

## **The Tree of Life and Ethics: Moral Vision in John’s Apocalypse**

Larry L. Lichtenwalter  
Middle East University

The descent of the New Jerusalem is the last prophetic event of John’s Apocalypse (21:1-22:5). The arrival of the holy city gives the fulfillment of all hopes, the answer to all the longings of the world, the quenching of all thirsts (21:6). With its coming, seven of mankind’s enemies are forever removed: the sea,<sup>1</sup> death, mourning, crying, pain, night, and the curse (21:1, 4, 25; 22:3, 4). Everything is made new (21:5). The former painful things that human beings have experienced on earth are forever gone (21:4).

The deeply personal and existential nature of this eschatological moment is capsuled in the imagery of God wiping away all tears (every tear) from every citizen-saint of this city of light and life.<sup>2</sup> The context suggests that God “accounts for the wounds of the past.”<sup>3</sup> This healing is both individual and communal. Here the human family—and all the families of the earth—finds both blessing and final reconciliation: for “the

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<sup>1</sup> In Scripture “sea” often has a negative connotation, representing void, darkness and chaos (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 18:12; Job 26:10; Prov. 8:27), death and “non-being” (Eze. 26:19-21; Jonah 2:6; Hab. 3:10), and evil (Isa. 27:1; 51:9, 10). Revelation also associates the “sea” with Babylon (16:12), and to the origins of beast (13:1; cf. Dan. 7:3). In Scripture “sea” becomes the metaphoric place of disturbed and stormy social and political conditions out of which the enemies of God’s people commonly arise.

<sup>2</sup> 21:4; cf. 7:17; Isa. 25:8; 35:10; 65:19.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse Through Hebrew Eyes* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 2002), 194.

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leaves of the tree of life heal the breaches of the nations” (22:2).<sup>4</sup> All national and linguistic barriers and alienation are removed. Humanity is now united in one family, at peace with one another and God (cf. 21:3, 7). The redeemed not only see God’s face, they reflect His character. His name is in their forehead.<sup>5</sup> They “share his holiness and righteousness” (22:4; cf. 1 Jn 3:2).<sup>6</sup>

No greater statement of the end of one kind of moral existence and the beginning of a new one can be found in Scripture.<sup>7</sup> The vision casts an enduring and compelling moral horizon.

This “moral horizon” provides a conceptual canvass on which Revelation’s tacit and explicit moral themes and values are painted. It provides lenses through which we are invited to interpret moral reality and frame ethical discussion. It unfolds a moral/spiritual metaphysical context in which Revelation frames human existence, *being*, action, and moral responsibility.

The foregoing imagery of God’s gracious consummation of all things draws us into a moral context—a worldview. It tells us who the players are. It tells us what condition human life has been in and is in. It tells us where we are and where we are going. It provides a worldview against

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<sup>4</sup> Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, Second Edition (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 605.

<sup>5</sup> In the book’s apocalyptic vision of the final conflict between good and evil, everyone will be stamped on their forehead with one of two names: the name of God (and the Lamb) or the name of the beast (14:1; 13:17). In antiquity a name represented character, being. With respect to “name,” Revelation’s moral vision portrays two types of character: likeness to God, personified in Christ, the Lamb; and likeness to Satan, personified in the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. These opposing characters are symbolized by the seal or name of God as written on the foreheads of the saints (3:12; 7:3; 14:1; 22:4) and the mark, name or number of the beast as written on the forehead and hand of its followers (13:16-17; 14:9; 16:2; 20:4). Thus, the primary meaning of the seal of God and the mark of the beast (consisting of the names of God and the beast respectively) stamped upon every individual is that “everyone is conformed to either the image of God or the image of Satan. Everyone bears the character of the divine or the demonic” (Beatrice S. Neall, *The Concept of Character In The Apocalypse With Implications For Character Education* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, Inc, 1983), 150). It is a matter of being, moral and spiritual orientation. It reveals Revelation’s interest in the mind and heart—character (2:23).

<sup>6</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22* (ed. David A. Hubbard Bruce M. Metzger, and Glenn W. Barker; vol. 52C; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 1188.

<sup>7</sup> Kendell H. Easley, *Revelation* (ed. Max Anders; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 395.

which the book's various moral themes and values are to be considered. It offers an example of Revelation's many tacit orienting "horizon generating" (worldview) contexts, and helps us to maintain the book's own agenda in our query after its ethics.<sup>8</sup>

This study explores the final vision's New Jerusalem's "tree of life" motif together with its "insider and outsider" imagery in order to unfold implications for the book's ethical trajectory and tacit moral values.

