

A New Creation Narrative: The Gospel of John

The Gospel of John is unique literature. Exegetes don't quite know how to categorize it, whether it's an evangelistic tract, a study in apologetics, or a Christological treatise. Or something else altogether. As the exact nature of this work seems to puzzle the Church's experts, I sense a freedom to offer my own understanding of John's Gospel. That's what now follows.

I think that the entire Gospel of John reprises Genesis 1-3. [It's probably even more, though, it's another Book of Genesis; see below.] The Gospel of John is a Creation narrative, telling how the new creation, this new age we inhabit, came into existence. It follows the pattern Moses used writing the original creation narrative so that we don't miss that what Jesus accomplished is an entirely new creation. Consider the following:

John 1:1 begins with *en arche*, exactly how Genesis 1:1 begins in the Septuagint. Also in John 1:1 is the word *logos*; Genesis 1 repeatedly says, "And God said. . . ." So the opening of John's Gospel seems to be another creational beginning. The appearance of words such as "day," "light," and "night" (and others) point to Genesis 1. In the original creation, God supernaturally created in 7 steps, climaxing in the 8th step, creating humanity. In the Gospel of John Jesus performed 7 supernatural events, which expositors like to call "signs." They are *creational* miracles. And the Gospel concludes with the passion narrative, which is really another (an 8th) supernatural event; and it too is creational, for it is what gives rise to a new humanity. The original creation of man was out of non-life (out of dirt, soil), as is the new life (out of death).

And John's Gospel ends with Jesus in the "garden," clearly reprising the Garden of Eden. In John 18-20 we read about "garden," "thorns," "midst" or "middle" (Greek, *meso*), "water," and "finished." These words are all in those first chapters of Genesis. And in John, "He breathed on them," which is exactly what God did in Genesis 2:7. The cross is referred to (elsewhere) as a "tree." So the cross, in the middle of two other crosses, is like the "Tree of Life" in the "middle" of the Garden.

There's more. The initial creation involved the Persons of the Godhead ("the Spirit hovered over the waters," and "Let us make man in our image"). Likewise, in the Gospel of John, repeatedly Jesus acknowledged that all He said and did was the work of the Godhead. In Genesis 2, God interacted with His human. He gave the man a commission and a command; there's work to be done and something to be obeyed. The man is there to serve God, to obey God, to represent God to the physical world. The Upper Room Discourse serves this very purpose in John's Gospel. It reprises God speaking personally to Adam. It includes a commission, a command, and something to be obeyed. And this: In the Garden, failure occurred. That was followed by the promise of a restoration. The same occurred at the end of the Gospel of John: Peter failed but was subsequently restored.

This all means that John's Gospel presents Jesus' ministry and His passion and exaltation as initiating a totally new creation. The Synoptic Gospels reveal Jesus as Messianic King offering the promised Kingdom of God. But that's not in John's Gospel. Instead, John sees what Jesus did as creating a whole new age, a new era, a new creation. By believing in Jesus, we don't merely have forgiveness of sins, but entrance into a totally, radically new creation. (Yes, Paul states this in his letters, but I'm arguing that it's there dramatically in the Gospel of John.) It's an era that will be fulfilled in the future, but it exists nevertheless in the present, a time when the two eras, the old and the new, overlap.

Something else. Easily missed in the original creation narrative is a conflict between good and evil. There's "darkness." There's testing. There's a wicked serpent mouthing lies. And this theme blossoms in the Gospel of John. Consider the metaphor Jesus uses in Chapter 15 of the Vine and the Branches.

The context of the vine metaphor is Isaiah Chapter 5. The vine is Jesus, the true Israel. And the branches are the Jewish people, the people of Israel. Those who "remain" in Him are the Jews who believe in Jesus, who are His disciples, and they bear fruit that glorifies God. Those who don't "remain" in Him are the unbelieving Jews. They reject Jesus and refuse to be His disciples. Jesus referred to those Jews who reject Him as essentially "non-Jews" (they don't follow Moses, they don't have Abraham as their father, but their father is the devil). All thru the Gospel of John, Jesus is in conflict with the Jews who refuse to believe in Him. They are the ones who don't "remain" in Him,

and so are “thrown into the fire and burned.” The context of the Gospel of John is God’s conflict with His chosen people, His adopted son, the nation of Israel. It’s a cosmic conflict, good versus evil.

