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## **“His Mercy is Over All His Works”: John Wesley’s Mature Vision of New Creation<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

For much of his life, John Wesley accepted common Christian assumptions regarding final salvation as a state of spiritual rest in paradise. Late in life, however, he rejected these assumptions, as “the new creation” became a dominant theme in his theology. Wesley’s mature eschatological vision thus shifted from a hope for spiritual rest to a dynamic vision of redeemed humanity living in a transformed, but still-physical new earth, complete with animal life. This paper explores “the new creation” as a theme in Wesley’s mature thought, through a close reading of sermons published in the last decade of his life. The topic is addressed under four headings: 1) Wesley’s speculations about the place of animals in redemption; 2) his understanding of the “image of God” and humanity’s relationship to the rest of creation; 3) the connection between Wesley’s vision of the new creation and the question of creation stewardship in the present life; 4) the way that the new creation functioned as an aspect of Wesley’s theodicy. While some of Wesley’s specific speculations concerning the new creation might not be of enduring value, this paper will argue that the overall shape and direction of his mature eschatology remains a compelling model for contemporary evangelicalism.

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For much of his life and ministry, John Wesley accepted the inherited assumptions of the mainstream Christian tradition regarding the final state of the redeemed as being one of spiritual rest in paradise. In fact, his first sermon, written shortly

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after his ordination to the diaconate in 1725, took as its text Job 3:17, “There the wicked cease from troubling / there the weary are at rest.” In that sermon he speaks of death as “not only a haven, but an entrance into a far more desirable country—a land not flowing with milk and honey like the earthly Canaan, but with joys knowing neither cessation nor end.”<sup>2</sup> Late in life, however, he rejected these assumptions, as “the new creation” became a dominant theme in his soteriology. This shift can be seen, as Randy Maddox has argued, as part of a larger arc of development in Wesley’s theology, which begins with his radical shift to an evangelical understanding of *personal* salvation after his heart-warming Aldersgate experience, continues with his growing recognition of the *socio-economic* dimensions of Christian life in the 1770s, and culminates in his growing sense of redemption’s *cosmic* scope in the 1880s.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in the last decade of his life, we find Wesley speculating in surprisingly concrete terms about the nature of the new heavens and the new earth, and musing about the possible ways in which both inanimate and animate creation will be transformed. Wesley’s mature eschatological vision thus shifted from a hope for a static spiritual rest to a dynamic vision of redeemed humanity living in a transformed, but still-physical new earth, complete with animal life. “The new creation,” however, was not a category which Wesley used *only* in reference to the eschaton; it was a central strand his mature theology, which brought together the personal, socioeconomic, and cosmic dimensions of salvation. As was the case with Wesley’s theology of salvation in general, he understood the new creation as having both *future* and *present* dimensions, and he believed God had graciously invited humanity to play a role in the ongoing realization of the new creation in human history.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will explore “the new creation” as a theme in Wesley’s mature thought through a close reading of sermons published in the last decade of his life. The topic will be addressed under four headings: 1) Wesley’s speculations about the place of animal creation in redemption; 2) his understanding of the “image of God” and humanity’s relationship to the rest of creation; 3) the connection between Wesley’s vision of the new creation and his theology creation stewardship

2 Sermon 133, “Death and Deliverance,” §4, in Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 4: 208 (hereafter *Works*). It should be noted that Wesley retained a belief in the resurrection of the body after a period of intermediate rest in paradise, but assumed (again, following the predominant trends of his day) that at the general resurrection our earthly bodies would be transformed into ethereal bodies. Randy L. Maddox, “Nurturing the New Creation: Reflections on a Wesleyan Trajectory,” in *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2004), 44.

3 Maddox, “Nurturing the New Creation: Reflections on a Wesleyan Trajectory,” 32.

4 Maddox helpfully articulates these characteristics of Wesley’s teaching on new creation as its “present availability,” its “processive character,” and its “cooperant dynamic.” *Ibid.*, 26–31. It is presently available in that the new creation is breaking into the world today, it has a processive character in that the new creation is realized by degrees, and it has a cooperant dynamic, in that God’s grace invites a response from humanity and brings with it responsibilities.

in the present life; 4) the way the new creation functioned as an aspect of Wesley's theodicy. While some of Wesley's specific speculations concerning the new creation might not be of enduring value, the overall shape and direction of his mature eschatology remains a compelling model for contemporary evangelicalism.

