

The New Jerusalem

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The New Jerusalem is described in Scripture as “the Jerusalem above” (Galatians 4:26), “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,” (Hebrews 12:22) and “the holy city” that “comes down out of heaven from God” (Revelation 21:2, 10). In the Old Testament it is seen as primarily as the abode of God whereas in the New Testament it is also the heavenly home of the saints. The sacred structures within the heavenly city contributed the heavenly design for the earthly Tabernacle and Temple, and in its future descended form as the “Tabernacle of God among men” (Revelation 21:3) it will constitute a celestial Temple that is both physical (Revelation 21:12-21) and spiritual (Revelation 21:22). An examination of the pertinent biblical texts reveals the extent to which this heavenly reality has occupied both past and prophetic expectation.

The New Jerusalem in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament the concept of a heavenly Jerusalem is implied in the contrast between an earthly and heavenly “mountain” and “sanctuary” (Tabernacle and Temple). Ezekiel refers to “the holy mountain of God” as well as “sanctuaries” which are in heaven (Ezekiel 28:14, 16-17). By contrast Psalm 2 refers to “God who sits in the heavens” and “Zion, My holy mountain” (Psalm 2:4-5). The former refers to the place where the God is enthroned in heaven while the latter refers to the earthly Jerusalem where God will enthrone His “king” (Messiah) after the overthrow of earthly nations in the Battle of Armageddon. Davidic Psalms also refer to God being in His “house” or “Temple” (Psalm 11:4; 23:6; 26:8; 27:4; 138:2), although the Temple was not built until after David’s death. Such references must then be to the heavenly Temple, an identification which one psalm makes explicitly: “The Lord is in His holy Temple; the Lord’s throne is in heaven ...” (Psalm 11:4a). Based on the Hebrew structure of parallelism, “holy Temple” and “throne in heaven” must refer to the same thing. Both Moses (Exodus 25:9, 40) and David (1 Chronicles 28:11-19) were shown the heavenly Temple and used it as a pattern (Hebrew *tabnit*) for the later construction of the earthly Sanctuary (Tabernacle and First Temple). If there is a heavenly Temple, would there not also be a heavenly Jerusalem, since the earthly structures were copied after the heavenly (Hebrews 9:23)? The objection to this is that these things appear in heaven (Revelation 11:19; 15:5-8), in the Tabernacle/Temple where Christ returned at His ascension (Hebrews 9:11), and the New Jerusalem only has its source from heaven (Revelation 21:2, 10). Furthermore, the New Jerusalem is specifically stated *not* to have a Temple (Revelation 21:22). But even if these passages do not describe the New Jerusalem, but rather the heavenly court of God (in the Third Heaven), they prepare the reader by the existence of a heavenly reality related to the earthly for this concept.

While the concept of the New Jerusalem is not *explicitly* taught in the Old Testament, it is *implicit* in those texts which deal with the eternality and inviolability of Jerusalem. For example in a text which combines both of these elements we read: “Those who trust in the Lord are as Mount Zion, which cannot moved, but abides forever” (Psalm 125:1). However, the Old Testament prophets also predicted that the neither the present earth or heaven would not continue

(Isaiah 34:4). Therefore, Old Testament theologians seeking to harmonize this seeming contradiction, must have reasoned that if Jerusalem is to remain eternally, a New Jerusalem would be created to fulfill such prophecies. This is, in fact, implied in those passages where the prophecies of a restored Jerusalem is joined to those of a new heaven and new earth. For example, in the prophet Isaiah we read: “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem ... (Isaiah 65:17), ... My holy mountain Jerusalem ... I will also take some of them for priests and Levites, says the Lord. For just as the new heavens and the new earth which I make will endure before Me, declares the Lord, so your offspring and your name will endure” (Isaiah 66:20-22).