The Gospel of John has a sub-theme running all thru it of good versus evil. And this is in absolutist terms. Those who believe in Jesus (“remain” in Jesus) are on the side of good. Everyone else—*everyone* else—is, by default, on the side of evil.

So the Apostle John, in his New Testament writings, gave us a sacred trilogy: (1) The Gospel of John is a (new) creation account. (2) 1 John is a treatise that explains how we who inhabit this new creation are to live while the new, spiritual creation is superimposed on the old, evil creation. And (3), the Book of Revelation describes how the old creation ends in judgment and the new creation succeeds it to the glory of Christ. In other words, John describes the beginnings, the essence of our being and doing in the long middle era, and the conclusion to this new existence in the Son.

Let’s understand something fundamental: The passion of Christ didn’t merely deal with the Fall and the curse of Genesis 3. No. The passion, the resurrection and ascension are all a totally new beginning, a *better* beginning, albeit one that is patterned after the old. It’s a more spiritual beginning, one that exalts the Son. The old creation is condemned and will be annihilated. Judgment of the old however has been delayed so that by grace many from all over the world have an opportunity to come into the new during the currently overlapping eras.

What has been preserved from the old are the prophecies and promises. The man and woman were driven from the Garden so that they are prevented from eating of the Tree of Life. In a sense, Jesus *is* that “tree.” He came to give us Life. New life. God’s kind of life, transcendent, supernatural life.

The Upper Room Discourse chapters reveal the fundamentals that new creatures must know to live in the new creation. This is deep. We’re right here at the core of the purpose of the New Creation. Fellowship (*koinonia*) thru new life is what justification calls us into. It’s God sharing His life with us thru the Spirit. It’s the original Creation blessing that couldn’t be granted because of disobedience, but now, thanks to the Person and work of the Son, in this new creation that blessing is fulfilled.

To be “born again” (in theology, “regenerated”) is to have Life, new life. And Life always expresses itself. And we—we!—have the responsibility of expressing that life. It’s by our willful effort. The one who has new life lovingly obeys Jesus. It is possible for people to refuse to obey Jesus’ commands and teachings. A refusal to obey Him means such persons have no life; they’re not in union with Christ; the Spirit doesn’t dwell in them; they’re not regenerated. But what commands in particular are to be obeyed? **“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you”** (15:12,17). The essential characteristic of a follower of Jesus is being a person who loves selflessly, even sacrificially.

The great purpose of creation is for God’s glory to be revealed. The Psalmists repeatedly declare the glory of God as Creator. Creation expresses God’s glory. (God’s acts in history do that too.) In the Gospel of John, “glory” and “glorify” occur more than two dozen times referring to Jesus or His works. (In 13:31-32, it occurs 5 times in two verses!) Jesus isn’t merely deity; He is a new, greatly expanded revelation of God. God’s glory in Jesus transcends all that came before. He reveals or expresses the glory of God that exceeds the revelation of God in Torah.

The glory of God is not some resplendent radiance or effulgence (although probably that’s part of it). It’s God’s goodness. It’s His love, His justice and truth and selflessness and humility. It’s His perfect character. So Jesus tells us, **“This is to my Father’s glory, that you [by bearing much fruit] show yourselves to be my disciples”** (15:8b). This verse is critically important, it’s fundamental to the new creation Jesus brought into existence: Discipleship in that era was commitment to learning from the Master so as to loyally reproduce exactly the life of the Master. God is glorified (or honored) when we deliberately, consciously imitate the Son. That means, be as the Son is and do as the Son does (or did). Our lives are to reflect the Son as a mirror reflects a person.