### **Back to the Future**

The vision of the New Jerusalem concludes with a few details from the center of the city: throne, river, and tree (22:1-5). The nearer one gets to the center of the city, the less like a city it seems and the more like a garden—something surpassing the original Garden of Eden. The allusion to Eden in the original creation is intentional.<sup>9</sup> Revelation transplants the rich soil of the original Garden envisioning a cosmopolis of paradise, not a garden per se, but a city in which the tree of life stands.<sup>10</sup> Although the Genesis narrative takes up only two early chapters of Scripture (Gen. 2-3),

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<sup>8</sup> Missing Revelation's larger moral horizon can bring disjointedness to ethical discovery. One can not only overlook subtle moral nuances, but also assign a dominating (thus distorting) weight to one moral theme over all others. For example, one will assert that Revelation is above all else a "political resistance document" (as per Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1996), 170), while another will point to themes of "justice and judgment" and its "advocacy stance" (as per Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 9; Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. "The Words of Prophecy: Reading the Apocalypse Theologically," in *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (ed. Steve Moyise, 2001), 19. Issues of liberation, gender, power, and violence likewise are often highlighted as ethically paradigmatic. No doubt, they represent significant moral themes found in Revelation, which demand attention. But, are they foundational moral themes, which can integrate its varied moral motifs? Can they facilitate ethical reflection across the macro, mezzo, and micro spectrum? Can they provide an adequate worldview? Or a sufficient theological/moral paradigm under which other of Revelation's moral themes could naturally fall and find meaning? Is "justice and judgment" what Revelation is all about? Is political resistance its ethic? Or power? Or violence? Or liberation? Or does what Revelation is really all about include these kinds of ethical issues within its larger moral vision?

<sup>9</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 171, 172.

<sup>10</sup> William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 228.

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the notion of a garden-like paradise, lost due to the Fall, exerts a strong influence in biblical imagery.<sup>11</sup> The portrait of mankind's first home in the Garden of Eden is powerful. The paradise home is paradigmatic as is its ethos and ethic.<sup>12</sup>

Just as there was a tree of life in the Garden (Gen. 2:9), so also a tree of life stands in the New Jerusalem (22:2). But whereas in Genesis 3:23-24 human beings are exiled from the Garden and the way to the tree is guarded by cherubim, in Revelation's vision of redemptive-recreation, those who are cleansed from sin "will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates," which are always open (21:25). A surface read might lead to the conclusion that Revelation is pointing merely to regained access to the tree of life and resultant eternal life. However, the metaphors of the tree of life and entering the city emerge as an icon not only of blessing, but also of moral orientation and choice. This is a city unlike all cities we have known. It will be without sin—righteousness pervades, dwells (2 Pet. 3:13).<sup>13</sup> The tree in the garden-like city is the archetype of blessing, but also blessing's consummation or *telos*.<sup>14</sup> Yet such blessing comes with intentional moral nuance and ethical implications.

While Genesis holds up the ephemeral state of Eden for a brief glimpse and then moves its readers back into their real world (of shame, suffering, alienation, domination and death), Revelation holds up the passing state of the real world (of sea, death, mourning, crying, pain, night, curse, violence, oppression, shame, and alienation from God) and moves its audience back into the shalom of an eternal Eden. Thus, Scripture ends as it begins. The sweep of salvation history and the end of all things (eschatology) is patterned after the beginning (protology)—a new creation, i.e., redemptive

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 133-228, 388-394; Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology*, 171-175. Easley notes how the garden imagery still exerts a strong influence on the world's major religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. See Easley, *Revelation*, 413.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible*, 219-228.

<sup>13</sup> Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology*, 173.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible*, 226.

re-creation.<sup>15</sup> Humanity is again in paradise enjoying full fellowship with God, at peace with self and others.

Revelation thus posits human moral destiny “back to the future” in the garden. The tree of life, and with it now, the holy city, is at once critical and instructive. It presents a paradox of hope and judgment. It provides a moral baseline that eschews moralism.<sup>16</sup> The mode of moral discourse here is primarily that of moral vision—an ethical horizon (cf. 2 Pet. 3:11-13).

### The Tree and Ethics

The last of Revelation’s seven beatitudes highlights the integral ethical role that both the tree of life and the city of life play in Revelation’s moral vision:<sup>17</sup> “*Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying*” (22:14, 15). Here, moral “right” of access and “exclusion” are contrasted. Revelation’s geo-ethical landscape is outlined. The geography includes not only a sphere of reality—in time, space, and essence—but also the human heart (22:11; cf. 2:23). It underscores and nuances the book’s “ultimate ethical aim.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Warren Austin Gage, *The Gospel of Genesis: Studies in Protology and Eschatology* (Winona Lake, IN: Carpenter Books, 1984).

<sup>16</sup> Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible*, 219.

<sup>17</sup> Each of Revelation’s seven blessings is “linked to the ethical purpose of the book, with some exhorting the saints to persevere and live exemplary lives in light of these prophecies (1:3; 16:15; 22:7) and others promising them future rewards for doing so (14:13; 19:9; 20:6; 22:14),” Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (ed. Moisés Silva; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 57; Virgil P. Cruz. “The Beatitudes of the Apocalypse: Eschatology and Ethics,” in *Perspectives On Christology: Essays in Honor of Paul K. Jewett* (ed. Marguerite Schuster and Richard Muller; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> “The book contains information for the mind, but it is information that entails ethical obligation. That the book has an ultimate ethical aim is borne out by the conclusion in 22:6–21, which is an intentional expansion of the prologue in 1:1–3, and especially by the ethical emphasis of 1:3 (cf. the phraseological parallels in 22:7b, 9b, 10b, 18a, 19a),” G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 184.

