

Chapter 9

Climate Change and Eschatology



Kurt Bangert

Abstract Global Warming and other environmental hazards have conjured up among Bible readers an impending end-time apocalypse. Based on a previous paper offering three biblical eschatological scenarios (the Rainbow Model, the Nineveh Model and the Apocalypse Model), this paper expands on the three scenarios, giving more theological and, if any, historical background. While the Rainbow Model (Noah's flood story) assumes that another worldwide destruction will never again take place and the Apocalypse Model (Jesus' end-time expectation) assumes the ultimate end-time world annihilation, the Nineveh Model (Jonah's doomsday message) assumes that the prospect of an envisioned end-time annihilation can be avoided through repentance and a change of behavior. For each scenario, this paper looks at possible historical roots and the theological intent. The result of the study suggests that each of the three narratives (Noah, Jesus, Jonah) is characterized by an inherent *component of contingency*, explicit or not, and that none of them is unequivocally unconditional. Each narrative assumes the basic tenet of God's compassion and mercy in light of man's willingness to change heart. Explicit or not, all biblical predictions entail contingencies that make it impossible for man to exactly predict the future. While the biblical covenants put man into a special relationship with God, God remains at all times sovereign and supreme to extend His mercy and compassion to whomever He wishes if and whenever man confesses his sins and changes his ways.

Three End-Time Scenarios Revisited

Global warming, environmental degradation and the extinction of many species at times conjure up doomsday scenarios of an impending end-time apocalypse. In light of humanity's relentless exploitation of nature, some orthodox people interpret such apocalyptic end-time scenarios as the fulfilment of biblical eschatological prophecies about the end of the world. Without any doubt, there are such biblical end-time prophecies: "Heaven and earth will pass away." (Mt 24:35 ESV) Or: "We are looking

K. Bangert (✉)
Bad Nauheim, Germany
e-mail: kontakt@kurtbangert.de

forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.” (2Pet 3:13 NIV; see also: Is 65:17 or Rev 21:1). Hence, for today’s Biblicist end-time soothsayers the end of the world is imminent, doomsday is just around the corner, and God is about to establish His own kingdom (see Grey 2013). Climate change—no longer questioned today (IPCC 2015)—seems to confirm the expectation of the world’s annihilation and the second coming of Christ. Should it be true that mankind is meddling with our climate (anthropogenic causes of global warming—which some are still doubting), then man’s hubris and sinfulness only serves to speed up the coming of the final judgment and the “restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:21 NKJV).

There is ample evidence of climate denial due to religious reasoning. Referring to climate change, the Republican Representative Tim Walberg (Michigan) once told his constituents: “As a Christian, I believe that there is a creator God who is much bigger than us”; so he was quoted by the *Washington Post*, “And I’m confident that, if there’s a real problem, he can take care of it.” (Washington Post 2017) The popular Christian American Hal Lindsey, referring to God’s covenants with this earth, expressed his belief “that as long as this old earth is floating in space, there will be no man-made climate change” (Lindsey 2015). Lisa Vox, author of the book *Existential Threats: American Apocalyptic Beliefs in the Technological Era*, came to the conclusion: “We must accept that a number of conservative evangelicals, especially from the older generations, will never support significant action on climate change, especially if it means signing a global treaty” (Washington Post 2017).

Climate denial is prevalent also in the very countries and regions most affected by global warming, such as in the Pacific Islands. Teburoro Tito, a former President of Kiribati, was quoted as saying that “God is not so silly to allow people to perish just like that” (Fair 2018, p. 5). Some authors have belittled religious thought as being “barriers” in the fight against global warming. On the other hand, though, while there is evidence “that the Church has significant potential as a climate change actor” there is also, according to Hannah Fair, a need “to consider the power and potency of religious ideas themselves” (Fair 2018, p. 3) which may serve to support an appropriate climate response in tune with scientific evidence.

A minority of Marshall Islanders, for instance, have combined scientific knowledge and religious faith as a springboard for action (Rudiak-Gould 2009). According to Fair, “while there is both the potential and prerogative for spiritualising climate change, it must be recognised that not all religious groups approach the morals and ethics of climate change in the same way” (Fair 2018, p. 4). Fair strongly advocates a “balancing” of religious and scientific knowledge which she terms *tufala save* (meaning “double knowledge”), but she also recognizes that Pacific Islanders while seeking to balance religious and scientific knowledge, most often give priority to their religious beliefs. One Presbyterian pastor was quoted as saying: “Yeah, we can by scientific research say something will happen but if God says there will be rain, there’ll be rain. ... God is sovereign” (Fair 2018, p. 7).

Vital Questions Regarding Eschatology

In light of the foregoing, Luetz, Buxton and Bangert have asked these vital questions:

Does climate change herald the end of the world? Does environmental degradation constitute the beginning of the end? Is God about to create a new heaven and a new earth because we are on the verge of destroying the one He entrusted to us in the first place? Must the world really pass away before God’s kingdom can come? Did God expect humans to destroy creation so that He would replace it? What did Jesus actually mean when he spoke of the ‘Kingdom of God’? Did he mean a future kingdom, or did he interpret the ‘Kingdom of God’ as something already begun in the here and now and [as something] that was and is to expand through his disciples? Has God set a time when the world would come to an end? Or is He leaving it up to humans to determine the time when the Earth becomes uninhabitable? Does the progressive anthropogenic destruction of God’s creation in any way relieve humanity of the originally entrusted creational stewardship responsibility? Further, could it be that some Bible-believing Christians have adopted a sort of apocalyptic fatalism? Could it be that doomsday Christians, although not necessarily yearning for the end of the world, still reckon with it, as it were, in a somewhat placid and unperturbed fatalistic expectation, hoping that when the end comes, God will then be able to finally establish His kingdom? – according to the dictum: ‘When the last tree has come down, Christ will come’.¹ (Luetz et al. 2018, p. 61 f.)

The authors responded to those questions by unfolding three possible end-time scenarios (or *models*) which they thought could help in dealing responsibly with the Bible’s eschatological language, especially in light of what they called the “creation crisis”. They hoped that these three models would help clarify the crucial question of whether it made sense for Christians to engage in fighting global warming, considering that—according to Biblical end-time prophets—the imminent end of the world cannot be avoided anyhow.

Three End-Time Models

The first end-time scenario was called the *Rainbow Model*. It was described as follows:

After Noah and his family survived the flood (seemingly as the only family), he offered a burnt offering in gratitude for their escape. And God promised: ‘Never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.’ (Gen 8:21–22 NIV). As a sign of this promise God reportedly created the rainbow: ‘Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.’ (Gen 9:16 NIV). According to the Rainbow Model, there will not be another worldwide apocalyptic catastrophe extinguishing virtually all life, because God has promised it. Relatedly and importantly, according to this model, there is

¹The dictum is an adaptation of the Native American saying: “When the last tree is cut down, the last fish eaten, and the last stream poisoned, you will realize that you cannot eat money.” J. Simpson and J. Speake (Eds): *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, 5th edition, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2009.

no immediate need to take action on climate change and creation care because the earth, all living creatures and the climate are essentially predestined to endure unharmed in perpetuity. (Luetz et al. 2018, p. 63)

Another scenario was the *Nineveh Model* which is based on the prophet Jonah who, according to the narrative in the Book of Jonah, was sent by God to the city of Nineveh to preach doomsday judgment: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” (Jon 1:2 NIV) Because Jonah had little inclination to be a doomsday preacher, “it took some dramatic detours before he eventually gave in and went to Nineveh to preach the message God had instructed him to deliver: ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown.’ (Jon 3:4 KJV).” (Luetz et al., p. 65) But then came the surprising turnabout: “The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.” (Verse 5 NIV). Even the king “took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust” (Verse 6 NIV). And when God saw how they turned away from their evil ways and repented, he decided not to destroy Nineveh (Verse 10). Luetz et al. commented this narrative:

The lesson of the Nineveh Model is that apocalyptic announcements do not of necessity come to pass in every case but constitute first and foremost a call to repentance and behavioral transformation. According to the Nineveh Model, God could be giving humans – as the appointed stewards of His creation – another chance to repent and amend their ways. (Luetz et al. p. 65)

The third scenario was called the *Apocalypse Model*. It worked from the opposite assumption of the Rainbow model (Noah’s flood) in “that there actually will be such a worldwide apocalyptic doomsday one day – regardless and in spite of the Rainbow motif.” (Luetz et al., p. 64) This scenario was based on the end-time sermons of Jesus as reported in the New Testament. Jesus in fact drew a parallel to Noah’s flood: “For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.” (Mt 24:38–39 NIV) At the time of the final judgment which Jesus was here imagining, some would be saved, many others would be destroyed, leaving the rainbow promise aside. Luetz et al. commented:

According to this model, there is no need to take action on climate change because the earth is destined to be doomed *anyway*, and all living creatures will ultimately be terminated by inescapable end time disaster. This model is alive and well, whenever politicians either deny or make light of the enormous damage unmitigated anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions are inflicting on God’s creation. (Luetz et al., p. 64)

For many who cling to the Apocalypse Model, “it is also too late to save the Planet, too hard and too futile to decarbonize the global economy, and perhaps even too ‘unspiritual’ to take action on climate change, because the Apocalypse is the preordained ‘Divine design’ in respect of the prophesied coming end” (Luetz et al., p. 64).

