodus 25-40.9 William P. Brown notes that this pattern corresponds to the ordering of space in the temple as described in 1 Kings 6.10 The tripartite pattern was typical of temples in the ANE, yet distinguishable by its focus on the seventh element: “This threefold arrangement of sacred space corresponds to the way in which the various days of creation are distributed both chronologically and thematically. The first six days, by virtue of their correspondence, establish the architectural boundaries of sacred space. The last day inhabits, as it were, the most holy space.”11

The physical structure of the temple thus corresponds to the ordering of the heavens and the earth at creation.12 Virtually every aspect of the temple mirrors the creation. The wash basins,

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7 Peter Thacher Lanfer, Remembering Eden: The Reception History of Genesis 3:22-24 (Oxford University Press, 2012), 127, discussing the second creation account, rightly notes that the connection between the temple and Eden is “not strictly exegetical,” for the temple is not mentioned directly in either creation account. The connections are established rather by analogy, association, even decoration. Thanks to BRENNAN for this reference.

8 G.K. Beale, The Temple and the Church’s Mission: a Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God (Intervarsity Press, 2004) provides the most complete development of the biblical story of the temple from a Christian perspective. In what follows, however, I am mostly beholden to the work of Jon Levenson, upon whom Beale is also heavily dependent. My first in depth reading of the temple theme in the New Testament was through Nicholas Perrin’s, Jesus the Temple (SPCK/Baker Academic, 2010).


10 William P. Brown, The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder (Oxford University Press, 2010), 36-40. Jon Levenson takes note of a variety of elements in 1 Kings 6 that feature the number seven: it took Solomon seven years to build the temple; the Feast of Booths during which it is dedicated occurs in the seventh month and last seven days Solomon's dedication speech (1 Kgs 8:31-55) is structured around seven petitions. Levenson concludes that the construction of the temple is presented here as a parallel to the construction of the world in seven days. Jon D Levenson, “The Temple and the World,” Journal of Religion 64 (1984): 288. We should not forget that Revelation is also riddled with sevens, as it is with temple imagery and scenes of worship.

11 Brown, Seven Pillars, 40.

12 This is widely affirmed in Jewish thought, both ancient and modern, as in, e.g., the midrash Tanhuma: Kedeshim 10: “Just as the navel is positioned in the center of a man, thus is the Land of Israel positioned in the center of the world, as the Bible says, “dwelling at the very navel of the earth” (Ezek. 38:12), and from it the foundation of the world proceeds . . . . And the temple is in the center of Jerusalem, and the great Hall is in the center of the temple, and the ark is in the center of the great Hall, and the foundation stone is in front of the ark, and beginning with it the world was put on its foundation.” Cited in Levenson, “The Temple and the World,” 283.
the altar, the veil, the lampstands, the pillars, and the decorations all symbolize elements of the cosmos—sea, earth, heavens, sun and stars. In the Hebrew Bible, God’s footstool is identified both as the ark and as the earth; God’s throne is both the heavens and the holy of holies.

The word pair “heaven and earth” occurs first in Genesis 1:1 and then more than 185 times in the Hebrew Bible, most prominently in Psalms and Isaiah, where heaven and earth are linked together both in creation and in judgment and salvation. Usually “heaven and earth” functions as a merism for the whole creation. In some texts that refer to the new (second) temple, however, “heaven and earth” is used homologically for both the temple and Jerusalem. This is not surprising given the fact that the purpose of both creation and temple is to provide the resting place, a suitable habitation, for God, represented temporally and relationally in the Sabbath and architecturally in the temple. Creation and temple not only mirror one another, they serve the same purpose. Jon Levenson, summarizing the Hellenistic allegory at work in Josephus’ first century description of the temple, says that the temple is a “microcosm of the world”: “…the Temple is an eikon, an image, an epitome of the world. It is not one of many items in the world. It is the world in nuce, and the world is the temple in extenso.”

In the first account of creation (Gen 1), the whole creation is holy, declared “good” by the Creator. God’s house is the whole cosmos, encompassing both heaven and earth. After Adam and Eve’s sin, God continues to interact with humankind and the creation on familiar terms, but we can also detect a progressive limitation of God’s presence. Levenson describes this as a “contraction”: “The presence of God is not diminished but concentrated. The glory that had filled the world now fills the tabernacle and its successors, the Temples of Jerusalem.” The Jewish temple thus comes to represent the world that “was meant to be, as it was on the first Sabbath.”