### The Place of Animal Creation in Redemption

John Wesley had a lifelong interest in the natural world, and was particularly interested in animal life.<sup>5</sup> Building on the traditional English Protestant affirmation of creation as “the book of nature,” revealing God in its own way alongside the Bible, Wesley published three editions of a four-volume work on creation, entitled *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*.<sup>6</sup> This was a compendium of what was then called “natural philosophy,” which, for Wesley, served the distinct theological purpose of leading the believer to a greater knowledge of God.<sup>7</sup> The Christian, he believed, was called to “see the Creator in the glass of every creature,” and to “use and look upon nothing as separate from God.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus the idea of creation as a source for theological reflection already had a long lineage in Wesley's thought by the time he reached the final decade of his life. It was at this time, however, that the issue of animal suffering came increasingly into his view as a theological problem. Thus he begins his remarkable sermon “The General Deliverance,” written in 1782, with a quotation from Psalm 145:9 in the *Book of Common Prayer*, from which I have taken the title of this paper: “his mercy is over all his works.” Yet, Wesley asks, “If the Creator and Father of every living thing is rich in mercy towards all; if he does not overlook or despise any of the works of his own hands, if he desires even the meanest of them to be happy according to their degree – how comes it to pass that such a complication of evils

5 Wesley's well-known advice to his preachers was, “Be merciful to your beast. Not only ride moderately, but see with your own eyes that your horse be rubbed, fed, and bedded.” See the “Large” Minutes of the Methodist Conference, 1789, in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 10, ed. Henry Rack (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 919.

6 Published in three editions, dated 1763, 1770, and 1777, respectively.

7 For background on “natural philosophy” as a pre-cursor to what we now know as “science,” and Wesley's place in eighteenth century debates concerning this field, see Randy L. Maddox, “Wesley's Engagement with the Natural Sciences,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, ed. Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 160–75.

8 Sermon 23, “Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount III.” §I.11, Works, I: 516–17. This aspect of Wesley's theology has led Howard Snyder to suggest the so-called “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” should be modified into a “Pentalateral,” including creation as a source alongside scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Howard A. Snyder, *Yes in Christ: Wesleyan Reflections on Gospel, Mission, and Culture*, Tyndale Studies in Wesleyan History and Theology 2 (Toronto: Clements Academic, 2011), 51–58. See also Wesley's comments on Christ as the life of all creatures, in Sermon 77, “Spiritual Worship,” (1780) § II.3, Works, 3: 95, and his early affirmation (1733) of the “pleasure” that God has “inseparably annexed” to the “use of those creatures which are necessary to sustain the life he has given us,” in Sermon 17, “The Circumcision of the Heart.” §I.12, Works, 1: 408.

oppresses, yea, overwhelms them?”<sup>9</sup> He answers the question by arguing that all animal suffering, including that which various species currently inflict upon one another to ensure their own survival, is the result of the fall. Thus, before the fall, animal creation was “happy” and enjoyed a kind of “perfection” according to their kind, which was seen in their loving obedience to humanity, who as God’s vice-regents, were God’s appointed conveyors of blessings to all other creatures. The obedience of animals to humanity, therefore, could be seen as bearing “some shadowy resemblance of even moral goodness.”<sup>10</sup> In short, animals in the original creation were, Wesley suggests, at peace with humanity and with one another.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as a result of the fall, humanity’s relationship to God was disrupted, and therefore the blessings of God no longer flow through human stewardship to God’s creatures.<sup>12</sup> After the fall, then, animals came to be at war with one another. It is because of sin that “an immense majority of creatures, perhaps a million to one, can no otherwise preserve their own lives, than by destroying their fellow-creatures!”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, humanity’s loving and kind stewardship of animal creation has been turned into an exploitative domination, such that humanity’s cruel treatment of animals surpasses the cruelty of a shark hunting its prey.<sup>14</sup> Wesley is unwilling to grant that such animosity and brutality is part of God’s original design for his creatures.