In synthesizing the three end-time models, Luetz et al. came to the conclusion—in light of the global warming and the general threat that humanity poses to the equilibrium of creation – that while they could not categorically exclude the possibility of an

end-time Armageddon (Apocalypse model) as a contingency, they strongly favored the Nineveh Model: “It invites us to take very seriously the warnings of today’s prophets, namely the thousands of scientific experts who advocate urgent change [...], begin to cover ourselves (figurately speaking) with sackcloths, and organize a dramatic turnabout of our thinking and behavior” (Luetz et al., p. 66).

The authors also reminded their readers of the oft-cited verse from 2 Chr 7:14: “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and *turn from their wicked ways*; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will *heal their land*.” (NIV, emphasis by Luetz et al.) And the authors asked: “Could it be that such heartfelt human repentance may prompt God to hear, forgive and *heal* the land?” (Luetz et al., p. 65).

To summarize: While the *Rainbow Model* assumes that another worldwide destruction will never take place again (the rainbow being its warranty) and the *Apocalypse Model* presumes an unequivocal and ultimate end-time world annihilation, the *Nineveh Model* advocates that the prospect of an envisioned end-time annihilation can still be avoided if humanity repent from their destructive behavior and amend their ways to avoid the ultimate eschatological disaster. In other words: The detrimental (and potentially lethal) effects of climate change must not of necessity constitute the “end of the world” that Biblicist conservatives anticipate—IF humankind chooses, and successfully manages, to reverse its destructive course.

In this paper, I shall now make an attempt to give more background to the three models by looking at the respective *theological and*—if any—*historical* contexts of the Noah story, the Jonah story, and the apocalyptic scenarios which were so abundantly prevalent during the time of Jesus. In terms of the *Noah narrative*, I shall not only look at the theological intent of the story but also on what we today can know about the historical roots of the flood account. In terms of the *Jonah narrative*, I shall not only investigate the intent of the Book of Jonah and its plot, but also its later usage by Jesus (the “sign of Jonah”) and its possible application to today’s global challenges. In terms of the *apocalyptic end-time scenarios*, I shall investigate the nature and intent of apocalyptic literature in general as well as the intent of the apocalyptic passage in Matthew 24–25 where Jesus apparently announced the imminent end of the world (which German theologians have called *Naherwartung*). How must we interpret this imminent end-time expectation (*Naherwartung*) today—in light of it being thwarted and postponed again and again for some 2000 years?

The result of this paper will show that all of the three narratives (Rainbow, Nineveh, Apocalyptic scenario) are characterized by an inherent *component of contingency*. That is to say, none of them are unequivocally unconditional, but each contains an inherent conditionality or contingency. And the question is to be raised what this conditionality means in light of the current climate crisis.

The Rainbow Model (Noah's Message)

In the following section, I wish to first look at how the flood narrative has been utilized by the Pacific islanders, especially in relation to the climate crisis, before going on to consider the *theological* implication and possibly *historical* background of the *Rainbow Model*. From that, I shall draw some conclusions with regard to an eschatological perspective.

Noah's Flood as Primordial Archetype

In the Pacific Islands, Noah's flood narrative has been cited as "a reoccurring feature of discussions with pastors and parishioners" and thus "held meaning and relevance" for many islanders who were questioned by Hannah Fair. The biblical story is also a good example for what Fair calls "epistemological entanglements" as it highlights "the polysemic potential of scripture". Hence, Fair used the narrative "as a means to explore the balance, enmeshment and tensions between different epistemologies". There were three discursive manifestations of the flood narrative in the Pacific Islands, namely: (1) the rainbow covenant as denial, (2) Noah as example for preparation, and (3) Islanders being unjustly left outside of the ark (Fair 2018, p. 8).

While Fair did not directly encounter the first manifestation with her interlocutors, her interviewees did complain, however, that Noah's covenant was often cited by elderly people as a reason for inaction and for a religious counternarrative to the threat pictured by science. To them, the rainbow covenant serves as an argument to profess the ongoing continuity of the world, as was shown also by Rubow and Bird (2016). But most pastors who were questioned on the subject, explicitly rejected that interpretation.

The second manifestation of the Noah narrative was encountered in connection with cyclone disasters that may (have) hit the islanders. Pastors evoked Noah as an example for timely preparedness—not only in case of a cyclone hitting the islands but even in terms of climate adaptation. "Thus, here the story of Noah is not a vehicle for doubt, but is explicitly mobilised as a weapon against it ..." (Fair 2018, p. 9) (Similarly, the biblical story of Joseph being prepared for a famine was invoked by some participants as an example of preparation.)

The third manifestation was encountered with Ezekiel, a church-based Tuvaluan climate advocate who emphasized the need for human action. According to this manifestation Noah is not the hero of the story but is counted among those who have safely sought refuge in the ark, while many others (including many animals) perished outside the ark. "Those outside the ark need to be liberated and I think God is with those who are outside the ark. God is struggling with them, trying to alleviate them while Noah is enjoying the luxury life, you know", said Ezekiel. Comments Hannah Fair: "While this reading is theologically unorthodox, it is highly pertinent to the question of how climate change is framed" (Fair 2018, p. 11).

I shall now review the theological and historical background of the Noah narrative.

Theological Background

According to the biblical flood narrative, God saw that the earth “was filled with violence” and that “all flesh had corrupted their way on earth” which caused God to decide “to make an end of all flesh” (Gen 6:12–13). “Behold, I will destroy them with the earth”, He said (verse 13). But because He also saw that “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation”, He spared Noah the fate of the destruction and ordered him to build the ark so that he, his family, and “two of every sort” of animal would go into the ark and survive the flood (verse 19). Through the flood, God “blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. They were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark.” (Gen 7:23 ESV) After Noah survived the flood, he built an altar to the Lord, and when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” (Gen 8, 21–22 ESV) And God made a covenant between him and the earth. The rainbow in the sky was to be the sign of this covenant. “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth” (Gen 9:17 ESV).

It is to be noted that God actually made two covenants with Noah. The first one was before the flood: “I shall establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark ...” (Gen 6: 17–19 ESV). This was a covenant that promised salvation from disaster. The second covenant was concluded after the rescue: “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood ...” (Gen 9:11 ESV). The first covenant was of a salvific nature and limited to a select group (Noah and his family and the animals inside the ark). The second covenant was of a preventive nature and a promise given to the whole world.

The theme of the *covenant* pervades the whole Bible. According to the biblical narrative, God made a covenant with Noah, later with Abraham, then with the people whom Moses and Joshua led from Egypt into the promised land. In the New Testament the “old covenant” is replaced by a new one (Hebr 8:13), according to which God “will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds” (Hebr 10,16 NIV). In the Old Testament, the covenant (Hebrew *berit*) is often connected with the word *shalom* which not only means peace but also implies wholeness, wholesomeness and complete harmony (von Rad Bd 1, 1978, p. 144).

If Scripture is taken at face value, the covenants widen from Noah to the whole world, but then are narrowed down to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (alias Israel) and their offspring, the people of Israel. Abraham is promised that his many descendants will inherit a vast land (from the Nile to the Euphrates). However, when the Bible

is read from an historical-critical perspective, the covenant theology ought to be reversed: Based on the covenant consciousness of the Jews during the time of their exile, the covenant idea was projected back into Israel's earlier history (cf von Rad Bd 1, 1978, pp. 147–149.). For instance, when in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, it is repeatedly stated that God will scatter his people amongst the nations in response to their disobedience (Lev. 26:27–35; Deut. 4:25–31, 40; 8:19–20; 28:36–37, 62–68), then these references may be considered to be back projections by which the covenant idea is extended to the time of the exodus, then to the time of the patriarchs and finally even to the time of Noah. The covenant given to Abraham may have served to reassure the exiles not only of their identity as Abraham's offspring but also of their right to the holy land.

We must also recognize a contingency factor in the covenant idea. The fact that Jerusalem and its temple were actually destroyed and the Jews were indeed scattered amongst the nations suggests that God had, at least for the time being, abandoned his "eternal" covenant because His people had broken it repeatedly: "[T]hey did not obey your voice or walk in your law. They did nothing of all you commanded them to do. Therefore you have made all this disaster come upon them." (Jer 32:23 ESV) What was originally meant to be an *everlasting* covenant (cf. Gen 17:13; Num 18:19; 1Chr 16:17; Ps 105:10; Is 55:3; Jer 50:5; Ez 16:6 etc.) was cut short and—at least for the time being—terminated due to Israel's disobedience. Hence, despite God's intention to abide by his eternal covenant, the contingency of that covenant cannot be overlooked.

