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THE PURPOSE AND PROMISE OF CREATION ACCORDING TO THE *LETTER TO THE ROMANS*: A CONTRIBUTION TO CHRISTIAN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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Abstract: This article offers an exploration of how Paul's references to creation in his Letter to the Romans can contribute to Christian environmental ethics. After an introduction to the debate and a survey of research, Romans 1:19–21; 8:19–22 and 11:26–27 is treated in detail. For each passage, the article discusses its implications for the environment and for human interaction with it. As creation testifies to its creator, humans need to do all to preserve it so that this testimony is also available to future generations. In its present suffering, creation is portrayed as participating in the human longing for the consummation of the Kingdom of God. As we wait together, humans are to treat creation as carefully as possibly as their co-heir of God's promises and comprehensive salvific purposes. Built on this expectation and in view of Old Testament and early Jewish eschatology, there is the prospect not only of the salvation and restoration of all of Israel but also of all of creation. Read in this way, Romans can contribute to Christian ecological ethics.

Keywords: *Apostle, Cosmology, Creation, Ecological Hermeneutics, Environmental Ethics, Epistle to the Romans, Eschatology, Paul*.

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1. Introduction

Faced with the major issues of their day and age, many Christians seek guidance and answers in the resources of their own tradition. Biblical scholars also regularly pursue this path and search for possible contributions that the canonical writings (and related literature) might make to current debates. In the past decade, for example, a whole series of studies on various aspects of migration has emerged. After a series of interesting, now largely forgotten, studies on creation and its preservation in the Bible in the 1970s and 1980s (Friedrich 1982; Vögtle 1970; Bindermann 1983) this topic is on the rise again in view of its urgency, an urgency that it should not and must not lose. It quickly becomes clear in this quest that the ancient writings, with their completely different perception and understanding of the existing world, do not and cannot provide the direct guidance that we need today. At the same time, it is welcome to see there is a whole series of outstanding ecclesial documents on this topic which, to varying degrees, draw on biblical and other traditions. From the perspective and knowledge of today, they endeavour to address the current situation and provide guidance for the community of faith and society at large. For instance, there is the excellent papal encyclical on the environment *Laudato Si: On the Care of Our Common Home* (2015) or the various declarations of the Protestant Church in Germany.[3] Despite the restrictions imposed by the nature and limitations of the canonical sources, it is worth taking a fresh look at the biblical theology of creation and statements on creation, its origin, purpose and fate, that provide us with a Christian understanding of creation and its preservation.

This article is an exploration in which I share my current reflections from my particular European setting, rather than offer any ready-made conclusions.[4] My context of reading is that of a committed Christian living in a highly industrialised secular

[3] "Geliehen ist der Stern, auf dem wir leben': Die Agenda 2030 als Herausforderung für die Kirchen. Ein Impulspapier der Kammer der EKD für nachhaltige Entwicklung" (2018).

[4] I draw on my earlier essays (Stenschke 2017, 261–289) and (2020, 107–118).

country in Central Europe. Perceptions, experiences and hermeneutical glasses will be different elsewhere in the world. Therefore, I offer a proposal for debate, in particular in a journal published and read in a context that differs from mine. Some of my conclusions with regard to a more sustainable treatment of our environment will be correct (and important) in terms of content. However, the crucial and exciting question is whether it was merely the wish that was the mother and father of the idea, or whether the conclusions drawn here can also be justified with regard to sound hermeneutics. Good intentions cannot justify reading into biblical texts that which is simply not there.