Despite the association of Jerusalem with a new creation, there is still some ambiguity in these contexts. In Isaiah 65:17-25 the context reveals that it is the Millennial Kingdom that is in view, since there is death (verse 20), decay (verse 22), and giving birth (verse 23). However, the opening statement of the section (verse 17) concerns the new heavens and earth. This could be a general introduction with the millennial description following as preliminary specifics, yet it is unclear. In Isaiah 66:10-24 the same period seems to be in view from verses 10-21, but with the comparison to the new heavens and earth it appears to move into the eternal state (note the statement of eternal punishment in verse 24). Nevertheless, later Judaism apparently understood these implications and built upon them.

The New Jerusalem in Later Judaism

The goal of the restoration was conformity to the divine ideal as expressed by both the pre-exilic and post-exilic prophets. Since the earthly restoration after the exile did not achieve this, it was obvious that a heavenly help was required. Therefore, the first development of the concept appeared in the Jewish apocalyptic literature and the Jewish midrashim of the post-exilic Second Temple period. In general these extra-biblical documents describe a heavenly Jerusalem, perfect in every respect, that either replaces or transforms the imperfect earthly Jerusalem as the pinnacle of restoration. The following Jewish apocryphal and pseudepigraphical texts contain references to the New Jerusalem concept which are regarded as apocalyptic: Tobit 13:8-18; Testament of Dan 5:12-13; Sybilline Oracles 5:420-27; I Enoch 90:28-29; 2 Esdras 7:26; 10:25-28; 13:36, and 2 Baruch 4; 32:1-4. Included among these apocalyptic writings are the Dead Sea Scroll documents which contain an apocalyptic text known as The New Jerusalem. Extant only in a collection of fragmentary copies from four different caves (*2Q24, 4Q554, 4Q555, 5Q15, 11Q18*) it records a vision of the New Jerusalem after the fashion of Ezekiel’s vision of Millennial Jerusalem and Temple (Ezekiel 40-48). Like Ezekiel and the Revelation, its dimensions are much greater than the ancient city of Jerusalem. Too, the language describing the city’s construction is similar, including such details as the twelve gates of the city, each named for one of the twelve tribes, beautiful walls and stonework all of pure gold, streets paved with white stone of alabaster and onyx and living waters. In addition, this text notes that the time for the appearance of this New Jerusalem comes after the final end time battle in which Israel emerges victorious over the Gentile nations and Israel has been restored in glory. Because this structure appears to be of earthly construction and houses a new Temple, it is thought to be a statement of the restored Jerusalem of the Millennial Kingdom. Even so, it bears witness to the

New Jerusalem tradition in Second Temple Judaism that most likely would have been known by Jesus and the writers of the New Testament.

In the Talmudic age, the Sages sought to instruct a Jewish community without an access to earthly Jerusalem. It had lost both its Temple and city, but not its promises. Therefore, like in Christianity, an emphasis was placed on what could not be lost or destroyed, the heavenly Jerusalem (even while retaining the hope of restoration of the earthly). For example, we hear the rabbis explain: “Not only on the face of this earth is there a Jerusalem, called in Hebrew *Yerushalaim Shel Matta* (“Jerusalem the Lower”), but also in heaven is there such a city: *Yerushalaim Shel Maalah* (“Jerusalem the Upper”).” According to the Judaism of the late Second Temple and the Talmudic periods, the New Jerusalem appears as both present and future. For example, the Talmud records that the Heavenly City, although to be realized in the Age of Redemption, could already be seen in moments of grace by the righteous, and could receive inspiration from it. Even so, the Talmud makes the Heavenly Jerusalem subservient to the earthly Jerusalem, probably in reaction to Christianity, which emphasized the Heavenly Jerusalem and identified with it in replacement of the earthly Jerusalem. There are several references to the Heavenly Jerusalem in the Zohar, the extra-biblical text revered by Kabbalistic (mystical) Judaism. It says that it was created by God to house the souls of the righteous. It also makes a distinction between earthly Jerusalem, which it identified with the kingdom, or the *Shekhinah* (the indwelling Presence of God), and the Heavenly Jerusalem which it identified with the higher *Shekhinah*, the *sefira* of *binah* (“understanding”), and also The World to Come. Therefore, it appears that Judaism understood a presently existing New Jerusalem, which would be realized in their Millennial era, yet continue into the final age, the World to Come.