One of the important theological lessons to be learned from the flood story is that man is inherently depraved ("man's heart is evil from his youth": Gen 8:21), and that violence and evil will therefore always be an existing reality on earth. The destruction of the earth could not and would not prevent evil from rising up again, even amongst Noah's own descendants. Man's depravity is a given in this world. Nevertheless, it is not only desirable but also possible that some people (like Noah and others after him) can and will be righteous "in their generation". The continuation of the Genesis story (and the whole biblical account) offers ample evidence for man's depravity while at the same time giving many examples of men and women adhering to the covenant with God and living a righteous life.

The flood story, then, is a narrative that encourages man to live righteously and, hence, receive the blessings of a merciful and benevolent God who will consider man's righteousness as a "pleasing aroma". The story, of course, also assumes very strongly that there will not be another world-wide disaster destroying life on earth. That promise—vouched for by the rainbow in the sky—was a comforting and reassuring pledge that was to take away from humankind any fear of another such global disaster.

Historical Background

I will now turn to the historical aspect of the flood story. There are two questions over which Christians have battled for years. The first is: Is the flood story a myth or has it an historical basis? The second question is: If there is some historical basis to the flood story, was it a world-wide flood or a regional event? I will address both questions here.

As for the first question and the proposed alternative between *myth* and *history*, this is—in my opinion—a false dichotomy. For the Greek word *mythos* (μῦθος) does not connote “unhistorical”, but rather implies an event which transcends, in significance and meaning, the realm of time and space. In other words, a biblical event may very well have historical roots which in the course of time gained a mythical implication for man’s existence. The myths of an ethnic group or a nation say much about that group’s or nation’s identity and self-understanding. What matters is not so much whether these myths are “true” in a strict historical sense but whether they are true in an existential sense. Myths are rooted in reality, but grow and blossom in the collective subconsciousness of an ethnic group which draws from it its identity, the meaning of its existence, and the interpretation of the lives of its members. Myths are the presuppositions upon which people base their thinking, reasoning, and *weltanschauung*.²

As for Noah’s flood, there has come to the fore in recent years a theory which commands and deserves attention when we speak of the biblical flood narrative. In 1998 two geologists, Walter Pitman and William Ryan, published their book *Noah’s Flood. The New Scientific Discoveries About the Event That Changed History* (Pitman and Ryan 1998). In it, the authors describe their theory about the Black Sea Flood which occurred some 7500 years ago (ca. 5500 B.C.) when the rising waters of the Mediterranean Sea spilled over the Bosphorus to flood the Black Sea which up to that time had been a freshwater lake some 100 meters (more than 300 ft) below the level of the Mediterranean. The spilled-over salty seawater flooded much of the coastal areas of the Black Sea, especially in the north where the coastal regions were rather flat, turning the once freshwater lake into a deadly (“black”) saltwater sea and irrevocably submerging large swaths of land never to be retrieved again. The evidence for the Black Sea Flooding was impressive, and a Bulgarian research team around Petko Dimitrov substantiated much of the evidence previously collected by Pitman and Ryan and other teams (Dimitrov 2004). While there are still controversies regarding some details of the Black Sea Flood, the actual flooding appears to be factual. Culture and language expert Harald Haarmann has described the cultural and linguistic repercussions of the Black Sea Flood, consolidating and corroborating

²For a fuller discussion of my understanding of myth, see my chapter „Schöpfungsmythen” in: Kurt Bangert, *Und sie dreht sich doch! 50 Antworten auf die Frage, wie alles begann*, Theiss: Darmstadt 2015, S. 14–41. For further discussion on the concept of *myth* see also: Norbert Bischof: *Das Kraftfeld der Mythen. Signale aus der Zeit, in der wir die Welt erschaffen haben*, Piper: München 1996/³2004; Christian Danz and Werner Schuessler: *Die Macht des Mythos. Das Mythosverständnis Paul Tillichs im Kontext*, de Gruyter/ Kindle Edition 2014; Mircea Eliade: *Myth and Reality*, Waveland Press/HarperRow: Prospect Heights, Ill. 1963.

much of the evidence. (Haarmann 2003) Christian and Siegfried Schoppe have even connected the Black Sea Flood to Plato's Atlantis Saga (Schoppe and Schoppe 2004). The scenario was also supported by two Indian geographers (Roy and Mukhopadhyay 2014). And various media have reported on these findings (for an example, see Axel Bojanowski 2010).

What remains a matter of conjecture though is whether the Black Sea Flood constitutes the historical basis for the biblical flood narrative. What speaks in favor of this connection are the flood stories that sprang up around the Black Sea. While it is true that flood stories have been discovered all around the world, the most prominent and detailed ones, however, were found in the vicinity of the Black Sea, such as the biblical narrative, the Gilgamesh Epic or the Greek Deucalion legend. If we assume that indeed there was a near-miraculous rescue story of one family having luckily survived the Black Sea Flood on a houseboat that eventually landed on the eastern shores of today's Black Sea, then it takes no phantasy to assume that this story was told all around the Near East and even beyond.

This brings us to the question of whether the biblical flood was a worldwide event or a regional occurrence. While there can be no doubt that those who transmitted Noah's story and included it in the Genesis account considered the flood to be worldwide, it is also true that no serious geologist alive today would speak of any evidence for a worldwide flood. Nevertheless: What are we to make of the numerous flood stories that have sprung up all around the world? There are some 500 of them. Bibli-cists claim that the mere existence of these flood stories prove beyond a reasonable doubt that there must have been a worldwide flood.

What these biblical literalists overlook, though, is that each of the worldwide flood stories tells of a handful of survivors: either a married couple, a pair of siblings or one large family. If indeed there was a worldwide flood and there were surviving families all around the world, then this would obviously belie the biblical narrative according to which only one single family survived—namely Noah's family in the Near East. The only alternative explanation, then, for the many flood stories with numerous survivors would be to assume that the story of the rescued family actually travelled from one place to all corners of the earth, thereby being transformed and adapted to the respective local environment (for instance, the mountain upon which the boat or the raft was supposed to have landed, usually assumed the name of a local mountain). If that is the case, then the numerous flood stories are anything but a proof for a worldwide flood. A review of the literature on the world's flood stories suggests that these accounts are likely to have travelled from the Near East to the rest of the world (cf. Isaak 1996–2002) (For an extensive discussion of the effects of the Black Sea Flood and its cultural, linguistic and theological implication for the interpretation of the biblical flood story, see Bangert 2015, pp. 60–136).

Eschatological Implications

The biblical flood narrative offers the comforting assurance that there would never again be another catastrophe that would destroy the whole earth. But that optimistic promise was relativized by none other than Jesus who in his forewarnings, on the Mount of Olives, of the time when “heaven and earth will pass away”, made explicit reference to Noah’s time by saying:

As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. *That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.* ... Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. (Mt 24:37–39.42 NIV)

Hence, according to Jesus, the rainbow in the sky was no guarantee that there would not be another global and final destruction of the earth. Jesus, therefore, assumed the contingency of the Rainbow Model. As already shown above in the discussion of the covenant, a covenant promise is generally hinged upon the conditions which both parties of the covenant must adhere to in order for the covenant to hold. What was true for the covenant with Israel from which God retracted after Israel had failed to fulfill her part (hence the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering into the diaspora), may also be true for the covenant that God made with all of mankind after the flood: God can retract from it, if mankind fails to abide by the covenant. One could argue, though, that in the case of the rainbow covenant God had made only a one-sided covenant without detailing any requirements to which man must adhere in order for the covenant to hold. Nevertheless, I would suggest two implicit conditionals for the rainbow promise: For one, it was Noah’s thank offering after the rescue that prompted God to grant the covenant in the first place; hence, man’s gratitude and faithfulness to God was reciprocated by God’s promise and constituted man’s inherent part in the deal. For another, if mankind works against the very protection that God had promised to provide, then this covenant too becomes null and void. Why should God protect the earth if man undermines God’s effort in that regard? It would be tantamount to man calling off the covenant.

The Nineveh Model (Jonah’s Message)

Literary and Theological Background

Although the Book of Jonah is enlisted among the “twelve minor prophets” (Dodekapropheton), it does not, contrary to the other eleven books, contain any prophetic message of the prophet that gave the book its name—except for the one message God told him to deliver to the Ninevites: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” (Jon 3:4 NIV) Hence, the book is not the record of a prophet’s

message, but a narrative telling the convoluted story of someone whom God had ordered to fulfil a task which he took great pains to avoid. Neither does the book contain an *explicit* message directed at the people of Israel, as Jonah was sent exclusively to the Ninevites. The book may, however, contain an *implicit* message to the Jews. But which one?

The general theme of the book of Jonah is debatable. Several possibilities have been offered, some of which were discussed by Martin Roth (2005). According to one alternative the book seems to suggest that when God announces a judgment, He does not necessarily follow through with it, as He leaves open a back door for a rescue. And for this, Nineveh is but an example (p. 111). Another alternative assumes a fundamental Jewish debate over whether or not sin must of necessity be atoned for through punishment or whether it can be atoned for simply by turning away from sin. According to this alternative, the book of Jonah aimed its message at those who had insisted on the necessity of punishment (p. 111 f.). Another alternative presupposes the absolute sovereignty of God's freedom who may extend his mercy and compassion to whomever he wishes (Cooper 1993, p. 144). Finally, one can assume that the citation of the psalm in Jon 2:3–10 refers to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the ensuing exile. Based on that assumption one can see the book of Jonah in the context of the Dodekapropheton (twelve minor prophets) and consider Jonah to be a key to an historical interpretation: Jonah was punished for his disobedience as the people of Israel had been punished for their disobedience (Roth, p. 114 f.). In this sense, Jonah becomes the epitome for Israel.