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Revelation's imagery of "the right to the tree of life" corresponds rather closely, though inversely, to Gen. 3:22-24, which narrates the expulsion of humanity from Eden because of the possibility that people might eat from the tree of life and so live forever.<sup>19</sup> Here, the ban that barred people from access to the tree of life and the immortality that it symbolizes has been forever lifted. This allusion to Genesis reminds us that while life is a divine gift it is ever tied to moral *being* and *doing*—to ethics.<sup>20</sup> While "life is an act of utter graciousness," the tree of life and the tree of knowledge disclose both the character of God's graciousness and the moral quality of the life, which His grace envisions.<sup>21</sup> There is no cheap grace here. No life free of moral orientation or responsibility is envisioned.<sup>22</sup>

In the first paradise the tree of life had a two-fold significance. First, the tree of life had the power of giving perpetual, physical earthly life to human beings, even after they sinned, so that it was necessary to bar the way to the tree of life after the fall (Gen. 3:22).<sup>23</sup>

Secondly, the tree conveyed "a certain sacramental character."<sup>24</sup> It was the tree *of life*. More importantly though is that human life is more than mere perpetual physical existence. Even though human life was earthly,

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<sup>19</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1221.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26* (vol. 1A: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 256, 257. As Matthews notes, "Life is a divine gift, but it is tied to the stipulation of obedience. Moses offered the same choice of life or death, obedience or disobedience, to Israel on the shores of Moab (Deut. 30:11-20). Obedience meant life and prosperity in Canaan, but defiance guaranteed expulsion" (ibid.).

<sup>21</sup> 1:4; 22:21; cf. Eph. 2:1-10; 2 Pet. 3:13.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 45.

<sup>23</sup> "In order to possess an endless existence, man must continue to partake of the tree of life. Deprived of this, his vitality would gradually diminish until life should become extinct. It was Satan's plan that Adam and Eve should by disobedience incur God's displeasure; and then, if they failed to obtain forgiveness, he hoped that they would eat of the tree of life, and thus perpetuate an existence of sin and misery. But after man's fall, holy angels were immediately commissioned to guard the tree of life. Around these angels flashed beams of light having the appearance of a glittering sword. None of the family of Adam were permitted to pass the barrier to partake of the life-giving fruit; hence there is not an immortal sinner" (Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1890/2002), 60.

<sup>24</sup> Hermon Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1969), 711.

nevertheless life for human beings implied favor and fellowship with God as well as moral correspondence with His character and the moral meaning invested in created intelligent life. After all, man and woman were made in God's image (Gen. 1:26, 27). Together they were appointed stewards of God's good creation (Gen. 1:28). The tree of life was a sign and seal of God's favor, an emblem of God's covenant with human beings.<sup>25</sup>

The moral vision, which the tree of life casts, was not mere physical existence, but life in the true sense. It assumed moral *being* and *action* "true-to-life."

### **Ethics True to Life—the Tree of Life**

Within Proverbs' moral vision the metaphor of the tree of life is used to refer to anything that enhances and celebrates authentic life in relation to the Creator Lord God.<sup>26</sup> It is related to righteousness (Prov. 11:30), gentle words (Prov. 15:4), and wisdom (Prov. 3:18). This includes what Proverbs elsewhere characterizes as "Lady Wisdom"<sup>27</sup> who metaphorically *IS* "a tree of life to those who embrace her, and those who hold her tightly live happy lives" (Prov. 3:18). The imagery of embracing (*hazaq*) her and holding her tightly (*tamak*) underscore the personal moral and spiritual quality of identifying with wisdom, and thus experiencing genuine happiness (authentic life). It is as if one eats from the tree of life because such wisdom imparts *REAL* life: is in keeping with life's essence, purpose, meaning and vitality. This is what is sought—not just life itself, but life free of shame and guilt, life full of honor and innocence, life which finds fullness of joy in fearing God and intimacy with Him. It is life as it was meant to be—in God's image, reflecting God's character and being.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 45.

<sup>27</sup> Tremper Longman, *How To Read Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 30-45; William P. Brown, *Character In Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 22, 23; Ernest C. Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Psalms & Wisdom Literature* (vol. 3; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 107-109. Proverb's Lady Wisdom is associated with righteousness (Prov. 8:6), truth (Prov. 8:7), wholesome behavior (Prov. 8:8) and good judgment (Prov. 8:12). She is associated with common sense, success, insight and strength (Prov. 8:14-15). She stays as far away as possible from deception, evil, pride, and arrogance (Prov. 8:7-8, 13). Woman wisdom is closely entwined with moral spiritual behavior.