5. Eden and Temple, and the Rupture of Earth from Heaven

The second account of creation, which extends through the stories of fall, curse, and primal violence (2:4-4:26), continues to develop creation-as-temple motifs, but is from the outset more narrowly focused on the relationships between God and humankind. What we might call “nature” or creation nonetheless remains the third major figure on the stage—both as garden and as the earth—throughout these stories. Here the dwelling place for God and humankind is a garden that seems to be differentiated from the rest of the world, perhaps modeled after the royal parks of the ancient near East. The garden is not just a nice piece of farmland in the midst of an untamed jungle, but a sanctuary where God and humans meet face-to-face. The human vocation in this garden is to “till” (or “work,” “serve,” in some contexts to “worship”; 2:5, 15) and “keep” (or “guard,” “watch,” “protect”; 2:15), words that are used in the Hebrew Bible in relation to the service of priests in the tabernacle and temple (the only other times these two verbs occur together are in Num 3:7-8, 8:25-26, 18:6-7, in connection with Levitical service in the sanctuary). While the vocation of tilling and keeping may sound like farming, these verbs say

13 Jon D. Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence (Princeton University Press, 1988) 86-90. In Isaiah 65:17-18, for example, “the reconstruction of the temple-city was not only a recovery of national honor, but also a renewal of the cosmos, of which the temple was a miniature. . . .YHWH is here said not to build Jerusalem, but to create it . . . just as he creates the new and the new earth.” (89-90).
15 Ibid., 297.
16 Ibid.
17 In Lawrence Sullivan’s terms, Gen 1 focuses on cosmogony and cosmology, Gen 2 on cosmology and anthropology (the human plight).
18 See Kristin M Swenson’s subtle discussion of the use of these two terms in the first four chapters of Genesis in “Care and Keeping East of Eden: Gen 4:1-16 in Light of Gen 2-3,” Interpretation (October 2006): 373-384.
more about what humans are to do for God and for the rest of creation than what they must do to provide for themselves. As the story continues, the intimacy, trust, and abundance of the garden-temple is shattered. In the expulsion narrative, Adam and Eve are driven from the garden. Genesis 3:23-24 indicates that Adam will continue the vocation of “tilling the earth,” but the task of guarding the way to the tree of life passes to the “cherubim,” who are introduced now for the first time. The fact that the cherubim feature prominently (along with gourds, open flowers, and palm trees) in the descriptions of the furnishings and decorations of the temple, guarding the holy of holies (1 Kgs 6:18-29, Ezek 41:17-25), confirms the integral connection between the temple and the garden sanctuary.19

The expulsion of humans from Eden follows a series of “curses,” directed to Eve and Adam, but with implications for “the earth” (Gen 3:16-19). As the story continues into the next generation, Cain, like his father a “tiller of the earth,” eventually loses his power to accomplish even that vocation and becomes a “fugitive and wanderer from the earth,” alienated from both God and earth (not to mention his brothers). The NRSV obscures the relentless references to the earth as the third significant player in this drama. By the end of this second creation account, human culture is being established around vengeance (Gen 4:23-24), setting in place one of the basic plot lines that will wind through the unfolding story of the rupture of earth from heaven.

6. Heaven, Earth, and Temple in Isaiah

The correlation of “heaven and earth” with the temple can be found here and there in the Psalms (78:69, 99:1-5, possibly 132:7-8), but is present most prominently in Ezekiel and third Isaiah, who write in circumstances in which the temple represents both their frustrations and their hopes. Levenson highlights Isa 56:1-7, 61:1-2 (which forms the core of Jesus’ inaugural sermon in Lk 4:16-30), and Isa 65:17-18 and 66:1-2 (which provide the foundation for the vision of a new earth and heaven in Revelation). Like Revelation 21:1-2, Isa 65:17-18 seems to skip too easily from the vision of a new heaven and earth to the renewal of Jerusalem: “For I am about the create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight.” As Levenson points out, the jump from heaven and earth to Jerusalem is not in any way a contradiction, but a simple instance of synonymous parallelism, reflecting the common homology of temple, city, and heaven and earth (see also 66:22-23).20 In Revelation, the seer simply presumes and replicates this move. Isa 66:1-2 seems to articulate, in contrast, the divine rejection of temple: “Thus says the LORD: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the LORD.” Levenson argues that this does not mean that God has no need of any temple, but that God “has already built his Temple, which is the world, ‘heaven’ and ‘earth.’ The endurance of the created order rends its earthly replica, or antitype, superfluous. This is anything but the desacralization of space. It is, instead, the infinite extension of sacred space, the elimination of the ‘profane,’ that which stands pro fano, ‘in front of the Temple.’”21 Third Isaiah’s move here does not disrupt the

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19 Lanfer, Remembering Eden, 127-157, offers an extensive discussion of Eden-as-temple imagery across the OT and other ancient Jewish literature. In the book of Jubilees (ca 2nd Cent BCE, widely known among early Christians), the expulsion narrative is replaced by an image of Adam offering sacrifices at the gates of Eden, underlining the image of Adam as priest and affirming the close association of temple and garden.
association of temple and creation, but confirms it and at the same time opens the door for later criticism of the Jerusalem temple in early Judaism and Christianity.