Martin Roth concludes that any book is rarely written for one purpose only, but that most books seek to convey several messages at once. So in this case, too (Roth, *ibid.*; likewise also Schmid 2019, p. 394). One can generalize that the book was written in an historical context in which Nineveh and the surrounding nations were seen very negatively by many Jews. And the book of Jonah takes a stand against this prejudiced viewpoint (Roth, p. 116).

One could also assume, I might add, that the book of Jonah was used as an aetiology around the psalm of Jon 2. The language there of the psalmist being engulfed by the depth of the sea—originally meant to describe the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon—may have been taken literally to describe the wreckage of Jonah's vessel and his wonderful rescue amidst the heathen. Incidentally, it has been widely debated whether the psalm of Jon 2 was a later addition or not. Apart from this debate, the book is widely considered to be a literary unit (Schmid 2019, p. 393).

As the language of the book points to a time *after* the Babylonian exile (there are words in the book reflecting late Hebrew as well as some Aramaisms), the origin of the narrative is usually dated after the fifth century B.C. Some have even dated it as late as between 400 and 200 B.C. (cf. The Interpreter's Bible VI, p. 873). Based on language and allusions to Greek mythology, the book appears to have been written during the time of the Ptolomaeans (third century B.C.) (Schmid 2019, p. 393).

As is well known, the Jews, during the exile in Babylon and Persia, had come to the recognition that their God (Yahweh) was not just a tribal god of their small ethnic group, but the one and only creator of the world who was the God of all peoples, the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians included. The implication was that God's

mercy was not limited and reserved for the Jewish people, but applicable to all peoples everywhere.

The Jews also gained the conviction that it was their holy task to tell the world about this (monotheistic) Creator God who was merciful and forgiving to those who would believe in Him, repent and turn away from their evil ways. In Isaiah 66:18–19 it says: “The time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory. I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations ...” (Is 66:18–19 ESV/NIV) Hence, the Jewish people were to be a *sign* for the surrounding nations. But that missionary notion may have given way to “a spirit of bitterness and vengefulness toward other lands” after the exile (The Interpreters Bible VI, p. 872). That is the probable theological backdrop against which one must read the Jonah narrative, the intention of which seems to be to reawaken in the nation of Israel the missionary destiny to which they once felt called by their God.

The mercifulness of God is obviously an important theme of the book and is exemplified by the story of Jonah whose doomsday message to the Ninevites was thwarted by their contrition and repentance on the one hand and by God’s mercy and forgiveness on the other. When Jonah grew angry after seeing that his prediction had not come to pass, he told God with a reproachful undertone: “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” And God’s answer to him was: “Do you do well to be angry? ... Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120.000 persons ...?” (Jon 4:2–3.11 ESV). The main message of the Book of Jonah appears to be that God’s mercy is for all to grasp: the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Persians. God is for all, and his mercy is for all. In this way, the book of Jonah modifies the dooming judgment messages of the Israelite prophets against their surrounding nations (see, for instance, Joel 4) by setting a counterpoint. Commenting on the lesson of the Jonah narrative and applying it to the here and now, the German theologian Helmut Fischer writes: “We are being challenged to clarify and re-arrange our relationship to those who have a different world view, a different faith and a different value system than we have” (Fischer 2019, p. 99).

Historical-Critical Considerations

While it is true that some biblical literalists still consider the Book of Jonah to have a historical basis, most modern exegetes consider it to be a fictional narrative with an important lesson. (For a discussion of the pros and cons of the historical option, see, for instance, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VI, p. 871 f.) “The popular modern view is that Jonah was written as an imaginative tale either as an allegory of the exile and mission of Israel (*cf.* Je. 51:34), or to teach the truth of God’s universal love by way of a parable.” (NBC 1970, p. 746) Fischer suggests that the Jonah text “does not wish to be read as reporting an actual event.” (Fischer 2019, p. 96)

We know that Jesus himself told many allegorical stories (called “parables”) which were to transmit important truths. It appears that we have allegorical books in the Old Testament, such as Job, Esther or Jonah. The question to be asked is not whether they are true in an historical sense but whether they are true in a theological and existential sense. And there can be little doubt that Jonah’s narrative delivers messages about God’s relationship to us as individuals (Jonah) and to us as collective communities (Ninevites). It has also been suggested that the prophet Jonah is the embodiment of Israel in her relation to the surrounding heathen nations. For instance, according to The Interpreter’s Bible, “the nation, insofar as it rejects its commission to be a light to the Gentiles, is identical with Jonah” (The Interpreters Bible VI, p. 873).

Jonah and Jesus

Not only Noah’s flood story was featured in the teachings of Jesus, but also Jonah’s story. When the Pharisees demanded that he legitimize his role by performing a “sign”, Jesus retorted, according to one synoptic version: “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” (Mt 12:39) And he continued: “The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah” (Verse 41).

There are altogether five synoptic versions of the demand for a sign (Mt 12:38–42; Mt 16: 1 + 4; Mark 8:11–12; Luke 11:29–32 and John 6:30). In only one of the five version is there a reference to the *three days and nights* which Jonah was said to have spent in the belly of a fish and which were then taken as an allegory to the “three days and three nights” which Jesus spent in the “heart of the earth” (Mt 12:40). Apart from the problem, that Jesus could not have spent three days and three nights in the earth, if we accept the common narrative according to which Jesus was crucified on a Friday and resurrected on a Sunday, an historical-critical comparison of the five different synoptic versions (two of them in Matthew) leads to the inescapable conclusion that the reference to the *three days and nights* must be a later interpolation that actually distorts the message of that tradition. But what is the message?

The gist of the narrative is best reflected in the Mark version in which the response of Jesus actually makes no reference to Jonah at all: “Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.” (Mark 8:12) The message is: Jesus will not give them a sign (i.e. a miracle). Fullstop.

The reference to the “sign of Jonah” is found only in the two Matthew versions and in the Luke version. In Matthew 16 Jesus simply says: “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it *except the sign of Jonah.*” (Verse 4) Then Jesus left them without further ado. That version does not give an explanation of what the “sign of Jonah” was supposed to be. That explanation is only given in the versions of Mt 12 and Luke 11. In both places the explanation is as follows: “The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something

greater than Jonah is here.” (Luke 11:32). Mt 12 offers the same text. The meaning in both places is clear: Jesus has no intention whatsoever of giving his critics and doubters a sign—except the sign of Jonah: It was merely *at the preaching of Jonah* that the Ninevites repented, and it should simply be *at the preaching of Jesus* that the Jews in his days should repent and mend their ways. The “sign of Jonah”, then, stands for the preacher himself (Jonah and Jesus) and his preaching. In other words: Believe my words, Jesus is saying, that should be sufficient. No sign, no miracle is needed; just the preaching and the listening and the believing and the repenting. It only takes listening and a change of heart to experience God’s grace and mercy.

Hence, not only in the Jonah narrative, but also in the preaching of Jesus, is there an inherent contingency in the message: Don’t look for miracles or signs in the sky but simply listen to the message of the messenger and change your ways, and God will show His mercy and compassion to you. God’s prophecies always carry an intrinsic contingency in them that is largely dependent on man’s attitude.

The Apocalypse Model (Jesus’ End-Time Message)

We now turn to the third scenario, the Apocalypse Model. We are referring here especially to Jesus’ prophecies and warnings regarding the coming of the Son of Man and the final judgment as described in Mt 24 (and, partly, in 25). This is not to deny texts of an apocalyptic nature in the other three gospels or other New Testament books. (For a more extensive discussion of NT apocalyptic cf. Becker and Öhler 2006.)

The Phenomenon of Apocalypticism

The passage of Mt 24–25 is a typical apocalyptic text. The phenomenon of *apocalypticism*—the name is derived from Revelation 1:1—is characterized by a *specific literary genre* on the one hand and a particular *eschatological world view*, on the other, which is preoccupied with the end of the world and the consummation of history. “Generally, where religions are occupied with the problem of the end of the world and the close of history, we meet apocalyptic thoughts and their literary deposits, especially in the Orient, and particularly in Iranian religion, but also in Hellenistic syncretism and among the ancient Germans. Apocalypticism developed most profusely on the soil of Judaism and primitive Christianity.” (Kümmel 1966, p. 317)

The term *Apocalypticism* (as a terminus technicus for a particular literary genre) can be traced back to Friedrich Lücke (1791–1855) who used the word *Apokalyptik* in his Introduction to the Apocalypse of John and other related apocalyptic literature (1852). The original meaning of the word (“uncovering”) has little to do with the term as it is today used for apocalyptic literature which implies both a particular form

and content. While the term is nowadays applied exclusively in the modern scientific discourse, it was not used in ancient times to describe apocalyptic literature.