Statements on creation appear in only a few places in the New Testament; there are hardly any direct references to how humans are to treat it. Here we turn to Paul's letter to the Romans, which is one of the few writings in the New Testament that contains several references to creation. The apostle refers to creation in Romans 1:19–21 in the context of his analysis of human failure in view of God's self-revelation in creation. The references to the groaning and pains of creation in Romans 8:19–22 have been examined in detail time and again, especially in current debates about the Bible, creation and the dramatic state of our earth. Two examples suffice: The *Web of Creation* web page (*Ecology Resources to Transform Faith Communities and Society*, www.webofcreation.org) and the so-called *Earth Bible Project*, which cites this text as the only text from Romans, among other biblical texts on the subject. A contribution to the British *Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics*- project at the University of Exeter has rightly referred to Romans 8:19–23 as an "environmental mantra" (Hunt, Horrell and Southgate 2008, 546–579; Byrne 2010, 83–93). The relationship in their understanding and role of creation between both passages has been noted several times (see Jackson 2010, 151). Both of these occurrences of creation play an important role in the argumentation of the letter. T. Ryan Jackson (2010, 151) even claims that "The trajectory of creation between chapters 1 and 8 reveals a great deal about Paul's overall argument in Romans". We will examine these references again and also add Romans 11:26–27 to the debate. For each of the three

passages, we will briefly trace Paul's train of thought. In a second step, we discuss the possible significance of the statements for human interaction with creation, even if this is not the intention of the text.

2. Creation and Its Preservation in Romans 1

A. At the beginning of the main body of Romans (Rom 1:16–15:13), Paul describes humanity under the wrath of God, which is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people[5], who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth (1:18). The truth that they suppress is God's self-revelation in his works: "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has revealed it to them" (1:19).[6] Because of this, God's attributes are evident and can be recognized: "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (1:20).[7] In view of this revelation to all people[8], there is no possibility for people to "excuse" themselves with ignorance: "For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him" (1:21). Praising God and thanking him – the appropriate and required reaction to his revelation in his creation – are "comprehensive descriptions of human obligations toward God, the failure of which were assumed to be signs of impiety" (Jewett, *Romans*, 157). As a

[5] For taking this phrase as referring to a still future judgement, Haacker (2012, 53).

[6] Jewett (2007, 153) notes that "Paul is consistent at this point with Jewish writings that maintain God's self-revelation to be partial and elusive".

[7] On the fusion of Biblical ideas of revelation and creation with Hellenistic-Roman ideas of the visibility of the divine in nature, Jewett (2007, 154–155).

[8] Jewett (2007, 154): "In contrast to most forms of natural theology in which *qualified* humans have access to divine knowledge, Paul relies on the classic biblical doctrine of divine self-disclosure to explain the truth that humans attempt to suppress", italics CS.

consequence of their refusal to honour and thank God, people became "futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to the wise, they became fools" (Rom 1:22). The consequences of this exchange are evident in the idolatry of the non-Jews. The appropriate reaction to God's revelation in his creation becomes apparent in the brief praise of the Creator God in Romans 1:25: "rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen". God responds to this failure and refusal to recognize him in his creation and to praise and thank him accordingly by "giving people up" (1:24, 26–32). The references to creation appear in a context rife with allusions to the Old Testament and the literature of early Judaism (the wrath of God, non-Jewish idolatry, fornication and other moral and ethical failures of non-Jews).

Creation and its role in directing attention beyond itself to God, the Creator, is a recurrent theme throughout the Old Testament and in early Judaism[9]: God is regularly introduced as the creator God (for instance, Gen 1–2; Job 38–39; Ps 104). Creation testifies to the existence and greatness of God: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" (Ps 19:1).[10] For Paul, creation is thus not an end in itself, but points (or at least *also* points) beyond itself to the reality and attributes of God.[11] Recognising God in the world that he created should lead to an attitude of honour and gratitude. The refusal of this response leads to the worship of the created (instead of the Creator), that is, to idolatry and massive failure in interhuman relationships that bring people under the wrath of God (Rom 1:26–31. 18).

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[9] Sir. 17:1–9; 42:15–43:33; Wisdom 13:1–9; Philo, *Opif*. 8–9; *Leg. All*. 3.97–99; *Conf. Ling*. 98; *Fug*. 12; *Spec. Leg*. 1,41; Jos., *Ant*. 1.55–56 and *Syr. Bar*. 54:18.

[10] It should be noted that in Ps 19 the heavens do not proclaim the glory of God to humanity (19:2), as Böhler (2021, 338–357) has rightly pointed out.

[11] Haacker (2012, 54) explains this with God's dealing with the world, which distinguishes Paul's reflections "from a priori speculation": "Paul here takes up a widespread tradition in which the creative power of God is primarily inferred from the natural order of the world".