The New Jerusalem in the New Testament

The New Testament follows the Old Testament concept of “the heavenly Jerusalem” in such passages as Hebrews 13:14 where the goal of the godly is declared to be a “heavenly city.” This hope is projected in Hebrews back to Israel’s beginning in Abraham: “By faith Abraham ... was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). This text would indicate that the “heavenly Jerusalem” was pre-existent and was recognized as the place where the righteous would be at home with God.

In like manner, the New Testament understood the Old Testament teaching that the earthly sanctuaries were constructed according to a divinely revealed pattern based on structures within the heavenly Jerusalem. Stephen’s speech in the Book of Acts alludes to Exodus 25:8-9, 40 when it declares: “He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it [the Tabernacle] according to the pattern (Greek *tupon*) which he had seen” (Acts 7:44). The author of Hebrews in comparing the earthly and heavenly sanctuaries likewise refers to “the copies (Greek *hupodeigmata*) of the things in the heavens” (Hebrews 9:23). In these same contexts, it is declared that “the Most High does not dwell in [houses] made by human hands” (Acts 7:48), but in “the greater and more perfect Tabernacle, not made with hands ... not of this creation” (Hebrews 9:11). It should be observed that these heavenly structures are not symbolic, since the actual earthly structures were made according to them. This should be kept in mind when considering the texts in Revelation that depict the furniture of the heavenly Temple (Revelation

11:19; cf. 4:5; 5:8; 6:9; 8:3; 9:13; 14:18; 15:5-8; 16:7) and the structural elements and dimensions of the New Jerusalem itself (Revelation 21:12-21).

The concept of the New Jerusalem also appears in several New Testament texts. In Galatians 4:26 the Apostle Paul speaks of “the Jerusalem above” in distinction to “the present Jerusalem” (verse 25). Even though this is an analogical (not allegorical) use for the sake of comparison, the concept of a heavenly Jerusalem clearly exists in Paul’s thinking. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews also understood the concept, as he contrasted the heavenly Jerusalem as a place of grace to the earthly Mount Sinai as a place of the law (Hebrews 12:18-22). In this context he further described the heavenly Jerusalem with respect to its inhabitants: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant ... (Hebrews 12:22-24a). In this description the author places as the inhabitants of the heavenly Jerusalem: God the Father (Judge), Jesus the Son (Mediator), the angels, Old Testament believers (“righteous men made perfect”), and believers of the Church Age (“church of the first-born”). This registry of residents accords with both the statements of the Old Testament concerning the heavenly destination of believers (Job 19:25-27; 2 Kings 2:11; Psalm 11:7; 73:24) and descriptions of the heavenly court and of the population of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation (see below).

In the aforementioned Hebrews passage, verses 26-28 explain that the old creation (the present heavens and earth) will one day be removed leaving that “which cannot be shaken,” the indestructible kingdom (the heavenly Jerusalem) as the eternal inheritance of the saints (cf. Isaiah 65:17; 66:22). This appears to be the same cosmic dissolution that Peter speaks of as the climax of the Day of the Lord that results in “a new heavens and a new earth” (2 Peter 3:10-13).

It is also possible to include with the Hebrews enrollment of heavenly citizens the inference to the heavenly Jerusalem in Paul’s declaration that “our [the saints] citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20a; cf. Ephesians 2:19). This citizenship is clearly in the Third Heaven, since it is from this place that “we eagerly wait for [the coming of] a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20b; cf. Hebrews 12:2).