Why would God allow animals to be subject to such vanities? Surely, he reasons, God will one day restore animal creation to a state that is superior to that of the original creation. As they have been subjected to a degree of the corruption brought on by the fall, so also will they be liberated to experience “a measure of ‘the glorious liberty of the children of God’” in the new creation.<sup>15</sup> This will entail a greater strength, swiftness, and understanding than each creature in its kind has possessed in the original creation, and, like human creatures, they “will be delivered from all irregular appetites, from all unruly passions, from every disposition that is either evil in itself, or has any tendency to evil.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, as they had originally been able to evidence “a shadowy resemblance of even moral goodness,”<sup>17</sup> so in the new creation, “No rage will be found in any creature, no fierce-

9 Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” §1-2, *Works*, 2: 437-38.

10 Ibid., §I.5, *Works*, 2: 441. Wesley would also publish, in the following year, an extract of John Hildrop’s *Free Thoughts Upon the Brute Creation*, which argued in favor of the idea that animals have souls. See Randy L. Maddox, “Anticipating the New Creation: Wesleyan Foundations for Holistic Mission,” *Asbury Journal* 62/1 (2007): 59.

11 See also Sermon 56, “God’s Approbation of His Works,” §I.11-13, *Works*, 2: 394-96.

12 Ibid., §II.1, *Works*, 2: 442.

13 Ibid., §II.3, *Works*, 2: 444.

14 Ibid., §II.6, *Works*, 2: 445.

15 Ibid., §III.1, *Works*, 2: 445.

16 Ibid., §III.3, *Works*, 2: 446.

17 Ibid., §I.5, *Works*, 2: 441.

ness, no cruelty, or thirst for blood.”<sup>18</sup> Working on the assumption of creation as a “great chain of being,” with humanity occupying a higher place in the chain, and creatures proceeding downwards in accordance with their likeness to the creator,<sup>19</sup> Wesley speculates that all creatures might “move up” one level in the chain, and that some animals might therefore even join humanity in becoming “capable of God.”<sup>20</sup> Lest we think this was a one-time indulgence on Wesley’s part, he ventures the same speculation in his 1785 sermon “The New Creation.”<sup>21</sup> These reflections on the place of non-human creatures in God’s plan of redemption are thus one aspect of Wesley’s late thinking about “new creation.”

### The Image of God and Humanity’s Relationship to Other Creatures

The image of God is another concept that has a long lineage in Wesley’s thought, reaching back into his pre-Aldersgate days.<sup>22</sup> It remained a centerpiece of his writing in the twilight of his life. Wesley had a three-fold understanding of the image of God: the *natural image*, which denotes those capacities which make humanity “capable of God,” including understanding, will, and liberty; the *political image*, which denotes humanity’s role as God’s vice-regents on earth, exercising leadership and management of creation as stewards; and the *moral image*, which is humanity’s vocation to imitate God in true righteousness and holiness.<sup>23</sup> While Wesley clearly distinguishes humanity from the rest of creation as the only earthly creature “capable of God,” it should be noted that he does not make this distinction absolute, but rather argues that some animals share in a degree of the natural

18 Ibid., §III.3, *Works*, 2: 446.

19 See, for example, Sermon 56 “God’s Approbation of His Works,” §I.14, *Works*, 2: 396-397: “There was ‘a golden chain’ (to use the expression of Plato) ‘let down from the throne of God;’ an exactly connected series of beings, from the highest to the lowest; from dead earth, through fossils, vegetables, animals, to man, created in the image of God, and designed to know, to love, and enjoy his Creator to all eternity.”

20 “May I be permitted to mention here a conjecture concerning the brute creation What, if it should then please the all-wise, the all-gracious Creator to raise them higher in the scale of beings What, if it should please him, when he makes us ‘equal to angels,’ to make them what we are now, — creatures capable of God; capable of knowing and loving and enjoying the Author of their being If it should be so, ought our eye to be evil because he is good However this be, he will certainly do what will be most for his own glory.” Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” §III.6, *Works*, 2: 448. Wesley’s (uncited) source for this idea is identified by Maddox as Charles Bonnet’s *La Palingénésie philosophique; or Idées sur l’état passé et sur l’état futur des etres vivans* (2nd edition. Munster: Philip Henry Perrenon, 1770). Maddox, “Anticipating the New Creation: Wesleyan Foundations for Holistic Mission,” 61.