B. The question now to be raised is whether these assertions regarding creation can contribute to biblically and theologically oriented environmental ethics and to the current ecological discourse and, if so, how. It should be noted that, in the immediate context, Paul has neither this nor any other ethical thrust in mind.[12] He refers to the recognisability of God in his creation in order to justify his contention that people have no excuse before God (Rom 1:21). He does not call for or instruct for a responsible approach to creation.[13] The aim of the argument of the entire passage (1:18–2:29) is to prove that "all, Jews and Greeks alike, are under sin" (3:9). Moreover, as a man of the ancient world, Paul probably perceived creation (also in its state back then) very differently than people do in the 21st century. For him, the world would have been a place far more mysterious and more threatening than it is for us. For Paul, the earth, at the time comparatively sparsely populated, was not the fragile blue ball in the vastness of an infinite universe as we know it and the precarious state of which we can clearly understand from all our scientific knowledge and, perhaps increasingly in recent years, our own experience. Despite these reservations, it is worth reflecting on the apostle's thought: If God can be recognised from his works and if this recognition should lead to the proper worship of God (praise and gratitude), then it is important, at least in a context in which this conviction is shared, to preserve this creation – among many other good reasons! – in order to preserve, to protect and, as far as possible, to keep God's creation intact *so that the chance of recognising the nature of God is also preserved for future generations*.

It is impossible to deduce from the Letter to the Romans what degree of integrity of creation is necessary for it to fulfil this function. This conclusion presupposes that the human ability to recognise God from his works, despite the cognitive limitations

[12] However, it should be kept in mind that the description in Romans 1:18–32, including its catalogs of vices, has indirect ethical implications.
[13] Compare Haacker's (2012, 54–55) cautious rejection of systematic-theological reservations (inspired by the so-called Dialectical Theology movement) against any natural theology.

mentioned in the context ("but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools", Rom 1:21–22)[14] is, at least partially, still available or is possible for each generation in a fresh way, even if it is socialized in a context that accounts for the perceived "nature" differently from the very beginning.[15] However, this means to raise questions far beyond the intention of Paul's statement.

Against this background, one should consider to what extent

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[14] Jewett (2007, 159: "In any event the declaration that 'their senseless heart was darkened' implies a comprehensive process of disabling and distortion that involves intellectual, emotional, and physical dimensions of the human being. In this divinely imposed distortion, the wrath of God is already manifest"; Haacker (2012, 55): Even these cautious statements about the discernability of God still seem daring in today's philosophical-theological reflection. They must also be seen together with the following statements about the loss of human cognitive ability as a result of the failure to recognise the truth that is revealed (vv. 21b, 22, 28). The lack of excuse of which Paul speaks *cannot be verified on an individual basis after the decline described in vv. 21ff. but represent a general judgment on the history of human thought* (italics CS).

[15] Jewett (2007, 153: "Whether this revelation occurs subjectively within each person's conscience or publicly within each cultural group is impossible to determine from the phrase ἐν αὐτοῖς. … The knowledge of God is available to all". Jewett (2007, 153–154) further stresses that a decisive break with later Jewish theology is evident, for instance, in Paul's claim that the knowledge of God was available to every human, which obviously includes Gentiles and barbarians. … nowhere in Judaism was there an admission of a natural knowledge of God for Gentiles. The contention of Hellenistic Judaism was the exact opposite of what we encounter in Romans … In contrast to Gentiles, the Jews have access to the truth about God and are guaranteed access to the "root of immortality" (Wis 15:1–6). To admit genuine knowledge of God on the part of Gentiles would be to abandon the foundation of God's self-revelation to Israel through the Torah, which established Israel as the chosen nation. Later on, Jewett (2007, 156) writes: "The shift from present tense verbs in vv. 18–20 to aorist verbs in vv. 21–23 signals a turn to the representatives of an archaic past who turned away from the truth and imposed a grim future on their descendants".

it should be an important concern of Christian catechism to lead people to an appreciation and correct understanding of the world as God's creation. From this vantage point it may also be possible to re-envision the relationship between the natural sciences and faith in creation, at least to some extent. Understood as "creation science", the natural sciences contribute to understanding the attributes of the Creator and recognising them better in his works.