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This correspondence between ethics and authentic life is further expressed in Proverbs where “personified wisdom” declares “*For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD. But he who sins against me injures himself; All those who hate me love death*” (Prov. 8:35, 36). Here, finding life is linked to the self (*nephesh*).<sup>28</sup> What one does with moral spiritual truth goes beyond mere physical existence. It touches one’s being, one’s inner private world of character, values, thought, intent, affections, heart. This is the ethical landscape where life is either: found, sinned against, or hated. True life and favor with God are contrasted with injuring self and loving death. True life is experienced only when one lives “true to life.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the tree of life—in Eden, wisdom literature, and John’s Apocalypse—reflects a morality “true to life” as God has ordained human beings created in His image.

#### **Tree of Life, Tree of Knowledge**

The moral boundaries of living “true to life” are nuanced in the tension created by the presence of the first garden’s tree of knowledge (Gen. 2:9) and the restored garden’s outsiders (22:15; cf. 21:8, 27). Ethics and the freedom, which ethics assumes require moral boundaries. No true moral freedom exists without definable limits. No true morality exists without moral choice. The absence of moral boundaries creates *non-order*, and *non-order* is the end of authentic human life.<sup>30</sup> If one could only do one thing, e.g., eat from all the trees, then that would not be true freedom. Freedom must include genuine choice: choice that matters.<sup>31</sup> If God had left the tree of knowledge out of the garden, then there would have been no

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<sup>28</sup> “vv. 35–36 is a two-proverb collection with elements of both parallelism and inclusio in which the proverbs together form an ethical merismus. ‘Finds me’ (v. 35) is paralleled by ‘fails to find me’ in v. 36, and ‘life’ in v. 35 is answered by ‘death’ in v. 36. Obtaining the Lord’s favor contrasts embracing death” (Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 110). See also, Murphy’s discussion of “The Personification of Wisdom” in Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Dallas, TX: Word Incorporated, 1998), 144-148.

<sup>29</sup> Numerous other proverbs link the moral quality of life chosen and lived with corresponding positive or negative affects of the quality of moral/spiritual life actually experienced (Prov. 1:19; 3:2, 16, 22; 4:22, 23; 10:11; 12:10, 28; 14:30; 21:21; 29:24).

<sup>30</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 63.

<sup>31</sup> Eugene F. Roop, *Genesis* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 41.



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disobedience, but also there would have been no freedom to choose and no moral capacity either.

Human beings live within moral spiritual boundaries, and at the same time they possess the power to cross those boundaries.<sup>32</sup> The tension created by those boundaries highlights the moral quality of life and the call to exercise personal moral freedom in order to purposefully stay within moral limits. This is the true freedom God offers intelligent beings that He has created.

Interestingly, nothing is really explained about the tree of knowledge (and it is found nowhere else in Scripture).<sup>33</sup> The Genesis narrative in fact has no interest in the character of the tree per se. What counts is the fact of prohibition, limitation, and boundary—the authority of the One who speaks and the unqualified expectation of obedience.<sup>34</sup> It's a powerful reminder that the control of one's life and the lives of others belongs outside one's self. Human beings may be free to choose, but they cannot choose the consequences of their moral choices. Their frame of reference for moral right and wrong will ever be external. It will ever be in God's hands and the intended morality that is consistent with the life He has created and graciously given.<sup>35</sup> While the issue of the tree of knowledge (and thus the tree of life) was spiritual in that it related ultimately to God, it was also moral in that it encompassed human freedom and moral choice that mattered. It also encompassed the moral issues of self in relation to God (another moral being) and, ultimately, to other human beings (Gen. 2:9, 16, 17; 3:1-4:10).

“Expulsion” from the garden and the tree of life points to the consequences of choosing a morality inconsistent with the meaning of life (Gen. 3:22-24). Painful spiritual and moral consequences immediately followed man's crossing life's intrinsic boundaries (Gen. 3:1-4:10). It would have been calamitous had human beings continued to live in a

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>33</sup> 2:9, 17; 3:1-17.

<sup>34</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 46.

<sup>35</sup> Larry L. Lichtenwalter, “Are There Moral Absolutes?,” in *Always Prepared: Answers to Questions About Our Faith* (ed. Humberto M. Rasi and Nancy J. Vyhmeister; Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2012), 131-132; John Wesley Taylor, “Is Truth of Consequence?,” *Perspective Digest*, 14, no. 3 (2009): 9; Paul Tillich, “What Is Truth,” *Canadian Journal of Theology*, 1, no. 2 (1955): 117-122.