21 Sermon 64, “The New Creation,” §17, *Works*, 2: 508-509.

22 See Sermon 141, “The Image of God,” Wesley’s first “University Sermon” at Oxford, 1730; *Works* 4: 290-303.

23 Wesley does not always speak of all three aspects of the image at once, but for an example of a passage where he does do so, see Sermon 45, “The New Birth,” §I.1 *Works*, 2: 188-89. His views on this subject are ably summarized in Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today*, 13–19.

image.<sup>24</sup> But it is Wesley's view of the political image of God that is of particular interest in relation to his mature thinking about "new creation." As already noted above, Wesley conceived of Adam's divine vocation to vice-regency as a means by which "all the blessings of God flowed through him to the inferior creatures." So, he states, "Man was the channel of conveyance between his Creator and the whole brute creation."<sup>25</sup> But the effects of the fall were such that the moral image of God was lost, and the capabilities of the natural image and political image remained but were twisted and perverted to false ends.<sup>26</sup> Here Wesley speaks of humanity being "incapable of transmitting those blessings" which God desires to bestow upon all creatures through his vice-regents, and therefore of all creatures being "cut off" from that communication with God which is proper to each.<sup>27</sup> Not only this, but as noted above, fallen humanity abuses its position of vice-regency and inflicts abuse and exploitation upon the rest of creation.<sup>28</sup>

Again, the new creation answers the disease of fallen creation with a cure that brings a restoration which is greater than the original creation. Wesley insists that on a personal level, salvation as "new creation" means not only forgiveness of sins and restoration of God's favour, but the restoration of the image of God in all its fullness. Thus in his 1781 Sermon "The End of Christ's Coming," Wesley writes that "real religion" is "a restoration of man, by him that bruises the serpent's head, to all that the old serpent deprived him of; a restoration not only to the favour, but likewise to the image of God, implying not barely deliverance from sin but the being filled with the fullness of God."<sup>29</sup> Wesley explicitly states that such a restoration involves not only the restoration of the moral, but also the natural, image of God,<sup>30</sup> and his statements about Christian stewardship, to which I will turn next, clearly indicate that he included the political image within this grand restoration.<sup>31</sup>

## New Creation and Creation Stewardship

The idea of creation stewardship follows from Wesley's assertion of the restor-

24 Sermon 60, "The General Deliverance," §I.4, *Works*, 2: 440-41.

25 *Ibid.*, §I.3, *Works*, 2: 440. See also his earlier comment in the same paragraph, about how Adam in his original state experienced an increased happiness "by the all the things that were round about him," meaning by his enjoyment of "the order, the beauty, the harmony of all the creatures: of all animated, all inanimate nature."

26 Sermon 57, "On the Fall of Man," §II.6, *Works*, 2: 410.

27 Sermon 60, "The General Deliverance," §II.1, *Works*, 2: 442.

28 *Ibid.*, §II.6, *Works*, 2: 445.

29 Sermon 62, "The End of Christ's Coming," §III.5, *Works* 2: 482.

30 Sermon 57, "On the Fall of Man," §II.8, *Works* 2: 410.

31 The basic structure of Wesley's thought concerning creation, fall, and redemption confirms this claim concerning the political image. Wesley is always concerned to demonstrate that: a) creation as originally designed was good; b) salvation overcomes the corruption of the fall at every point. Thus God has provided "an universal remedy for an universal evil!" *Ibid.*, §II.9, *Works*, 2: 411.

ation of the image of God. Remembering that Wesley sees this restoration as a dynamic reality, which is present *now* by *degrees* and will be fully restored in the eschaton, we can see how Wesley makes the concept of “stewardship” a central one in his teaching on Christian life. Humanity may have been given “dominion” over creation, but, he writes, “We are not at liberty to use what he has lodged in our hands as we please, but as he pleases, who alone is the Possessor of heaven and earth, and the Lord of every creature.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, as part of their ongoing reflection of the restored *moral image*, human creatures are called to “imitate him whose mercy is over all his works,”<sup>33</sup> which gives shape to the proper exercise of the political image of God.