Furthermore, if the world is perceived and understood as the creation of God, reverence for the Creator demands that we preserve and care for his creation and treat it with great respect, just, to use an analogy, as I take special care of the wardrobe that a master carpenter and close friend of mine designed, carefully made from selected fine wood and painstakingly treated and cared for over decades before I inherited it. I gladly do so because this wardrobe is not only useful and functional, but also because it reminds me of its maker and my manner of treating this piece of furniture follows from my respect and appreciation for its builder.

At this point, it is worth citing Klaus Haacker's (2012) observation concerning the Western world and theology:

> At the level of systematic theology, the question must be posed whether the widespread polemic against a "natural theology" could have another reason than the emphasis on the (personal) revelation of God in the medium of His word. It could also stem from a one-sided understanding of God as being otherworldly with the consequences that the empirical world is declared to be a "God-free" realm that can and must be explained rationally throughout. If, in particular, the experience of nature more or less untouched by humans (against Acts 14:17) is denied its function as a witness to God, this could be related to the lack of reverence for creation, which made the unrestrained exploitation of natural resources possible (which in no way corresponded to the mandate of Genesis 1:28, which excludes any misunderstanding by the charge to "cultivate and preserve" in Gen 2:15). And if, in the course of industrialisation [in the Western world] from the 19th century onwards, many people lost access to faith in God, this primarily was a consequence of their social impoverishment and the failure of the church which they experienced in this process. However, it could also be that the displacement of the natural world with an industrially shaped

environment in which people now live contributed to the removal of the notion of God (55).

3. Creation and Its Preservation in Romans 8

A. Again, we first trace Paul's train of thought. After the important statements on the revelation of God's very being in creation and its function in Romans 1:19–21, Paul returns to creation in Romans 8. He contrasts the life in the Spirit as the all-changing alternative to pre-Christian existence (Rom 8:1–17) and its great promises for the future (8:18, 24–39) with the present "groaning" (στενάζω), which cannot call into question God's calling and its certain fulfilment. However, suffering is experienced not only by the believers, but also by the non-human creation, which is closely linked to their fate:

> For the creation waits with eager longing[16] for the revelation of the children of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as the sons of God, the redemption of our bodies (Rom 8:19–23).

Yet, like the present suffering of believers (Rom 8:19) and Israel still divided in the present (addressed in Romans 9–11), the subjection of creation to futility, to the bondage of corruption, the groaning and the pains of childbirth are not the last word and final fate of creation. Paul speaks of a *temporary* subjection in the full assurance that creation will also one day be freed from this fate. The non-human creation will also participate in the future revelation of the glory of the children of God in perfect participation in eschatological salvation. In Paul's vision of the future, the entire creation is included in salvation or – phrased in

[16] Haacker (2012, 200–201) proposes translating the term as "confidence", noting that the expression "fearful" found in several German translations is clearly inappropriate here and would also contradict v. 15. Jewett (2007) makes a similar point, opting for "eager expectation" (514) or "confident expectation" (511).

a less anthropocentric way – the eschatological reversal and the consummation of creation will include believers. Robert Jewett (2007) rightly emphasizes this close link:

> For Paul it is inconceivable that humans could exercise any absolute form of liberation related only to themselves. Freedom must be responsibly embodied in the real world as the "new creation" manifests itself in the lives and actions of believers. *Paul's premise is that humans and the creation are interdependent and that human fulfilment is contextual and cosmic. Murray states the theological corollary that „the glory of the people of God will be in the context of the restitution of all things* "(cf. Acts 3:21). Despite the interpretive difficulties in understanding v. 21b, it provides a barrier against *the chronic individualising of salvation* that has marked the tradition of Pauline theology (515, italics CS).

While in other passages Paul reflects only on the present and future destiny of humans, here he emphasizes a deep bond in the groaning that unites all of creation. The expression πάσα ἡ κτίσις ("the entire creation") includes the whole range of animate and inanimate objects in heaven and on earth (Jewett 2007, 516).