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perfect environment as sinful people, especially eating of the tree of life and living on indefinitely in such a condition. “In a distorted and disrupted world, interminable life would be unbearable. In expelling humanity from the garden we experience a God who withholds, but who also provides a tolerable life.”<sup>36</sup>

It is this distorted and disrupted world that the Apocalypse so graphically portrays—a world of incredible sorrow, violence, oppression, struggle for power and coercion, natural and human calamity, war, suffering, crying, and death. Here is the real world of real people whose heartfelt turmoil either compels them to cry out “How much longer will things go on like this?” (6:10) or to yearn for death which seems never to come (9:6). Such strong imagery of human moral dysfunction, personal and social turmoil, and existential angst imply the existence of a morality true to the meaning and well being of human life. Withholding the tree of life affirms life’s boundaries, as does the promise of extending it anew to those who choose such life by washing their robes in the Lamb’s blood (22:14).

The right to enter the city through its gates, and the description of people “excluded” from the city, both expands and concretizes the moral imagery of the tree of life. The fact that access to the tree of life is mentioned before access to the city (since the tree is in the city) expresses a rhetorical phenomenon that occurs regularly in Revelation—the “last-first” principle of placing two events in reverse order so that the last event is nuanced by what should have logically been first.<sup>37</sup> Entry into a city by means of the gates was the only legitimate means of access to an ancient city (cf. Jn. 10:1).<sup>38</sup> The phrase “and may enter by the gates into the city” (22:14) is in antithesis to an earlier statement about the New Jerusalem that declares that “*nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever enter into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life*” (21:27).

**Insiders and Outsiders**

Valid access to the Holy City, and thus the tree of life, assumes moral innocence and honor. The moral implications of having one’s name written

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<sup>36</sup> Roop, *Genesis*, 47.

<sup>37</sup> Aune, *Revelation* 17-22, 1222.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

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in the Lamb's book of life are likewise unmistakable (21:27). Angels posted at the city's twelve pearl gates (21:12) suggest as much the barring entry of anything inconsistent with both the moral/spiritual nature of the city and the character of the life it exemplifies (yet another allusion to Gen. 3) as it does their heartfelt invitation and welcome.<sup>39</sup> Again, Proverb's "personified wisdom" raises her voice: "*beside the gates leading into the city, at the entrances, she cries aloud: To you, O men, I call out; I raise my voice to all mankind*" (Prov. 8:3, 4 NIV). The phrase "anything unclean" (21:27) is not used in a literal cultic sense, but rather "metaphorically in a moral sense of people who are immoral."<sup>40</sup> It is a cultic perspective that encompasses a moral sense. People are in view: who they are; how they are oriented morally (22:11).

The image of individuals barricaded forever outside the city is reinforced by threefold repetition. Three segments of the New Jerusalem vision describe those excluded from the city: "*Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood*" (22:15 NIV); "*But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death*" (21:8 NIV); "*Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful*" (21:27 NIV).

The specific character of the descriptions in these vice lists highlights the concrete nature of Revelation's moral vision. In the catalogue sin and sinners are combined.<sup>41</sup> Moral wrong (evil) together with one's *being* and *doing* converge. The envisioned moral life is not lived in the abstract. It never can. Nor is it merely on the level of moral principles alone. Concrete

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<sup>39</sup> According to Gen. 3:24 and Ezek. 28:14, 16 angels act as guardians of Eden, the garden of God, and since the New Jerusalem is the eschatological counterpart of Eden (2:7; 22:1-5), angelic guards at its gates seem appropriate (see Aune's discussion, *ibid.*, 1154-1155).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 1175. Aune explains how notions of ritual purity (unclean, i.e., *koinos* and *akathartos*), a central religious category in early Judaism, carried over into early Christianity and eventually transformed into an exclusively moral category (Matt. 15:11, 18, 20; Mk. 7:2, 5, 15, 18, 20, 23; Heb. 9:13; Acts 10:14, 15, 28; 11:8, 9; 21:28; Rom. 14:14; Heb. 10:29). See Aune's extended discussion, *ibid.*, 1174, 1175.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 1131.

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action, behavior, and deeds are envisioned on the part of individuals who identify themselves with these moral values (vices).

Correspondingly, “each transgression can be balanced antithetically by a positive trait that is to characterize members of the heavenly city.”<sup>42</sup> Revelation is permeated with direct and indirect allusions to the Commandments of God, affirming their enduring covenant nature (12:17; 14:12).<sup>43</sup>

From a broader perspective the Apocalypse sets the cosmopolis garden of New Jerusalem in antithesis over against “the great city” Babylon (18:1-24; cf. 17:1-6; 14:8). Babylon is fallen: arrogant, proud, corrupt, exploitive, oppressive, and blasphemous. It is an incredible picture of fallen human civilization. It is religious but independent of God and it blossoms for one last time as a splendid city. It depicts the complete control of the political, religious, commercial and cultural apparatus of society by the Satanic power structure (chapters 13, 17, 18). It provides a compelling glimpse of the power of corrupt culture by linking imagery from religion, politics, entertainment, sensuality, immorality, consumerism, and mood altering substances (18:3, 7, 9, 14). It lives luxuriously and is marked with futile human endeavor. The evocative language points to Babylon culture’s voracious materialistic consumerism, its ruthless pursuit of pleasure, its emphasis on sexuality and sensuality, and a spirituality that is independent of God.