It would be inaccurate to suggest, however, that Wesley explicitly wrote about “creation stewardship.” Certainly, as I have already indicated, he believed that Christians were called to treat animal creation with justice and mercy, but the issues of environmental concern that are so prevalent in today’s context were simply not matters of concern in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, as scholars such as Howard Snyder, Randy Maddox, and Theodore Runyon have suggested, there is a definite “trajectory” in Wesley’s thought that points toward an ethic of creation stewardship.<sup>34</sup> This case can be made, not only on the basis of Wesley’s strong appreciation for creation, but also on his understanding of the profound *interconnectedness* of creation, as underscored by his understanding of creation existing in a great interconnected “chain of being.” It was important for Wesley that Christians understood their connection to the rest of creation, as can be seen in his remarks in the preface to his *Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*, “By acquainting ourselves with subjects in natural philosophy, we enter into a kind of association with nature’s works, and unite in the general concert of her extensive choir. By thus acquainting ourselves with the works of nature, we become as it were a member of her family, a participant in her felicities.”<sup>35</sup> While the early Wesley adopted an ascetical ideal of holiness that involved flight from supposedly “transitory” creation, the mature Wesley increasingly envisioned holiness as a life in which human beings would *enjoy* creation all the more.<sup>36</sup> But such “enjoyment” can never be individualistic; it is always to be understood within a set of relationships between human persons and the rest of creation. Therefore our conduct and *use* of creation in its totality should be done in a way that reflects God’s propri-

32 Sermon 51, “The Good Steward,” §I.1 (1768), *Works*, 2: 283.

33 Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” §III.10, *Works*, 2: 449.

34 See Snyder, *Yes in Christ*, 51–58, 94–97; Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today*, 200–207; Maddox, “Nurturing the New Creation: Reflections on a Wesleyan Trajectory,” 49–52.

35 *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*, I:viii, cited in Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today*, 202.

36 On this point, see Snyder, *Yes in Christ*, 95.



etorship and a consciousness of how our use will affect the happiness of others. Along these lines, Wesley comments in his sermon “The Mystery of Iniquity” that Christian violence in India has affected not only its supposedly “heathen” inhabitants, but also the very earth itself:

See with your own eyes! Look into that large country, Indostan. There are Christians and Heathens too. Which have more justice, mercy, and truth the Christians or the Heathens Which are most corrupt, infernal, devilish, in their tempers and practice the English or the Indians Which have desolated whole countries, and clogged the rivers with dead bodies

O sacred name of Christian! how profaned!

O earth, earth, earth! how dost thou groan under the villainies of thy Christian inhabitants!<sup>37</sup>

In other words, because Wesley believed we should “use and look upon nothing as separate from God,”<sup>38</sup> we can say, as Runyon does, “When we deal with the earth and its resources, and when we deal with our fellow creatures, we are dealing with God.”<sup>39</sup>

This role of the steward, though modest in respect to the views of some of his contemporaries concerning the superiority of humans over other creatures, nevertheless highlights the way in which he believed God was *involving humanity* in the present and ongoing realization of the new creation in history. This aspect of Wesley’s thinking is best illustrated by his understanding of Methodism’s role in what he called “The General Spread of the Gospel.” Taking Isaiah 11:9 as his text, Wesley’s sermon on this topic interprets the promise of God that “The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea,” as meaning that “The loving kindness of God, producing, uniform, uninterrupted holiness and happiness, shall cover the earth, shall fill every soul of man.”<sup>40</sup> He then goes on to assert that such uniform holiness and happiness will be brought about, not by God acting irresistibly, but by working in the same way that he works *now*, that is, by grace assisting and empowering human creatures to respond to the grace of the Gospel and live lives of holiness.<sup>41</sup> The Methodist revival is then offered as an illustration of the way in which God works to spread holiness over the face of the earth, and a hopeful sign that the world is entering “the dawn of ‘the latter day

37 Sermon 61, “The Mystery of Iniquity,” §33, *Works*, 2: 467-468. The line of poetry is an allusion to Milton, *Paradise Lost*, iv. 951.