This reversal of fate, the release of creation from subjection to futility, will take place "when the freedom of the children of God has taken on the quality of 'glory' (cf. Rom 8:17 end)" (Haacker 2012, 203). When exactly this will be achieved remains open. The overall context suggests that the liberation of creation is linked to the coming day (of the Lord) and the coming of the Messianic Redeemer from Zion (cf. Rom 13:11–12; 11:26–27). In terms of content, this vision of the future is based on the Old Testament promises of an eschatological restoration of creation. Jewett (2007) outlines this vision for the whole of creation as follows:

> That the realm of nonhuman creation "itself will also be set free" from the Adamic distortion was a significant theme in Jewish prophetism and apocalypticism […] *Isaiah's* vision of a messianic future includes both a king who will restore righteousness among humans (Isa 11:4–5) and a restoration of Edenic conditions between animals and humans (Isa 11:6–9; 65:17, 25; 66:22). *Jubilees* envisions the time when "the heavens and the earth shall be renewed" (1:29). *1Enoch* speaks of regaining access to the "fragrant tree" on the seventh mountain, which restores the joy and long life of Eden (chaps. 24–25; see also 91:16–17), while the *Testament of Levi*

> anticipates a messianic priest who "shall open the gates of paradise, and shall remove the threatening sword against Adam. And he shall give to the saints to eat from the tree of life, and the spirit of holiness shall be on them" (18:10–11). *4Ezra* 13:26 expects the messianic "Man from the Sea" to "deliver his creation" from the perils of violence. The *Sibylline Oracles* predict a time after the day of judgement and the arrival of a just empire when the earth will once again become "the universal mother who will give to mortals her best fruit in countless store of corn, wine and oil. […] And the cities shall be full of good things and the fields rich" (SibOr 3:744–745,750–751). The *Oracles* reiterate Isaiah's vision of wolves and lambs eating grass together, with no creature harming others (514).

The references to the present and future status of the entire creation are reminiscent of other statements in Romans, in which Paul contrasts the present fate of believers with their future state. In these cases, the argument is similar: even if believers are currently suffering, a glorious future is surely in store for them (Rom 5:1–11; 8:18, 28–39). In Romans 11, Paul applies this line of arguing to the present fate of Israel (only a few believers, see Stenschke 2017, 239–267) and the future redemption of all Israel (11:26).

In keeping with the Old Testament tradition, Paul links the fate of the non-human creation and of human beings, in their present suffering as well as in their future redemption. The close link between the fate of the entire humanity, Israel or other peoples, and the non-human creation is widespread in the Old Testament; see, for instance, Genesis 6:5–8, 22 and Deuteronomy 28:4, 8, 11, 18, 22–24, 38, 40, 42. In both, divine blessings and curses, creation is affected by human attitudes and actions.

In Genesis 6:7, the fate of humans and animals is directly linked: "So the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals, the creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them'". Isaiah 24:4–7 bears impressive witness to human failure and its consequences for the entire creation:

> 4. The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish. 5. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. 6.

> Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore, the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left. 7. The wine mourns, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh.

Hosea 4:1–3 reads:

> Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; 2. there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. 3. Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away.

This close link also plays an important role in Ezekiel 34–37, where the return from exile and the eschatological restoration of Israel appear in close connection: "And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. And the trees of the field shall yield fruit and the earth shall yield its increase" (34:26–27). The inhabitants of the land shall no more be a prey to the nations nor shall the beasts of the land devour them (v. 28). "I will provide for them renowned plantations so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land" (v. 29). In Ezekiel 36:4, 6, the mountains and hills, the ravines and valleys, together with the ruins and deserted cities, are addressed directly by God and receive this divine promise: "But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel, for they will soon come home" (V. 8). God himself will ensure that people and animals multiply (v. 11); "And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations" (vv. 29–30). "This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden, and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited" (v. 35). Non-human creation and humans are inextricably linked in these traditions. Therefore, any type of soteriology that contrasts humans with the "rest" of creation (long considered insignificant)

is problematic.