That Babylon traffics in “human lives” (18:13) and in her is “found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain on the earth”

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<sup>42</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1059.

<sup>43</sup> References that allude specific commandments include: 2nd---“worshiping idols” (9:20; cf. 21:8; 22:15); 3rd---“have not denied my name” (3:8; cf. 21:8), “blasphemies against God” (13:6); 4th--- “Lord’s Day” (1:10); 6th---“murders” (9:21; 21:8; 22:15); 7th ---“sexual immorality” (2:14; 2:20; 9:21; 21:8; 22:15), “adultery” (2:22); 8th---“thefts” (9:21); 9th---“liars” (21:8, 27; 22:18); 10th---“fruit you long for” (18:14). See Skip MacCarty, *In Granite or Ingrained: What the Old and New Covenants Reveal About the Gospel, the Law, and the Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2007), 199, 200. That these *covenant commands* are for humanity as a whole (and not just believers), is implied in the refusal to repent of violating its concrete moral stipulations by those surviving the corrective judgments of the sixth trumpet (9:20, 21). The commandments of God are His specified way of life within the covenant between Himself and humankind. It calls people to an ethical way of life, i.e., the wholeness and preservation of one’s relationship with God and fellow human beings.

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(18:24) points to the reality that real human beings are envisioned along with the metaphoric great city.<sup>44</sup> This is no abstraction. Real people suffer and are deceived. Real people are exploited, coerced, die—they are deceiving and being deceived, oppressing and being oppressed. This is because human beings embody Babylon's value system. They have been squeezed into her cultural/moral mold (cf. Rom 12:2).

This Babylon imagery unfolds a worldview and resultant encapsulating culture—and ethics. Human beings invest their future security and hope in her. They have either bought into or merely outwardly support her moral vision, which includes marked anti-creational actions that tear at right relationships with God, humanity, and all creation.<sup>45</sup> This brings the chaos engendering reversal of creation depicted throughout the Apocalypse, but especially at earth's close. Within the narrative the forces of chaos threatening to undo God's creation subvert the very principles that promote and protect the life and well being of the community.<sup>46</sup> The anti-creation forces driving Babylon would be worshiped. They prescribe how that worship is to be (13:14-17). There is an ethic to go with that worship.<sup>47</sup> Babylon thus creates her own worldview, culture and ethics.

Fallen Babylon is a spiritual/moral frame of reference that both influences and determines concrete human behavior. Thus, coming out of Babylon includes a moral escape—not just theological or doctrinal escape.<sup>48</sup> The invitation to come out of her is both personal and concrete—“so that you will not participate in her sins and receive of her

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<sup>44</sup> See my discussion on *psuchē* (18:13), Larry L. Lichtenwalter, “Souls Under the Altar: The ‘Soul’ and Related Anthropological Imagery in John’s Apocalypse,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 26, no. 1 (2015): 64-66.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. 9:21; 21:8, 27; 22:15; 11:18; 17:1-6; 14:8; 18:1-24. The reference in 11:18—“to destroy those who destroy the earth”—to the antediluvian world depicted in Genesis chapter 6 freights powerful anti-creational imagery.

<sup>46</sup> For discussion on the link between redemption, law and the reclamation of creation see, Terence E. Fretheim, “The Reclamation of Creation: Redemption and Law in Exodus,” *Interpretation*, 45, no. 4 (October, 1991): 357-360; Carol J. Dempsey, *Hope Amid The Ruins: The Ethics of Israel’s Prophets* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 29, 30, 42-45; Bruce Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terrence E. Fretheim, and David Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 158.

<sup>47</sup> 9:20, 21; 18:4, 5; 21:8; 22:19. See my discussion, Larry L. Lichtenwalter, “The Seventh-day Sabbath and Sabbath Theology in the Book of Revelation: Creation, Covenant, Sign,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 49, no. 2 (2011): 304-305.

<sup>48</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 898.

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*plagues; for her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities*” (18:4, 5). It is a strong wake-up call to break off personal identification with any religious moral political system that is not in line with the Eternal Gospel and the corresponding life it envisions in the New Jerusalem.<sup>49</sup> There will ever always be a personal moral dimension to the theology of Revelation or it does not fit real human life. Revelation’s moral vision is cast against this backdrop of the proverbial “tale of two cities”<sup>50</sup>—eschatological Babylon and heaven’s Holy City of Jerusalem.

**RIGHT to the Tree of Life**

The action of washing one’s robes is clearly “a metaphor for moral and spiritual cleansing or reformation.”<sup>51</sup> The present participial form—“those who wash”—indicates continuous activity rather than a once-for-all event.<sup>52</sup> While the saving and purifying effect of appropriating the substitutionary death of Christ is in view here (cf. 7:14; 1:5), it nevertheless marks the personal decision to lead a morally upright life<sup>53</sup> within the context and

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<sup>49</sup> Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, Second Edition, 523-538.