Apocalyptic literature proceeded from what is considered an apocalyptic movement (Tilly 2012, p. 12) that is generally characterized by certain basic principles such as: (1) the experience of the presence as being fraught with suffering, threat, injustice, hopelessness and suppression; (2) a dualistic world view of opposites such as light and darkness, good and evil, life and death, truth and deception etc.; (3) the idea of several aeons (“Weltzeitalter”) such as the idealized past, the disorderly present, the Armageddon-type end-time aeon, and the time of deliverance; and (4) the expectation of a final judgement. Typical for apocalyptic literature is that the future and the hereafter become the projection of today’s hopes and fears. The apocalyptic paradigm pretends to have received revelations about God’s salvific plans even though that plan is nowhere to be verified in today’s reality (Tilly, p. 15).

Apocalyptic literature (which generally deals with eschatological events) is to be distinguished from *prophetic* literature which is altogether a different genre and historically precedes the apocalyptic type. According to Israel’s prophets the presence allows for divine intervention at any time, while the apocalyptic viewpoint does not reckon with any divine intervention during the present era but expects God to put a radical end to the presence at some point in the future. Hence, apocalyptic thought is an expression of the disappointment over God’s virtual non-intervention in times past. Another difference between the prophetic and the apocalyptic view is that while the prophets reckoned with God’s judgmental intervention as a consequence of man’s sin during the current history, the apocalyptic view places God’s retribution at the eschatological final judgement (Tilly, p. 22 f.).

Apocalyptic literature has flourished since the time of Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah when—amongst the diaspora Jews—the expectation of the imminent end of the world and the coming of the kingdom of God (led by the *Messiah*) came more and more to the fore. While Mt 24–25 constitutes only a portion of the Gospel of Matthew, “the true Jewish apocalypses present complete books of prophecy in pseudonymous form” (Kümmel 1966, p. 317). One of the most prominent—and fully preserved—Jewish apocalyptic books is the *Book of Daniel* which, according to most modern scholars, was probably written at the time of the Maccabean revolt. There are also apocalyptic passages in other Old Testament books, notably Is 24–27; 33–35; Jer 33; Ez 39–39; Joel 3; and Zech 12–14.

There are also numerous non-canonical apocalyptic books many of which were written during the Jewish era. Jewish apocalyptic books were, for instance, the *Book of Enoch*, the *Assumption of Moses*, *Second and Fourth Ezra*, the *Jewish Sibyllines*, the *Syrian Apocalypse of Baruch* etc. But there were also apocalyptic books authored in the early Christian era. The *Ascension of Isaiah* is believed to have originated during the Judaeo-Christian era, as it contains Jewish and Christian elements. The early Christians either revised some of the Jewish apocalyptic literature, such as *Ezra*, the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* and the *Christian Sibyllines*, or they wrote altogether new books of the same genre, such as the *Apocalypse of John* (known as Revelation), the *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, etc. most of which were not included in the New Testament canon. Some apocalyptic narratives have even

surfaced in the Quran—such as the *Christian Legend Concerning Alexander* or the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. (For further discussion on Quranic apocalyptic literature, see Bangert 2016, pp. 426–450).

According to Tilly, Jewish apocalyptic literature emerged as a result of the “Makkabaean crisis” when Greek and Jewish elites attempted to turn Jerusalem into an Hellenistic metropolis. The Makkabaens succeeded in staving off that Hellenistic challenge and in reaffirming the conservative Jewish tradition. The apocalyptic revision did no longer assume the wholesale salvation of the Jewish people as a nation but reduced the salvific promise to a pious remnant amongst the Jews who remained faithful to the traditional law (Tilly 2012, p. 39).

One of the important features of apocalyptic literature is that the authors “do not dare to step forth personally, but conceal themselves behind the authority of some ancient worthy, such as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, the twelve patriarchs, Moses, Elijah, Daniel, Baruch and Ezra.” (Kümmel 1966, p. 317) The nominal would-be author usually epitomizes an idealistic authority and represents a normative past to which the content of the apocalyptic texts is linked (Tilly 2012, p. 49 f.).

Another characteristic, albeit connected with the previous one, is that the history portrayed in apocalyptic literature usually runs from the time of the pretended would-be author through the time of the unnamed actual author to a distant end-time future. By purporting an ancient author, the book appears to accurately “predict” the events of the future—at least up to a certain point in time—and therefore solicits trust also for the final events of its anticipated eschatology. “They write history in prophetic form from the time of the alleged author until the end of the world. About the time of the actual author, which is treated with special accuracy, there often occurs a break between representation of past history and construction of future history, which gives a clue to the time of composition.” (Kümmel 1966, p. 317) Such *vaticinia ex eventu* (“prophecy from the event”) represent the fictitious construction of a future of which the first part has already come to pass and thereby instills confidence in the would-be author to also predict accurately the remaining events (cf. also Tilly 2012, p. 51).

Apocalyptic literature—Jewish and Christian alike—is characterized by an “uncompromising cosmic dualism” (Tilly 2012, p. 51), contrasting antagonistic powers, principalities and world aeons. Opposing each other are the evil world and the future salvation, the present impurity and the future purity, the light and the darkness, the unjust and the pious, God’s adversary and God Himself (ibid.). Apocalypticism distinguishes particularly between the evil present aeon and the time of the end, when God “will again reveal himself mightily and will finally prevail. The world lies in wickedness, but God will help. This aeon of the godless, earthly kingdom is coming to an end; the new aeon of God’s transcendental kingdom stands at the door.” (Kümmel 1966, p. 318) The end is portrayed as being close at hand, as in the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, and it behooves man to prepare for it by repentance and a change of heart. The end is usually preceded by cataclysmic cosmic events and a chain of catastrophes on earth which are the forebodings of the ultimate consummation of history and the final judgment at which man’s fate will be decided. “The seriousness of the threat of judgment and the glow of hope in imminent salvation through God’s wonderful rule exercised strong influence upon Jewish piety

in the centuries around the turn of our era.” (Kümmel 1966, p. 318) The apocalyptic dualism of the Jews (and later, the Christians) is most likely to have been influenced by the Persian dualism which at times has also been identified as Gnostic philosophy (For a discussion on Persian dualism, see Widengren 1965; for Gnostic dualism, see Jonas 1999).

According to Tilly, there is a subtle difference between Jewish and Christian apocalypticism, although both are historically closely related. The dissimilarity lies in the availability of salvation. While the Jewish apocalyptic expects salvation only at the very end of time, the Christian apocalyptic believes that salvation was made accessible already through the Christ event (Tilly 2012, p. 88). While the Jewish apocalyptic has given up on the current wicked aeon, the Christian apocalyptic still believes in some sort of divine intervention during the present era. Says Tilly: “The most important difference between the early Christian kerygma and the Jewish apocalyptic consists in the Christian assumption of God being operative in this world and in history.”³ (Tilly 2012, p. 90) God’s salvific intervention is seen in the Christ event (the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus) by which the eschatological aeon has already been introduced vicariously. The presence is not entirely godless and hopeless, as it is seen by the Jewish apocalyptic, but is a time when God makes His salvation available to those who believe (Tilly 2012, p. 91). God’s salvation has been mediated through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and it is in man’s relation to Christ that the final judgment becomes effective even now. “The decisive judgement over all men and women takes place, as it were, already in their encounter with the earthly Jesus ...”⁴ (Tilly 2012, p. 104).

The Expectation of Jesus

As a Jew, Jesus apparently had more or less adopted the eschatological/apocalyptic world view of his time and his people, and it should be no surprise to note that his preaching centered around the coming of the eschatological “kingdom of God” and man’s preparation for it. One will also have to reckon with the possibility (if not the fact) that the thinking of the early (Judaean-) Christian church influenced the synoptic tradition which also found its way into the book of Matthew. It is quite likely, for instance, when Jesus predicted of the temple in Jerusalem that “there will not be left here one stone upon another” (Mt 24:2), that this was a back projection by the early church which was already fully aware of the fate of the Jewish temple which the Romans destroyed in 70 A.D. (The book of Matthew is believed to date from 80 to 100 A.D.).

³Original German: “Die wichtigste Differenz zwischen dem frühchristlichen Kerygma und der jüdischen Apokalypitk besteht nämlich in der christlichen Annahme des Wirkens Gottes in der Welt und in der Geschichte.”

⁴Original German: “Das Entscheidungsgericht über alle Menschen vollzieht sich vielmehr bereits aktuell in ihrer Begegnung mit dem irdischen Jesus ...”.

In his apocalyptic sermon of Mt 24–25, Jesus announced the coming of the Son of Man, i.e. the coming of the Messiah. When “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man” (Mt 24:29–30 ESV). Then he said: “When you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (Verses 33 and 34).

It has been a puzzle for many theologians that Jesus predicted the coming of the Son of Man to be happening during the lifetime of those who were contemporaries of Jesus. But did Jesus actually utter those words? Or were they put into his mouth by Christians who had seen the destruction of the Jewish temple? Some theologians have argued that Jesus erred when assuming the end would come during the life time of his contemporaries. Werner Zager, for instance, wrote: “The historical Jesus was filled with the urgent expectation of an imminent kingdom of God and the final judgment. And he erred in that expectation.” (Zager 1996) But was it really the expectation of Jesus? Or was it the hope of those having seen the destruction of Jerusalem who anticipated the nearby end of the world and who placed their expectation into the mouth of Jesus, as it were?