B. What are the possible implications for a specific biblically motivated environmental ethics? Such consideration is also encouraged by what Haacker (2012, 200) calls the "new hermeneutical situation":

> Surprisingly, Paul now extends the scope of Christian hope (up to v. 23) by introducing creation as the subject of expectation (v. 19), in order to then even speak of a hope for creation (v. 20–21). This step is so bold that the meaning of κτίσις in this context has been repeatedly problematized in the history of interpretation; a gospel also for non-human creatures was long considered difficult to imagine. The growing awareness over the last two decades of the destruction of nature caused by humans has led to a new hermeneutical situation, which is reflected in the increased use and research of this passage.

Even when Christians know that the redemption of the entire creation will only take place with the eschatological revelation of the children of God (for which they long together with the entire creation, Rom 8:19; on the groaning of believers, see 8:26–27), *as fellow sufferers with this very creation* they will *do or refrain from doing* everything possible to avoid increasing the present suffering of creation, to reduce it wherever possible or – as far as possible – even to reverse it.[17]

The statements on the suffering of the entire creation in Romans 8 are remarkable in that they shed a different light on the anthropocentric paradigm that has dominated modern Western thought. (The rest of) Creation is not merely seen as a resource for humans to use, who – at least without reflection – often understand themselves more as in opposition to non-human

[17] This is yet another reason why the Church's catechetical ministry must offer clear guidance on our responsibility toward creation. Helping people confront the immense, often hidden suffering caused by a wasteful, self-centered lifestyle can itself be transformative. Encounters with the realities of industrial farming or slaughterhouses—though unsettling—can awaken moral sensitivity and inspire change. Even the much-debated, sometimes neo-romantic works of the German forester Peter Wohlleben, with their emphasis on the inner life of plants and animals, open fresh avenues of reflection: Cf. Wohlleben (2020).

creation than as inextricably linked to it and its fate. Here, humans are reminded of the present (and also the future) destiny of all creation and of their interconnectedness with the entire creation and its destiny. In this way, a purely anthropocentric perspective is deconstructed.

It is remarkable that the present suffering of the non-human part of creation is not only stated, but that its unfathomable suffering is impressively described: "subjection to futility … bondage to corruption ... groaning together in the pains of childbirth".[18] Haacker (2012, 201) notes:

> The whole notion of a personal consciousness of creation must go against the grain of the modern distinction between *res cogitans* [humans as the "thinking thing"] and *res extensa* [creation as the "extended thing", drawing on the notions and terms of European Enlightenment philosophy], but perhaps this is a symptom of the modern disruption of the relationship between humans and nature and is partly to blame for the destruction of nature through the human desire to dominate and other addictions that corrupt the treatment of creation (cf. 1:24ff). In biblical thinking, creation even has a voice in praise of God (cf. Ps 19:1–5). Ps 96:11–13 speaks of the anticipation of heaven, earth and sea for the eschatological coming of the LORD.

In this way, the ancient biblical text opens up an up-to-date, holistic perspective on the world. All who suffer, believers and non-believers alike and who similarly long for redemption ("But not only they, but we ourselves .... groan within ourselves, looking .... for the redemption of our body", Rom 8:23) should broaden their perspective to include the entire creation and act accordingly.

Likewise, it is instructive to turn to Robert Jewett's

[18] With regard to content, the suffering of animals often remains in the background, as seen in several Old Testament passages. Examples include Balaam beating his donkey (Num 22:23, 25) or scenes in which animals inflict harm on other animals, such as the recurring references to lions and other predators (Isa 35:9; Ezek 19:3). Yet even in these texts, the emphasis typically lies on the danger these creatures pose to humans rather than on their own suffering. Cf. Janowski, Neumann-Gorsolke, and Glessmer (1993).

commentary on Romans, which is decidedly concerned with ecological perspectives – surely a welcome concern! – but argues in a hermeneutically problematic way. Instead of (or in some places alongside) the eschatological perspective (the confident expectation of the entire creation will be fulfilled in the eschatological revelation of the children of God), Jewett (2007, 512, italics CS) focuses on the already present participation of the children of God in the restoration, which he associates with Paul's envisaged mission to Spain, among other things:

> Paul implies that the entire creation waits with bated breath for the emergence and empowerment of those *who will take responsibility for its restoration, small groups of the υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ* ("sons of God") which the mission envisioned by Romans hopes to expand to the end of the known world, that is, to Spain. These converts take the place of Caesar in the imperial propaganda about the golden age, but they employ no weapons to vanquish foes. When Paul speaks of their "revelation/unveiling", there is *a clear reference to God's glory advancing in the world, in this instance, through the triumph of the gospel. As the children of God are redeemed by the gospel, they begin to regain a rightful dominion over the created world* (Gen 1:28–30; Ps 8:5–8).