<sup>50</sup> Joseph L. Trafton, *Reading Revelation: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (ed. Charles H. Talbert; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 213; Edith M. Humphrey, “A Tale of Two Cities and (At Least) Three Women,” in *Reading the Book of Revelation: A Resource for Students* (ed. David L. Barr; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

<sup>51</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1219. Parallel imagery is found in Revelation 7:14 where the redeemed, standing before the throne, are said to have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (i.e., signifying the saving and purifying effect of appropriating the sacrificial death of Christ) and in Revelation 3:4 where some Christians in Sardis are referred to as those “who have not soiled their clothes” (i.e., a metaphor for continuing faithfulness to their Christian commitment. See Aune’s discussion of the possible meanings for the metaphor of washing one’s garments, i.e., (1) Christian baptism, (2) the decision to lead a morally upright life, or (3) martyrdom (ibid., 1220, 1221).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 1220.

<sup>53</sup> The King James Version reads “they that do his commandments” rather than “wash their robes,” but both internal evidence and the earliest and best manuscripts support the latter (Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, Second Edition, 616, 617).

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empowerment of that gracious cleansing.<sup>54</sup> It is also to be understood in the active sense of what a person must do to reform his or her way of living.<sup>55</sup>

Washing one's garments points to a fundamental moral orientation, purpose and decision in the context of the Lamb's atoning work and the sovereign reign of God (7:14-15; 14:1-5). The resulting experience of such divine cleansing deep within inner being of self and conscience<sup>56</sup> includes the gracious receiving of the moral "right" (ἡ ἐξουσία — not just *a* right but *the* right) to partake of the tree of life and to enter the city, i.e., to exercise one's rights over, to have full "power over" (ἐξουσία ἐπὶ) the tree of life.<sup>57</sup> Assurance is unequivocal: "He who has the Son has life eternal" (1 John 5:12). Only those who have experience such gracious opportunity will be able fully grasp its existential implications. It is the stuff of joyful praise and new song (14:1-4; 15:1-4).

Such "right" has nothing to do with merit. It is an imparted right. *Exousia* in the Apocalypse reflects the sovereign Lordship of God in a fallen world where nothing takes place apart from His *exousia* or authority. The *exousia*, which other moral beings (including evil entities) might have (or are granted), is based on His Lordship.<sup>58</sup>

While imparted though, *exousia* nevertheless suggests a moral and spiritual correspondence between the one having (or granted) the "right" or "authority" or "power" on the one hand, and the moral/spiritual nature of what that "right" or "authority" or "power" is over, on the other hand. This

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<sup>54</sup> Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1220.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. In Num. 8:21 "the Levites purified themselves from sin and washed their clothes."

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Heb 9:9, 14; 10:1-4, 14-17, 22, 23.

<sup>57</sup> See Aune discussion, Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1221. "The closest parallel is 16:9, where God is referred to as τοῦ ἔχοντος τὴν ἐξουσίαν ἐπὶ τὰς πληγὰς ταύτας, "the one who has authority over these plagues." Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> *TDNT*:566. Nearly a fifth (21 of the 108) of the N.T. use of ἐξουσία occurs in Revelation (2:26; 6:8; 9:3, 10, 19; 11:6; 12:10; 13:2, 4, 5, 7, 12; 14:18; 16:9; 17:12, 13; 18:1; 20:6; 22:14). While God has ultimate *exousia*, it is given to various entities including the AntiChrist beast for his final activity (13:2, 5, 7). That he was "given authority to act" implies that even the rule of the AntiChrist does not take place apart from the will of God (ibid., 568). Likewise the "authority of His Christ" at the overthrow of Satan with the fulfilment of the work of the cross both demonstrates and posits God's right of authority to act (12:10). The word is indispensable to express the fact that created beings cannot take anything or do anything on their own, but that it has to be given to us. Authority or "right" is imparted. Created beings are enabled (ibid., 566, 569).

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includes how one acts in the moral spiritual political realm of things. At Revelation's epochal cosmic conflict turning point, it is loudly announced "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority (*exousia*) of His Christ have come" (12:10). Christ's substitutionary death and resurrection brings about a new historical reality with corresponding moral authority for Him as the world's Redeemer. Theodicy implications for the Great Controversy are tacit and illuminative. The point here though, is that such authority is linked to one's action in the moral/spiritual realm. It is not devoid of ethics, moral orientation, or action.

This moral and spiritual correspondence between the right to something and over what that right entails (*exousia*) is found also in the imagery of the 144,000 who on the one hand "wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14) and on the other hand, as a result of and in keeping with their redemptive experience (14:3, 4), exhibit blameless lives (14:4, 5). Theirs is the incredible privilege of standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion (14:1). Not their own doing, but nevertheless in heart and mind and choice of life—very much in harmony with what it means morally and spiritually to follow the Lamb (14:4).