Be that as it may, we have in any case, in the subsequent verses, the warnings of Jesus who is also reported to have said: “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” (Verse 36) According to this verse, not even Jesus, the Son of God, could have known the time of the coming of the Son of Man and the end of the world. Even if this verse were considered a later interpolation by the early church—in light of the predicted events not coming to pass as early as anticipated—one cannot insinuate that Jesus, even while expecting the Kingdom of God to come soon, pretended to know the exact time and date of its coming. First on his mind was not the timeline of the eschatological events, but whether or not people would be ready for them. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus warned: “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.” (Verse 6 ESV) So there seems to be an ambiguity about what Jesus may or may not have claimed to know about the coming of the Son of Man. But he definitely wanted his listeners to stay alert and prepare for whatever was coming whenever it was coming. “Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Verse 42).

From the apocalyptic perspective of John the Baptist, the fate of the present aeon was already sealed: it would be utterly destroyed and replaced by a future Kingdom of God at the end of time; and the final judgement would decide who may enter that kingdom and who may not. From the perspective of Jesus, however, the Kingdom of God was already in the making; it was “all but coming”—to use a famous phrase of Walter Rauschenbusch (1907, p. 309). God’s Kingdom is already a present reality—however feeble and unassertive it may yet be. It is not entirely deferred to the time of the end. In fact, the time of the end has already begun, as it were,—as seen in the “finger of God” through which Jesus was healing the bodies and souls of his contemporaries (Lk 11:20: “If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”) Perhaps Jesus considered himself less an

apocalyptic (like John the Baptist) but rather a *prophet*, for like the prophets of old Jesus, too, still seemed to believe in the reshaping and reforming of present history. That is not to deny the fact that the final and consummative establishment of God's Kingdom remained elusive and was to be expected at the time of the end by God's doing.

Whatever we may think of Jesus' predictions, it will be expedient to assume that there has always been a contingent element in virtually all prophetic and apocalyptic predictions of the Bible; for—as Jonah had to learn for himself—God was “a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster” (Jonah 4:2), and “behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Math 12:41). No one in this world should claim for him- or herself to know the mind of God and to be able to predict the future. As the adage goes: “It is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future.”

Today, after 2000 years of futile expectations of the end of the world (despite many dates set), we do not know for sure if and when doomsday comes. With Jesus, one may ask: “Who then is the faithful and wise servant?” (Verse 45) What matters is not *when* we face our day of reckoning (which may be at our death) but whether or not *we are ready* for it.

And assuming there will actually be a final apocalyptic event extinguishing the human race, the question may well be asked, from today's perspective, whether that final end-time destruction will be brought about by a God who may once again “regret that I have made them” (Gen 6:7) or whether that event is precipitated not by a vengeful God but by man's own carelessness and recklessness. If the latter, it should give us pause to amend our ways. If the former, i.e. if God were to have set a date in his mind for the world's final hour, then He may not be very pleased if we were to beat him to the task. Should man be guilty of jeopardizing life on earth because he chooses to ignore the warning signs nature is giving him and because he confuses his own sinful doings with the acts of God?

The Contingency of Prophetic Predictions

It may now be worthwhile, in this connection, to take a closer look at the possible contingencies of prophetic predictions from a general biblical viewpoint. Let's first look at the Old Testament prophetic literature. When was a prophetic prediction conditional and when was it not?

The correctness of biblical predictions ranks among the basic presuppositions of many Christians. Especially evangelicals have maintained that virtually all of the Old Testament predictions about the coming of the Messiah were fulfilled at the time of Jesus (while liberal theologians would question at least some of these “fulfillments”, arguing that they were sometimes artificially construed on the basis of the Greek wordings in the Septuaginta). Some prominent evangelical literalists have also claimed that it is possible to predict the events of the future simply by carefully reading the Bible. Hal Lindsay (1970) and John Walvoord (1974) are examples of

those who claimed to know exactly what is going to happen during the time of the end. Richard Pratt spoke of a “monomania in the interpretation of biblical prophecy” (Pratt 1993, n.p.) and set out to challenge this widespread hermeneutical orientation by exploring the role of Old Testament predictions and investigating their respective conditionality and fulfillment (Pratt 1993, n.p.). He observed that sometimes future events conformed to a prophet’s words, but at other times they did not. How is this to be interpreted?

As a Reformed theologian, Pratt takes seriously the Calvinistic tradition according to which “God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatever comes to pass” (Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647). Hence, what God has once ordained, remains immutable. But the Reformed tradition of Calvin not only spoke of the *immutability* of God’s plan but also of *divine providence*: “Although in relation to the decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet by the same providence he often orders them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes.” (Westminster Confession 5.2) Calvin balanced the immutability of God’s decrees with an acknowledgement of God’s complex involvement in the progression of history. “In this sense”, writes Pratt, “belief in God’s immutability does not negate the importance of historical contingencies, especially human choice. . . . For this reason, we should not be surprised to find that intervening historical contingencies, especially human reactions, had significant effects on the way predictions were realized.”

Pratt goes on to distinguish between three different kinds of prophetic predictions: (1) predictions qualified by conditions, (2) predictions qualified by assurances, and (3) predictions without qualifications.

An example of the *first* type (predictions qualified by conditions) is Isa 1:19–20: “If you are ready and obey, you will eat the best produce of the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be eaten by the sword.” The conditionality of such a prophecy is bipolar and goes into two directions. There are also conditional predictions which are only unipolar such as Isa 7:9: “If you are not faithful, then you will not stand at all.” The prediction does not spell out what would happen if Israel is faithful, hence, it aims at one direction only.

As for the *second* type (predictions qualified by assurances), these prophecies forbid the people to intervene or pray to God as this would be futile and would not lead to Him changing his mind. “And they may cry to me, but I will not listen to them” is an example of this (Jer 11:11b). Or God takes a solemn oath (in the form of “As I live . . .” or “As Yahweh lives . . .”) in order to add weight to his prediction and to emphasize that the prediction is unequivocal. However, the reason why God forbade the people to pray or for the prophet to intervene on their behalf, seems to be, so Pratt, that such interventions had been proven to actually be effective. “Yahweh forbade prayers in response to some oracles precisely because prayer usually had the potential of effecting outcomes (Jer 26:19; Jonah 3:10; Amos 7:1–9). Similarly, Yahweh declared that he would not ‘turn back’ or ‘relent’ from some courses of action because he normally left those options open (Joel 2:14; Amos 7:3, 6 Jon 3:9).” So the prohibition to pray or intervene paradoxically implies the tacit and unexpressed conditionality of these very prophecies. Such conditionality is corroborated by a

passage in Jeremiah 18 where the prophet visits a potter's house and where the people of Israel are likened to the clay in the potter's hands (i.e. in Yahweh's hands) and which the potter may mold into whatever pleases him. Then we read:

If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. (Jer 18,7–10 NEV)

The lesson to be learned from this passage is that not only the qualified predictions but also the other prophecies were subject to implicit conditionalities. Sincere repentance as well as flagrant disobedience could effect the outcome of predictions which was the reason why in some cases God advised not to intervene. And Pratt's survey of Scripture reveals "that the descriptions of God's reactions in Jeremiah 18 are only representative" in that God reacted to human responses in many different ways.

One might think that the *third* type (predictions without qualifications) would be unequivocal and definite. However, argues Pratt, the Old Testament abounds with examples of unqualified predictions of events that did not take place, Jonah's announcement to the city of Nineveh being probably the most prominent one. But there are other such predictions as well in which the predicted future simply did not come to pass. What causes these turns of event? "Each text explicitly sights human responses as the grounds for the deviation." The people repented or prayed upon hearing the prophetic word. "These passages indicate that the fulfillment of at least some unqualified predictions were subject to the contingency of human response. Conditions did not have to be stated explicitly to be operative."

But unfulfilled predictions also pose a problem. When a prediction fails to come to pass, this is considered a false prophecy, at least according to Deut 18:22 where it states: "When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously." (ESV) Hence, the fulfillment of a prediction was to be a test and a hallmark of a prophet's genuineness and truthfulness. However, even that seemingly straightforward test of true prophecy doesn't stand the Old Testament evidence, as "it does not account for the many predictions from canonical (and thus true) prophets that were not realized", so Pratt. Hence, he concludes that "intervening historical contingencies had a bearing on all three major types of prophetic predictions".

One question to be raised in light of such prophetic contingencies is this: How could the listeners be certain of the future or the truthfulness of the prophetic predictions if there was always an implicit conditionality in them? For an answer, Pratt points to an Old Testament parameter to which God had bound himself. "To be more specific, the prophets looked to Yahweh's covenants to guide their expectations of what the future held." In other words, the prophets always operated within the framework of God's covenants. We already discussed above the significance of the covenants within the context of Biblical theology. The prophetic corpus explicitly mentions the covenant with Noah (Isa 54:9), Abraham (e.g. Isa 41:8 51:2Jer 33:26 Mic 7:20), Moses (e.g. Isa 63:11, 12 Dan 9:11, 13 Mic 6:4; Mal 4:4) and David (e.g.