According to Jewett, the responsibility for restoration is given to the children of God and (like almost everything else in Romans) linked to Paul's anticipated missionary endeavour to Spain (Rom 15:22–29), which for Jewett is the decisive key to the letter's intent and design, alongside or together with an anti-imperial thrust.[19] The focus is on the triumph of the gospel. The children of God are now called to interact with God's creation in a responsible manner ("regain a rightful dominion"), that is, "in more modern terms, their altered lifestyle and revised ethics begin to restore the ecological system that had been thrown out of balance by

[19] In this case, the focus is on the confrontation with imperial Roman ideology, which propagated that a comprehensive participation and renewal of nature (a new, golden age) had begun with the accession of Augustus. Even if the interpretation of the creation statements of Romans is interesting against this background, the question remains of how widespread this aspect of imperial Roman propaganda actually was. On the state of research and methodological questions: Stenschke (2021, 151–182).

wrongdoing (1:18–32) and sin (Rom 5–7). In contrast to the civic cult, Paul does not have a magical transformation of nature in view".[20] While I fully share Jewett's concern, I cannot see such a

[20] Jewett (2007, 512) notes that Roman imperial imagery shaped how early audiences might have understood Paul's reflections on creation. David Castriota, for example, interprets the iconography of the Augustan Peace altar as representing the restoration of a mythical "golden age" marked by abundance and harmony. Paul Zanker similarly argues that the altar depicts a supernatural realm where plants appear in idealized form and animals coexist peacefully—an idyllic world supposedly inaugurated by Augustus' victories. Against this background, Jewett explains that Paul envisions creation "awaiting with eager longing" the emergence of God's triumph of righteousness (cf. Rom 1:17). This eschatological renewal restores balance to creation by overcoming the corruption introduced through Adam, whose disobedience brought devastation upon the ground (Gen 3:17–19). Paul emphasizes the transformation of God's children rather than prescribing explicit ecological policies (Rom 12:1–2). With renewed minds, such communities will be able to discern God's will for the ecosystem. Creation, therefore, longs for the appearance of these transformed persons, trusting that they will eventually address the roots of ecological disorder. Jewett argues that the "futility" mentioned in Romans 8:20 reflects human misuse of the natural world: Paul likely has in view "the abuse of the natural world by Adam and his descendants." The human desire for fame, prestige, and lasting achievement, Jewett suggests, drains creation of its inherent goodness and results in continual frustration, symbolized in Genesis by "thorns and thistles" (Gen 3:18). Given these biblical allusions, Paul's audience could easily have connected his argument to the environmental consequences of imperial ambition—military campaigns, exploitative economies, and destructive land use that left the Mediterranean world scarred by ruined cities, depleted soil, deforestation, and polluted waterways (513). As Jewett further comments (514), nature did not fall "by its own fault"; humanity bears responsibility for the degradation of the ecosystem. The "hope" introduced in Romans 8:21 is that the very humanity that defaced creation will be redeemed and will eventually participate in lifting the curse from the land. For Paul, this redemption remains a future reality, not a present political achievement—contrary to the claims of the Roman civic cult (515).

direct mandate in Romans 8 (see also Tuchtfeld-Haug 2022, 123–142).

4. Creation and Its Preservation in Romans 11

A. In my previous essays on creation in Romans, I have suggested that the connection between the statements in Romans 8:19–23 and the eschatological coming of the "Redeemer from Zion" mentioned in Romans 11:26–27 probably implies an end-time restoration of the non-human creation according to Old Testament and early Jewish thought. If the revelation of the children of God (Rom 8:19), which is also eagerly awaited by the groaning and fearful creation of Romans 8, coincides with the coming of this Redeemer[21], this coming should, according to Old Testament and early Jewish understanding, also bring a comprehensive restoration of the entire creation (Vögtle 1970, 67–232).