Glory must be revealed. God wants the lovely character of the Son to be seen in His new human creatures, the creatures of the new creation. In other words, reproduction: Jesus makes clones of Himself, and the clones make

clones, and etc. The new creation glorifies God because it is populated by those who bear the character and do the work of the beloved Son. We're to glorify the Father as the Son did.

In Chapter 17, Jesus says to the Father, "I have glorified you on earth. . .now glorify me." His initial creative works glorified God, but the greatest glory was imminent: the climactic creation act. It's a shameful, painful death followed by resurrection and return to the Father. His humble obedience to God, His trust in God, His love for God, His commitment to God's will, and His selfless, loving willingness to suffer horribly for the sake of others revealed the otherwise unknowable glory of God and the glory of Jesus Himself. And His ascension to the Father was that greatest creative act of all, for by it He created a new humanity, new life for creatures whose desire is to be like Him, and thus to glorify God.

Jesus thus demands of us a radical commitment to Himself. That's how we take the side of good in a world that's dedicated to evil and is under judgment. The alternative to such a commitment to Jesus is [*gasp!*] a commitment to evil. (Everything John writes, following Deuteronomy 30:15ff, is absolutist, strictly binary, good or evil, truth or lies, life or death, blessing or cursing.)

Look at how John concludes his Gospel. Peter represents all who believe in Jesus, all thru this entire age. We are to suffer just as Jesus did, even to the point of death, because our suffering results in our exaltation, and it glorifies God (21:19). As Jesus is Isaiah's Suffering Servant, we too are God's servants, called also to suffer. We are to follow Jesus regardless what persecution or loss or other consequences result. This kind of commitment to Jesus, a life-time, full-time, radical commitment, is expected of us *because of who Jesus is*, the infinitely glorious, exalted Son of the Living God.

Whereas the original creation narrative by Moses ended in disaster, with alienation, sorrow, curse, death and banishment of the humans from God's presence, this new creation narrative by John ends with humans in the loving presence of God, indwelt by God, empowered by God, and ultimately glorified by God. Jesus command to "Follow Me" (21:19) means God has so imbued us with love and blessing and new life (Peter later wrote that we are "partakers of the divine nature") that we can now glorify God as we pursue this new, exalted life in the here-and-now.

The Gospel of John presents the ineffable glory of the Son *so that* we, participants in this new creation, participants in the very life of God, love Him and delight in wanting to be like Him. And so we glorify the Father. It's *why* we have new life. It's why there's a new creation.

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There's yet another way to see the Gospel John, *viz*, as a reprise of the entire Book of Genesis for this new era. Consider that Genesis deals mainly (that is, after the initial chapters, the so-called "Prologue") with God's engagement with the Patriarchs. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and then the 12 sons of Jacob, served as the foundation of the Nation of Israel. In the same way, Jesus engaged with the initial disciples, the Twelve, bringing them to faith just as God did with the Patriarchs in Genesis. Most of the Gospel of John narrates Jesus' teaching and interacting with the Twelve, who would then go on to be the foundation of the Church. The Church is built upon the written teachings of those initial disciples, the Apostles. At the end of the Book of Revelation, the twelve sons of Jacob reappear as the foundation of the New Jerusalem, and the Twelve apostles are the gates to that new, holy city. John's Gospel thus parallels Genesis. A major difference though is that the focus in Genesis is on covenant, whereas in John, there's no covenant; there's something vastly better: the bestowal of the Spirit.

And the treatise that we call 1 John is, in a sense, parallel to or a reprise of the Book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy was written to the generation after that which was delivered from Egypt and for all the generations of Israelites who would come after them. And similarly, 1 John was written for the followers of Jesus who would come to faith thru, and so join in fellowship with, the Apostles. And this: Just as the Old Testament ends with the eschatological writings of the Prophets, the New Testament ends with the Book of Revelation, which deals with God's program for the future. God's Word is skillfully and beautifully ordered. Everything that God does is lovely, as He is lovely.