7. The Temple Prior to Jesus

The vision of hope associated with the temple in books such as Ezekiel and Isaiah also gave rise to criticism of the temple’s leaders when the Jerusalem temple failed to live up to its promise. Second-Temple Judaism, especially up to and including the time of Jesus, saw the rise of numerous groups who considered the temple to have been desecrated, whether by outsiders such as Antiochus Epiphanes, the Roman General Pompey, or by Israel’s own priests. The Samaritans had long seen their temple on Mount Gerizim as the true temple. Alternative temples were also built in Egypt at Elephantine and Leontopolis, the latter under the direction of Onias, an heir of the Zadokite line, who had led a group of Jews to the Nile delta in the 2nd Century BCE. The sect associated with the Psalms of Solomon (ca. 60 BCE) mounted a sustained critique of the wealth and arrogance of Israel’s priestly leaders and set themselves apart as a provisional temple, awaiting the messianic cleansing of the temple. The Qumran community, which was essentially an embodied protest against the leadership of the Jerusalem temple, saw itself as “an eternal planting” (Eden renewed) and “temple,” the sacred space from which the renewed creation would break forth (1QS 8). Most significant among these protest movements for our understanding of Jesus’ relationship to the temple is the ministry of John the Baptist, a “dissident” who decried the corruption of the order associated with Jerusalem and the temple, and proclaimed and administered initiation into the new order of God’s empire. Each of these groups considered the current temple defiled, perhaps beyond redemption. Each of these groups saw themselves in some way as undergoing “tribulation” associated with the end of this world and the dawning of the next, identified themselves as “the poor” (Israel’s true remnant), and carried on certain temple functions apart from the establishment in Jerusalem. Jesus’ ministry begins within this framework. His proclamation of the coming of God’s rule establishes his continuity with John’s counter-temple movement.

8. Jesus the Temple

The fact that all four canonical Gospels report Jesus’ cleansing of the temple and his prophetic declaration of its destruction highlights the importance of this event in the story of Jesus. John highlights this event by moving it up near the front of the fourth Gospel (2:13-22) in conjunction with a clear assertion that Jesus’ body, raised up again after three days, will replace the destroyed temple. John thereby articulates openly at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry what the other evangelists implicitly affirm: that Jesus does not bring an end to Israel’s temple, but its transformation into an eschatological key. Jesus sees himself, according to the Gospels, as the living extension of the temple into God’s coming rule. Jesus’ comment during the cleansing of the temple provides a key to understanding what he may have intended by this parabolic sign-action. The reference to a den of robbers recalls Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11, both of which are part of

22 The desecration of the temple by Antiochus prompted the visions of Daniel that subsequently fueled much messianic hope among Jews prior to and during the time of Jesus. Daniel carries on the prophetic image of the messiah as the builder of an eschatological temple and in turn provides many of the images that Jesus draws upon in the Gospels to articulate his self-understanding.

23 See the recent discussions of these movements in Perrin, Jesus the Temple, 17-45, and Timothy Wardle, The Jerusalem Temple and Early Christian Identity, WUNT 2:291 (Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 98-165.

24 Perrin, Jesus the Temple, 37.

25 Ibid, 44.
scathing prophetic denunciations of Israel’s corrupt leaders. Isa 56 looks forward to the gathering and restoration of Israel, as well as the time when the nations would also be gathered. Jer 7 is God’s call to repentance to those idolatrous ones who oppress aliens, orphans, and widows, and steal, murder, commit adultery (all common accusations against the priestly class) and then come back to the temple to declare “We are safe!” When repentance is not forthcoming, Jeremiah proclaims the imminent doom of the temple. Together, these passages frame Jesus’ words and actions as a denunciation of the temple leaders, with clear implications for the building that is the temple, not per se an attack on the institution of the temple itself.

Many Christians today understand the cleansing and destruction of the temple as a sign of God’s judgment against Israel as a whole and the temple itself in particular, leading to the conclusion that the temple is a religious, historical relic. Jesus is not, however, signaling the end of the temple so much as the transfer to him of the vision and hope associated with it from the beginning of the Hebrew Bible.