B. This eschatological restoration of the entire creation would also have practical implications. Even if the restoration of creation is thus removed from human control and means (and perhaps also hybris), this prospect offers new hope for this earth. Because it will not be destroyed, but awaits its restoration and can expect it, this earth must be treated as carefully as possible even now while we wait for the restoration to come. To return to my earlier analogy: even if my children eventually have the old family wardrobe—after decades of use—professionally restored by a skilled furniture restorer, I would already have ensured, in the present, that it has suffered as little damage as possible. By using it with care and gratitude, attending to its maintenance and repairing what I can, I help preserve its integrity so that it is ready for the restoration to come.

5. Concluding Remarks

The occurrences of creation in Romans examined here and its implied eschatological restoration at the return of Christ have a

[21] This is the identification rightly made by Haacker (2012, 199–200): "Above all, the hope is that the 'sons of God' will one day be 'revealed', that is, appear publicly as such, analogous to the expected ἀποκάλυψις of Jesus Christ, that is, his return in glory ...".

number of ecological implications:

A. Because God is the Creator behind this world and can be recognised from his works, it is crucial to treat his works with care in gratitude and reverence towards God the Creator and in responsibility before him, so that future generations will also have the opportunity to recognize God's being and attributes in his creation and thank and honour him accordingly. Christian faith and creation are inextricably linked, as is also emphasised in the first article of the Apostolic Creed: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth", that is, the *entire* existing world.
B. Because the non-human creation is also suffering and longs for its eschatological redemption, it is mandatory not to increase this impressively described suffering but, in whatever way possible, to alleviate it or avoid it altogether.
C. Because one day not only believers but also the whole of creation will be liberated from the present suffering, it is important to treat creation with care even now, even if or precisely because its eschatological renewal is the work of the God whom believers love and serve as they await for its coming.

These considerations, derived from the references to creation in the Letter to the Romans – and assuming their hermeneutical legitimacy – presuppose an understanding of the world as God's creation. In contexts in which this is not only formally confessed ("I believe in ... the creator of heaven and earth"), but is a living ingredient of faith (is believed and can be believed), the above implications carry weight. To take up my above image once again (and with the risk of simplification): if the master craftsman and his masterpiece actually exist and there is no doubt that he made the wardrobe, then there is an obligation to treat the wardrobe as *his* work with respect. However, if the existence of the wardrobe is explained otherwise (perhaps as an endless chain of coincidences), there are, of course, still enough other good reasons to value it and treat it with care, but this *personal* component, obligation and responsibility are lacking.

For other contexts, we need to ask whether and how these ethical implications can be valid and guide us to a different understanding of our being and acting. It must be taken seriously that today we read these and other biblical texts after centuries of scientific research, which has sought and found other answers to the questions of the wherefrom and whither of the world we find. In addition, since the European Enlightenment, there has been a global trend of progressing secularization, the full extent and implications of which cannot yet be fully grasped. Many people are living in the *Secular Age*, impressively described by Charles Taylor (2007). Whether and how biblical/church belief in creation and modern natural science can be reconciled in this context cannot be discussed here.

If one does not believe in an actual creation (however understood in detail) in the possible application of these biblical statements, and thus abandons the biblical foundations, or regards them only as a *theologoumenon*, one will have to draw on the – for whatever reason – valued biblical and ecclesiastical doctrine of creation in a different way. In doing so, many people are likely to follow the widespread line of thought that relegates "facts" (by no means an unproblematic concept) to the realm of science and locates their possible interpretations in the realm of myth (which can, of course, have an enormous impact), theology and faith. Whether and how convincing this is for our contemporaries (apart from the representatives who are convinced of this approach of factually not true and yet mysteriously true) is debatable.

All such considerations aside, there are many other good and urgent reasons for preserving the entire creation in addition to the implications proposed here, which – in this case – are indeed without alternative.

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