Isa 9:7; Jer 30:9; Hos 3:5 et al.). In principle, divine covenants were not thought to be subject to revisions. On the contrary, they reflected the immutability of God's character. Hence, "Yahweh would never react to historical contingencies in ways that transgressed his covenants." The recipients of Old Testament prophecies normally could rest assured that God would abide by his covenant promises, "but no particular prophecy was completely free from the potential influence of intervening historical contingencies. In this sense, those who heard and read the prophets faced a future whose precise contours remained hidden."

Pratt concludes that Old Testament prophets "did not speak of what had to be, but of what might be". Even the few predictions that guaranteed fulfillment did not address their timing or manner of realization. "Old Testament prophets did not speak of a fixed but potential future." As a consequence, Pratt warns that "we should not speculate as to how current events fit within a fixed future". The future is certain only to God. But even that statement may be questioned as God has repeatedly subjected himself to the ways human beings responded to His warnings.

It appears, then, that on the basis of Pratt's investigations, the conditionality or contingency of Old Testament predictions has been well established. And that has very practical consequences for what the future holds in store for us. "The way we handle biblical predictions will greatly effect how they are fulfilled."

One could, at this juncture, raise the question of whether these insights with regard to the Old Testament prophecies also apply to the apocalyptic literature. Could it be that apocalyptic predictions are of a different nature than prophetic prediction? And could it not be that while prophetic predictions entail explicit or implicit conditionalities, apocalyptic texts ought to be read as unequivocal and final predictions without any contingencies?

Stephen O'Leary has looked specifically at apocalyptic literature (1998) and identified a paradigm that explains not only the motivation which drove the authors of the ancient apocalyptic texts but which also illuminates the impetus of modern end-time scenarios propagated by today's soothsayers. He describes the paradigm as follows: "The eschatological understanding [of apocalypticism] can be seen in the age-old lament that describes the decline of morals in society: young people no longer respect their elders, while war and all kinds of immorality increase in direct correlation with the growth of humanity's knowledge and technical skills." (p. 5) O'Leary goes on to show that this apocalyptic paradigm assumes an ideal world at the beginning of time, right after God had created the world, followed by a subsequent deterioration of morals due to God's non-interference, until a time when things get totally out of hand so that God, at the very end of time, is prompted to once again intervene in order set things straight and restore the old order. Interestingly, O'Leary offers a prominent example for this pattern from a prominent secular author, Plato, who wrote:

It is from God's act when He sets [the universe] in its order that it has received all the virtues it possesses, while it is from its primal chaotic condition that all the wrongs and evils arise in it—evils which it engenders in turn in the living creatures within it. When it is guided by the Divine Pilot, it produces much good and but little evil in the creatures it raises and sustains. When it must travel on without God, things go well enough in the years immediately after He abandons control, but as time goes on and forgetfulness of God arises in it, the ancient

condition of chaos also begins to assert its sway. At last, as this cosmic era draws to a close, this disorder comes to a head. The few good things it produces it corrupts with so gross a taint of evil that it hovers on the very brink of destruction, both of itself and of the creatures in it. – The God looks upon it again, He who first set it in order. Beholding it in its troubles, and anxious for it lest it sink racked by storms and confusion. He takes control of the helm once more. Its former sickness he heals; what was disrupted in its former revolution under its own impulse He brings back into the way of regularity, and, so ordering and correcting it, He achieves for it its agelessness and deathlessness. (Plato's Statesman, 273c–273e, p. 152)

O-Leary sees parallels between Plato and Paul who, in light of the general deterioration of the world at his time (see, for instance, Rom 1:18–28) anticipates a restoration of creation (Rom 8:18–22; 11:25–27). “The hope or expectation of God’s regaining control over the helm of the universe that Saint Paul held in common with Plato testifies to the enduring power of eschatological myth as a way of understanding the problem of evil.” (p. 5) Apocalyptic myths offer a “temporal and teleological framework” for understanding the outworkings of evil in this world by claiming that evil must grow in power in order to reveal its full nature before an appointed time of the end, when God will once again reinstate his own power and order.

Apocalypticism, then, is the attempt to make sense of the deteriorating development of evil in a once perfect world that is being corrupted to a point when only God can put an end to it. Such a message seems to have been especially appealing to those groups who suffered most under the weight of persecution, injustice and marginalization. “The early Christians who responded favorably to the book of Revelation were, by most historical accounts, subject to intense persecution that included execution and public torture.” (p. 11) Hence, they were most receptive to the promises and predictions of the apocalyptics who appeared to offer a comforting time-line with redemption close at hand.

Unfortunately (or fortunately), most of the apocalyptic predictions over the past 2000 years have failed. There exists a long list of apocalyptic predictions over the centuries which did not come to pass. Whether it were the Millerites in the 19th century who proclaimed the end of the world in 1844, or the false prophets who anticipated the coming of the Christ or the Antichrist in the year 2000, or even the present-day soothsayers around the QAnon movement; they have all built their case on the dissatisfaction of marginalized peoples in order to mobilize their followers into an awakening for a better future. Take this modern case, for an example:

In the anonymous book *QAnon: An Invitation to the Great Awakening* we read: “The world collapsed into darkness ... Destroyed factories, declining job numbers, sicker people, opioids, destruction of Iraq, Syria and Yemen with pointless wars, displacement of people into Europe, Isis, terrorism, collapsed governments, poverty and genocide. TOTAL MISERY” (p. 6). But the QAnon fellowship offers a cure: “Our job is to generate a future that reclaims the reins of power from the forces that would abuse our children and enslave us. Our intention is to take them back and restore power to ‘We the People’. We are committed to achieving that for all of us, you included.” (p. 2) Those who sense a secret conspiracy of the powerful (“Deep State”) have themselves created a conspiracy of which they want each of us to be a part.

But so much seems clear: In light of the many failed predictions, apocalyptic texts also have built-in contingencies that are not made explicit because, if they were, they would undermine the very objectives which their authors aim to achieve.

Towards an Hermeneutic of the Three Models

This survey of the three biblical narratives has yielded a number of hermeneutical insights with regard to how God may be seen as dealing with mankind. I shall enumerate a number of such discernments:

The Rainbow Narrative

1. If we accept the modern discoveries about the Black Sea flood some 7500 years ago as the basis for the flood myths, then we must also accept the fact that there was never a worldwide flood which extinguished virtually all life on earth.
2. Be that as it may, the flood narrative was meant to convey a comforting message: that as long as the rainbow would be seen in the sky, there would not cease day and night, summer and winter, seedtime and harvest; life will always go on!
3. The narrative also testified to the general depravity and sinfulness of man. But despite that depravity God will abide by his eternal covenant with mankind and not punish mankind again as He appears to have done at the time of the flood.
4. The story also encouraged the listeners and readers to live a righteous life as Noah had lived, who set himself apart from the majority of his contemporaries who did not heed his warnings.
5. The flood narrative was also about making appropriate preparation for a time when calamity does strike. Entering the ark thus becomes a symbol for disaster preparedness which is today as needful as it ever was.
6. In light of Jesus comparing the sinfulness of Noah's contemporaries with the sinfulness of the people at the time of the end (Mt 24:37–39), the rainbow promise (of there never again being worldwide destruction) emerges as being contingent.

The Nineveh Narrative

1. The Jonah narrative exemplifies, first and foremost, the contingency inherent in all prophetic predictions which may or may not contain explicit (or implicit) conditionalities.
2. The narrative also witnesses to the sublime sovereignty of a God who may reward or punish whom he wishes, whether it be His own people or the Gentiles. For God is no longer a tribal god, but the sovereign Creator of the universe.

3. The story shows that God allows himself to revoke any predictions of impending disaster whenever man repents and changes his or her way of life. In other words: man's sin can be atoned for by man's confession and by turning from his (or her) evil ways.
4. Conversely, God can also punish His own, despite the overarching covenant relationship (be that an individual such as Jonah or the people of Israel), if they choose to disregard His commandments.
5. But God can also, after demonstrating disapproval with His own (Jonah's near disaster or Israel's near destruction), rescue them and restore His covenant relationship with them. If He is free to show mercy even to the Ninevites, how much more will He show compassion to His own covenant people, if they repent and turn from their evil ways.
6. Finally, the story also shows that man cannot run away from God or from what man is destined to be and to do—regardless of the ultimate outcome.