38 Sermon 23, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount III,” §I.11, *Works*, 1: 516-17.

39 Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today*, 207.

40 Sermon 63, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” §8 (1783), *Works*, 2: 488.

41 *Ibid.*, §§9-11, *Works*, 2: 488-89.

glory.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, universal holiness, which, again, it should be remembered, *includes* the restoration of the “political” image of God and a right relation between humanity and the rest of creation, is *already beginning to spread now*, and will continue to spread in the same way in which it spreads now. In language that seems to reflect a tendency towards postmillennial eschatology, Wesley writes, “in general it seems that the kingdom of God will not ‘come with observation,’ but will silently increase wherever it is set up, and spread from heart to heart, from house to house, from town to town, from one kingdom to another.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, as those *now* participating in the new creation, in an as-yet-partially realized manner, Christian believers are called to *presently* imitate their Lord whose mercy is over all his works. Again, although Wesley does not explicitly lay out an ethic of creation care, the overall trajectory of his thinking on new creation clearly points in that direction.

### New Creation as an Aspect of Wesley’s Theodicy

Finally, because of his strong emphasis on the love of God, it was important for Wesley to affirm, first of all, that all pain and suffering are the result of the fall, and not a part of God’s original design for creation, and that secondly, the remedy of salvation is sufficient to not only cure all these evils but to restore creation to a *greater* state than originally intended. Thus, taking into account the immeasurable suffering that has been inflicted on humanity and the rest of creation because of the fall, and believing that God’s sovereignty implies that he at the very least *permitted* the fall to take place, Wesley argues that the fall must have been permitted in order to allow for a greater blessing to occur in the fullness of time. Thus, not only is God free from blame for the suffering inflicted by moral and natural evil, but his goodness will also be vindicated by a promised new creation in which *all things* will be transformed into a superior state than that which they enjoyed in the original creation. Furthermore, stressing the *present* aspect of new creation, in his 1782 sermon “God’s Love to Fallen Man,” Wesley argues that humanity has a promise of greater happiness and holiness both *here on earth* and in the coming new creation.<sup>44</sup>

The greater blessedness of non-human creation, however, will have to wait for

42 Ibid., §16, *Works*, 2: 493, citing Job 19:25.

43 Ibid., §17, *Works*, 2: 493. Wesley’s shift towards postmillennial eschatology (following an earlier shift towards premillennial eschatology from his original amillennialism) is summarized in Maddox, “Nurturing the New Creation: Reflections on a Wesleyan Trajectory,” 34–38.

44 Thus Wesley joins his voice to the *O felix culpa!* tradition of thinking about the fall. See Sermon 59, “God’s Love to Fallen Man,” esp. §I.1 and n. 9 by Outler, in *Works*, 2: 425: “mankind in general have gained by the fall of Adam a capacity of attaining more holiness and happiness on earth than it would have been possible for them to attain if Adam had not fallen. For if Adam had not fallen Christ had not died.” See also Sermon 57, “On the Fall of Man,” §II.10, *Works*, 2: 411-412.

the consummation of the new creation. As I have already noted, Wesley was quite attuned to the issue of animal suffering as a theological problem, and saw the resolution of this challenge in a transformed animal creation as an aspect of theodicy. He spells this out at the end of his sermon, “The General Deliverance,” where he argues that the idea of animal salvation can

furnish us with a full answer to a plausible objection against the justice of God, in suffering numberless creatures that never had sinned to be so severely punished They could not sin, for they were not moral agents. Yet how severely do they suffer! – yea, many of them, beasts of burden in particular, almost the whole time of their abode on earth; So that they can have no retribution here below. But the objection vanishes away, if we consider that something better remains after death for these poor creatures also; that these, likewise, shall one day be delivered from this bondage of corruption, and shall then receive an ample amends for all their present sufferings.<sup>45</sup>

So also, in his sermon “The New Creation,” Wesley speaks of animal salvation as “a demonstrative proof to all his creatures that ‘his mercy is over all his works.’”<sup>46</sup>