Jesus’ fulfillment of the temple ideals is also expressed in nearly every aspect of his ministry. As a concise embodiment of the divine ideals for the whole creation, the temple was not merely a place of worship and sacrifice, but the place to which people turned when in need, whether for food, forgiveness of debt and sin, deliverance from demonic powers, healing, or a vision of hope and assurance for where the world was heading in God’s mercy. All of these, of course, are prominent features of Jesus’ ministry. Even before he arrives in Jerusalem, cleanses and occupies the temple, departs from it and prophesies its destruction, he is fulfilling its functions. He is Lord of the Sabbath and the true servant and guardian of the Temple. His actions are public signs of God’s power, fundamentally reordering relationships and time, drawing together heaven and earth, the new temple, which is now reconstituted in his crucified and resurrected body.

9. The Temple, the “Body of Christ,” and God’s Dwelling Place

The Gospels are usually dated in relation to the Roman destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70CE, largely on the supposition that the prophecies of this event attributed to Jesus may be prophecies after the fact. Already in the letters of Paul, in the mid-fifties, however, we find clear statements that the Apostle and presumably his communities saw themselves as living embodiments of the eschatological temple. Apparently the Christian self-identification as the eschatological temple took place long before and independently of the destruction of the physical temple in Jerusalem. In 1 Corinthians, Paul identifies the Corinthian Christians as God’s field, God’s building (1 Cor 3:9), and finally as God’s temple (3:16-17). Both field and building carry temple associations, but the final reference underlines what Paul has been leading up to: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.” The imagery throughout this context, especially the references to foundations, gold, silver, precious stones, wood (and hay and straw) (3:12), may have reminded the audience of temple decorations—these are materials used to build Solomon’s temple (cf. 1 Chron 29:2). The clearest background text, however, is Malachi 3-4, in which God comes to the temple like a refiner’s fire. Here, then, the Corinthians are not merely like a temple, they are the purified eschatological temple. Paul comes back to the image of the Corinthians as the temple of the Holy Spirit in 2

26 Ibid., 83-88.
27 Matthew especially is fond of images in which Jesus crosses the boundaries of and joins together “heaven and earth.”
28 Perrin, Jesus the Temple, 68
Cor 6:16 and 1 Cor 6:19. This last text is usually understood, wrongly, as a reference to the presence of the Spirit within our individual bodies (therefore, do not drink, dance, or smoke!). In Jewish thought the Spirit is an expression of God’s presence, power, and glory, at work especially in the temple and the assembly. It is unlikely that Paul here would adopt the individualistic, personal understanding of the body that modern, western readers usually presume. Moreover, given the prominence of the Spirit in Paul’s proclamation, we should not be surprised by the fact that his writings are also littered with cultic and temple imagery.

Paul’s discussion of the Spirit in Romans 8 is particularly important given that it frames one of the few texts in which the apostle makes clear reference to the fate of creation (8:18-23). Paul affirms first that “Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death” (8:2). They are not “in the flesh,” nor even in the presence of the Spirit, but in the Spirit itself, which dwells in them (8:9), as God’s Spirit dwelt in the temple. Their suffering, as well as Paul’s, which he describes in language (“groans,” “suffer agony”) that recalls Jewish descriptions of the tribulations leading up to the coming of the messiah, is also associated with “glory.” God’s glory, which resides in the temple/creation, is now about to be revealed to them. Paul then turns, abruptly, it seems, but not surprisingly given the temple homology, to creation “waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.” He goes on to align the groaning and redemption of creation with that of the Christian community. This alignment is not arbitrary, but a reflection of the place of creation alongside humankind in the original ordering of heaven and earth, the cosmic temple. It would be strange for Paul not to presume that the despair and redemption of creation corresponds to that of the people who have for so long lived, like creation, in futility (Rom 7), but now possess and live within the Spirit of God.

One could go on and on. 1 Peter 2:4-9, Hebrews 8, and Ephesians 2:18-22 all describe the church in imagery of the temple. Ephesians is perhaps the clearest: “...you are fellow citizens and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” The New Testament is thus not only the story of Jesus, but the story of Jesus and his community as temple, the dwelling place of God.

10. So...there is a story that runs from the beginning to the end of the Christian canon. This story focuses on the fracturing of creation—God’s temple and dwelling place—including the alienation of humankind and the suffering of both creation and humans. The creation/temple theme frames the Hebrew canon. This same story comes to fruition in Christian scriptures in Jesus’ embodiment of the temple/creation ideals and in the image of God’s people as the eschatological temple—the new creation. This new creation—the new heaven and new earth, and the heavenly city and garden—includes in redemption the whole of creation along with humankind. This canonical story is not so much anthropocentric as it is temple-centric, and thus “creation-centric. In this story, human redemption is a central element, but only one element in God’s redemption of the whole of heaven and earth.