The Apocalyptic Narrative

1. The apocalyptic narratives suggest that there will be an eventual end to history and to life on earth as we know it—be that through an external catastrophe or through man's self-inflicted calamities.
2. Apocalypticism presumes the principle non-interference of God into the affairs of man and hence assumes man's responsibility for history and for the well-being of the planet.
3. Apocalyptic end-time scenarios should not serve as a rationale or excuse to continue ad infinitum man's squandering of earth's resources such as water, air, non-renewable energies, virgin forests, or endangered species, by claiming that it doesn't matter as the final judgment cannot be avoided anyway.
4. Even when assuming, on the basis of apocalyptic texts, that the destruction of the earth and the consummation of man's history lie in the hands of an unfathomable sovereign God, that assumption must not and cannot relieve us of the responsibility of working diligently for the effectuation of the principles of God's kingdom in the here and now, as Jesus taught.
5. Whatever we may do to implement these divine principles and to change the world for the better in order to preserve the earth as a livable environment for all, we as human beings will never be able to re-create a perfect world or an earthly paradise; hence, there always remains a *promise surplus* (*Verheißungsüberschuss*) that we hope for, as God remains the final answer to man's history and to the fate of the earth.
6. In other words, although apocalyptic myths convey the message of a final restoration through the sole act of God (apocalypticism according to John the Baptist), they implicitly also call for man's commitment to righteousness, peace, liberty and justice in this world (apocalypticism according to Jesus).

A New Understanding of God and of Man's Role?

In light of the principal contingencies of biblical prophecies, well established above, and also in view of the contemporary climate crisis, the question has been raised in what way the traditional view of God ought to be revised.

In October 2008, the Department for Theology and Studies of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) convened a consultation of biblical scholars, theologians and ethicists active in the area of climate change. They authored the Publication *God, Creation and Climate Change* (Bloomquist 2009). In it, the group reflected, among other things, on the question of God in light of climate change, and how that view also affects the self-understanding of man.

“When people think about ‘God’, the authors stated, “they often refer to a supreme being who reigns over and above the world as an almighty ruler or monarch (almost always as ‘he’). When something goes wrong in nature, such as occurs under climate change, it is then immediately assumed that this is caused by ‘God’—as an almighty actor standing outside of and controlling all that occurs on earth.” (p. 17). They then described what they considered a “shift” toward an understanding of God based on biblical research. According to this shift, God is “not an all-controlling monarch who punishes even the innocent, but God revealed yet hidden throughout creation. God’s grace and love are ultimately more crucial than might and power. God is intimately related with humans and the rest of creation, present in the midst of vulnerability and suffering” (p. 18).

While that shift was a much needed revision in Protestant theology, today in light of climate change and other developments, “a similar shift is called for in how we imagine or think of God”, said the authors. “God is neither to be seen nor sought behind creation nor inferred from it, but only recognized in and through it.” (p. 18 f.) “God is the source of all being rather than one who intervenes from the outside.” And referring to the writings of Sallie McFague, they come to a yet newer understanding of God: “Rather than assuming God to be like a will or intellect ordering and controlling the world, God is the breath that enlivens and energizes the living breathing planet. God permeates, suffers with and energizes the innermost aspect of all that is created, in ways known and unknowable, in ways that are both intimate and transcendent” (McFague 1993, pp. 145, 147).

That new shift toward a postmodern understanding of God during the Anthropocene of climate change leads, of necessity, also to a new understanding of man’s role within creation. The Lutheran scholars lamented that “[s]ome human beings have acted as if they were demigods who can order and control, for their own self-interests, the land, trees, air, water and other creatures, including vulnerable human communities. This often occurs in the name of ‘development’ or ‘progress’.” And in consequence, “the delicate interrelationships within creation have been upset. Creation’s protest is now being experienced through climate change” (Bloomquist 2009, p. 21). The assumption that human beings are separate from or above nature, has ensnared man to “escape our creaturehood” (p. 22).

But given the Kairos moment⁵ of climate change today, there is a need for repentance and conversion that involves also a shift in the way man understands himself. That shift ought to involve a shift from human independence to human interdependence with the rest of creation; from creation understood only as the backdrop for human worship, to creation pulsating with life, pathos and worship of God; from an exclusive focus on God active in human history, to God being active in, with and through the spatial realities of the whole creation, in which humans participate; from an understanding of man's sin only as a broken relationship between humans and God, to sin being understood as a broken relationship with all creation; from an obsession with progress and development as measured in economic terms, to what will result in more sustainable life for all of creation; from a focus on technological or market-based fixes, to the healing of creation (p. 23 f.).

The Lutheran scholars summarized their thoughts by suggesting that we "must move beyond narrow anthropocentric views of life, and embrace more interconnected views in which God, human beings and the rest of creation are intimately related" (p. 26).

Conclusion

Global Warming and other environmental hazards have conjured up among Bible readers an impending end-time apocalypse. Based on a previous paper offering three biblical eschatological scenarios (the Rainbow Model, the Nineveh Model and the Apocalypse Model), this paper expanded on the three scenarios, giving more theological and historical background and drawing some hermeneutical conclusions. While the Rainbow Model (Noah's flood story) assumed that another worldwide destruction would never again take place, and the Apocalypse Model (Jesus' end-time expectation) assumed the ultimate annihilation of the world, the Nineveh Model (Jonah's doomsday message) assumed that the prospect of an envisaged end-time annihilation can be still avoided through repentance and a change of behavior.

For each of the three scenarios, this paper looked at possible historical roots and the theological intent, but also discussed the contingency aspects. The result of the study suggests that each of the three narratives (Noah, Jonah, Jesus) is characterized by an inherent *component of contingency*, be it explicit or not, and that none of them are unequivocally unconditional. Each narrative (and, in principle, any biblical prophecy) assumes the basic tenet of God's compassion and mercy in light of man's willingness to change heart. Explicit or not, all biblical predictions entail contingencies that make it virtually impossible for man to exactly predict the future. Even with God at the helm of history, history remains open-ended as God has subjected Himself to the way humans will relate to God. While the biblical covenants place man into a special

⁵A „Kairos-Moment“ (from Greek *καιρός* implying a moment in time, in contrast to *chronos/χρόνος* which stands for a period of time) connotes a crucial time requiring decisions of vital consequences.

relationship with God, God remains at all times sovereign and supreme to extend His mercy and compassion to whomever He wishes—especially if and when man confesses his sins and changes his ways. Hence, God’s predictions mediated by His prophets are contingent.

The lesson to be learned from the contingency of biblical prophecies, as demonstrated in this paper, should caution us to assume that apocalyptic end-time scenarios, as they have been depicted in some biblical and extra-biblical texts, are final and unequivocal and that supposedly, as a consequence of this, any effort by man to preserve the natural environment would remain futile as the final outcome has supposedly already been fixed. On the contrary, man as a steward for God’s creation (see Gen 1:28) has a holy responsibility to care for our planet, for the environment and for all life. Man is to adhere to the divine principle of “Reverence for life” (*Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben*) as propagated by Albert Schweitzer.

The lesson of prophetic contingencies may, in all likelihood, also require a shift in our understanding of God, away from God as an almighty actor standing outside of creation and controlling everything that occurs on earth, to a view of God as the source of all creation and who suffers with it and whose spirit permeates it in a way that is both immanent and transcendent.

But above all, the climate change problem requires a shift in man’s behavior. Barbara Rossing, an American New Testament scholar in Chicago who regularly speaks against the apocalypticism that some have associated with climate change, found the Nineveh narrative “the most intriguing biblical model” as it “can serve as a parable for how the greatest ‘empire’ on earth today can shift course and avoid disaster”. The book of Jonah shows “how thanks to grassroots mobilization, good leadership, and an effective prophet, a giant ship of state—including all the people and even the animals—can abandon its destructive course in time to avert a catastrophe. We can learn from Nineveh” (Rossing 2009, p. 142).

Astronomers have calculated that, at the very latest, life on earth will cease to exist when our Sun, after having spent most of its hydrogen through thermonuclear fusion, will turn into a Red Giant that will engulf the earth and extinguish all life on our planet. That is estimated to take place some four billion years from now. But life may come to an end much sooner: when another big meteor or asteroid hits the earth; or when an atomic war flares up and gets out of hand; or when enough insects have become extinct and fertilization of vital plants is no longer working; or when another virus emerges that is more infectious and fatal than the ones we have encountered so far. There are many reasons why life on earth could be erased. Life is fragile and delicate, individually and collectively.

The Covid 19 pandemic taught us that exponential growth of any kind, if not contained, eventually leads to the crossing of certain points at which vital systems are bound to collapse. We are, unfortunately, right in the midst of a very dangerous exponential growth curve: the population explosion of mankind. When exactly this curve will peak, we don’t know yet. We only know that it cannot increase indefinitely. It is likely that the human population will hit various boundaries and tipping points that might eventually threaten life on earth. Due to its exponential growth rate, the human race has become a serious threat to the climate, to the global environment, to

mankind itself, and to the whole living world. Climate change experts have for some time spoken of “tipping points” which, if crossed, may give rise to some unforeseen upheavals and disruptions of the earth’s ecosystem that may alter and endanger, if not destroy, life on earth. As stewards of God’s creation we have a responsibility to prevent this through concerted ‘creation care’.

During the initial apex of the corona pandemic in Europe, when the “Fridays for Future” campaign (to save the planet) had come to a sudden standstill, the internationally-renowned climate researcher Hans Joachim Schellnhuber of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK) was quoted as saying: “He who thoughtlessly passes on the virus, jeopardizes the life of his grandparents; he who thoughtlessly releases carbon dioxide, jeopardizes the life of his grandchildren”⁶ (DTS 2020).

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