But Wesley also believed that the new creation would see a transformation of “inanimate” creation, such that many natural evils would be removed. This, again, is built upon the presupposition that whatever “natural evil” is found the present creation was not present in the original creation. So in his 1782 sermon “God’s Approbation of His Works,” Wesley postulates that, with respect to the earth, “there were no agitations within the bowels of the globe, no violent convulsions, no concussions of the earth, no earthquakes... there were no volcanoes, or burning mountains.”<sup>47</sup> With respect to water, he suggests that “there were no putrid lakes, no turbid or stagnating waters.”<sup>48</sup> and further that “the element of *air* was then always serene . . . it contained no frightful meteor, no unwholesome vapours, no poisonous exhalations.”<sup>49</sup> And although all these forms of natural evil do persist in the present, fallen creation, Wesley insists that the new creation will see a new heavens and a new earth in which inanimate creation will surpass its original beauty and harmony. In his sermon “The New Creation” Wesley indulges in some uncharacteristic speculation about the state of the new earth, and in his speculations he is careful to note, again, a lack of such phenomena as comets, hurricanes,

45 Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” §III.9, *Works*, 2: 449.

46 Sermon 64, “The New Creation,” §17, *Works*, 2: 509.

47 Sermon 56, “God’s Approbation of His Works,” §I.3, *Works*, 2: 389.

48 *Ibid.*, §I.4, *Works*, 2: 391.

49 *Ibid.*, §I.5, *Works*, 2: 391.

storms, meteors, earthquakes and volcanoes.<sup>50</sup> He also foresees changes in the elements, with fire, for example, retaining “its vivifying power, though divested of its power to destroy.”<sup>51</sup> The earth will no longer be subject to extreme variations in temperature, but “will have such a temperature as will be most conducive to its fruitfulness.”<sup>52</sup> In these and many similar speculations, it becomes clear that Wesley sees the new creation as a way for God to set all things right, and to restore and improve upon the proper ordering of the original creation, including animal life and non-animal creation. Thus, all the forms of natural evil that are present in the fallen world are credited as resulting from the fall. The evil that we see in the world is not an inevitable consequence of the present world’s materiality, and hence the new creation need not entail an escape from materiality, but rather a new creation that includes a transformed and redeemed materiality.<sup>53</sup> Thus the problem of evil is addressed by clearly crediting humankind’s abuse of their God-given liberty as being the source of evil, and then emphasizing the way in which God’s plan of redemption will provide a salvation which, in its personal, social, and cosmic scope, will address the profound corruption of sin and its effects in their entirety.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

At first reading, some of Wesley’s ideas about the future state of animals and other aspects of creation may seem fanciful and idiosyncratic. However, they should not be dismissed too lightly, for three reasons. First, these specific speculations should be set within the broader context of his theological system, in which concern for God’s love, justice, mercy and truth feature prominently. Viewed in this light, Wesley’s proposals concerning the new creation have integrity and weight as part of his larger theological project. Secondly, his strong affirmation of the goodness of creation and God’s plan to restore all things in the new creation has solid warrant in the overarching shape of the scriptural narrative, even if some of the specific aspects of his arguments are tied to particular understandings of the natural world which have passed out of favor. Thus, if we were to attempt to translate Wesley’s views to a contemporary context, we would have to replace his thinking about the “chain of being” with a contemporary understanding of the interrelatedness of all creation. Third, the way that the concept of new creation was able to unite the personal and cosmic aspects of salvation in Wesley’s

50 Sermon 64, “The New Creation,” §§8, 9, 15, *Works*, 2: 503-504, 507-508.

51 *Ibid.*, §10, *Works*, 2: 504.

52 *Ibid.*, §14, *Works*, 2: 507.

53 Wesley explicitly rejects the idea that matter is inherently evil in Sermon 59, “God’s Love to Fallen Man,” §15, *Works*, 2: 434.

54 The same motivation is seen in his rejection of predestination. See Sermon 58, “On Predestination,” §14, *Works*, 2: 420.

theology holds compelling promise for contemporary evangelical theology. Although Wesley was not overtly concerned about creation stewardship, his vision of “new creation” could nevertheless provide a fruitful framework for integrating the stewardship of creation into a cohesive understanding of salvation and Christian mission.