This moral/spiritual correspondence is suggested elsewhere in the Apocalypse by the linking of the verbs "to give" (δίδωμι) and "to overcome" (νικάω), i.e., "To him who overcomes, I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (2:7; see also 2:17, 23, 26, 28).<sup>59</sup>

The image of one being "worthy" (ἄξιος) further nuances this link, "you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments" (3:4, 5a). Here the worthiness not only precedes but culminates with completion of the process of overcoming.<sup>60</sup> Elsewhere in Revelation the notion of "worthiness" is attributed to God (because He is Creator, 4:11), the Lamb (because He was slain and overcame so as to open the scroll and its seven seals, 4:5, 9, 12), and in ironic pun referring to persecutors who "are worthy" of judgment ("worthy" to drink blood because they poured out the blood of saints and

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<sup>59</sup> Even the apostate woman Babylon is "given" judgment in relation to her actions and attitudes (18:6, 7).

<sup>60</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 277.



prophets, 16:16).<sup>61</sup> Each expression indicates the sphere in which there is implied moral correspondence.<sup>62</sup>

Washing one's robes then, includes an inner moral orientation and a sense of sin. It includes as well, the conscious choice to claim Christ as one's righteousness in relation to those realities. The moral agency implied in one having the right to the tree of life and to enter the Holy City through its gates is grounded in God's grace (1:4; 22:21). The Lamb's atonement is the framework for moral being and action. It beckons at one's deepest level, and at bottom is the reality in which the right of access to Eden restored is ever possible. Moral agency connected with life transforming conversion is implicit. This is the Lamb's work alone. "*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb*" (7:10).

#### **Will There Always Be An Outside?**

As the moral boundaries are drawn for the redeemed community—drawing a clear line of who is in and who is outside—one might expect that this would mean that in the end there is no longer an outside. This is not the case, however. The shocking truth is that at the very end of the Apocalypse story, after the battle, after the judgment, after the destruction of evil, after the new heavens and the new earth and the description of the holy city, there is still an outside to the city, still limited access to the tree. This image of a completely sacred space with doors ever open to the outside (21:25), where evil lurks, is important for understanding Revelation's moral vision.<sup>63</sup> It suggests eternity's enduring moral reality. Moral boundaries still exist as values expressed in God's character and eternal laws endure. Freedom of choice still exists both now and through eternity. Following the *eschaton*, however, evil will never again come within the city because no one will either bring it in or invite it in (21:27). Such things will ever be inconsistent with "life."

Thus the tree, and the city, appearing as they do in Revelation's conclusion, are at once critical and instructive. They present a paradox of

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> E. Tiedtke, "Right, Worthy," *NIDNTT* 3:348, 349. "ἄξιός, ἀνάξιός" *TDNT* 1:379.

<sup>63</sup> David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1998), 117.

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hope and judgment, a moral baseline that eschews moralism.<sup>64</sup> The tree, together with the city's spirit—ethos—remains an ever-present hope for humankind. To return to the Genesis garden—to the land before shame and suffering and alienation and death—involves a moral advancement, not a regression; a reawakening, not a reversion; a transformation, not human endeavor; moral boundaries and choice, not relativity or indifference. Grace and cleansing blood both undergird and empower the entire experience (1:4; 22:21; 7:14; 22:14; 12:11).

The Apocalypse thus envisions a morality consistent with human life, which God created in His own image, so much so that physical life itself is not the ultimate value. There are those who will “not love their life even when faced with death” (12:11). They are willing to be faithful unto death (2:10). Why so? Because there are things about human life (in relation to one's self, to others, and to God), which are both worth living for and dying for. True life is experienced only when one chooses and lives “true to life.” Death is better than the moral alternative.

Taken together “the” *exousia* to the tree of life and entry through the gates into the city point to moral correspondence with those realities. Something, which the moral agent receives from God via the Lamb's work, yet which one receives because they value it, avail themselves of it, and allows the Lamb to empower them to live in harmony with.

Revelation asserts that the gates to the New Jerusalem are always open (21:15; cf. Isa 60:11). So also is access to the tree of life. And yet there are categories of people who are outside the gates (22:15) as well as gracious Holy Spirit invitation to partake of that which gives true life (22:17). The text affirms that the reader can choose to be either inside or outside the city. Such choice is linked to both existential longing and inner moral orientation. There must be desire and choice. Such choice is ours still.

The imagery of the Lamb's Book of Life (21:27), blood washed robes (7:14; 22:14), tree of life (22:2, 14) and access to the eternal city (21:3-7; 27; 22:14) presents a wonderful picture of stability and security.<sup>65</sup> The

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<sup>64</sup> Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible*, 219.

<sup>65</sup> Easley, *Revelation*, 58.

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believer is a citizen of the heaven no matter what the forces of evil do.<sup>66</sup>  
Here is awesome assurance!

**Larry L. Lichtenwalter** is President, Dean of Philosophy and Theology, and the Director of the Adventist Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies at Middle East University in Beirut, Lebanon. He is a preacher, pastor, systematic theologian, author and holds a Ph.D. in Christian Ethics from Andrews University.  
lichtenwalter@gmail.com

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<sup>66</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 503.