The Description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation

The use of the term “New Jerusalem” (Greek *ten hagian Ierousalem*) is found only in the Book of Revelation. Because the book was written after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (at the end of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian about A.D. 90), some commentators have suggested that the concept of a “new” Jerusalem developed in response to the loss of the “old” Jerusalem. However, the “old” Jerusalem was never entirely lost to the Jews and a Jewish population continued there (and on its outskirts even during the Hadrianic ban) through the following millennia. However, as we have seen, the concept had existed long before the Temple’s destruction (in the Old Testament, Jewish Apocalyptic literature, and the New Testament). John, as a Jew, would have been quite familiar with these texts and traditions. For example, there exists a close parallel between Revelation 21:22-23, which is part of the description of the New Jerusalem and an earlier Jewish midrash on Isaiah 60:19 fused with a

midrash on Psalm 132:17. The similarities in these accounts do not mean that John borrowed his material from the Jewish midrashim, but that Jews and Jewish-Christians arrived at similar conclusions concerning the New Jerusalem based on their interpretation of the same scriptural texts.

The most complete description of the New Jerusalem is in Revelation 21-22. John calls it “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (Revelation 21:9), which has been “made ready as a bride adorned for her husband” (Revelation 21:2). This refers to the place Jesus left to prepare for His people (His disciples and “those who believe in Me through their word,” John 17:20) in John 14:2. The background of the marriage metaphor is the Jewish custom of the bridegroom husband leaving the bride at the betrothal to prepare a new house where they would dwell together once he returned to take away his bride. At the time the bridegroom returned, the wedding took place, at which occasion the bride was splendidly adorned. In the same way, the New Jerusalem will come down from God as the glorious place promised to the Church.

The appearance of the New Jerusalem also finally fulfills the divine ideal purposed in the earthly Tabernacle and Temple (Exodus 25:8) and in the Church as a “spiritual temple” (Ephesians 2:21-22) of a holy relationship between the Creator and the creature. The New Jerusalem is therefore called “the Tabernacle (Greek *skene* for Hebrew *mishkan*, “dwelling”) of God” since in it God will forever “dwell” among His people (Revelation 21:3; 22:3-4), and a “temple” comprised of “the Lord God, the Almighty and the Lamb” (Revelation 21:22). In this light, it is significant that the New Jerusalem is laid out as a “square” (Revelation 21:16a). The predicate adjective “foursquare” (Greek *tetragonos*), describing the dimensions of the city, is from “four” (Greek *tetra*) and “corner” (Greek *gonos*). This term was also used with reference to cube-shaped building stones (cf. *BAGD*, p. 821), and indicates here a *tetragonal* (quadrilateral) structure said to be 1,500 miles equally in every direction with walls measuring 72 yards (estimated as an area of 2,250,000 square miles). This design of connecting planes of equal size forming a cube has long been recognized as the unique cubical shape of the Holy of Holies in the Temple in which the Presence of God dwelt in the midst of Israel (1 Kings 6:20; 8:10-13; 2 Chronicles 3:8; 5:14-6:2). The New Jerusalem, then, completes the temporary purpose of the Holy of Holies in the earthly sanctuaries, where a priest represented the people before God, by serving as the permanent and unrestricted meeting place for all the saints (as God’s priests) and God.

Besides its structural shape, Revelation details its internal construction that can only be compared to precious earthly stones in color and composition. The brilliance and splendor produced by this vision of iridescent stones of every color and hue and streets of pure gold like transparent glass, is the language of accommodation. In Exodus 24 when Moses and the elders of Israel were permitted to see the God of Israel, their vision of His heavenly court was of “a pavement of sapphire as clear as the sky” (verse 10). Too, Ezekiel’s vision of God’s throne contained similar descriptions: “something like an expanse, like the awesome gleam of crystal,” “something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance” (Ezekiel 1:22, 26).

This jeweled adornment of the city read in relation to the statement that the city is “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (Revelation 21:9) have caused many interpreters to conclude that the whole description of the New Jerusalem is symbolic of the Church (either the redeemed on

earth or in heaven). However, the language here is metaphorical, the use of an object for what it contains (the Church *in* the city). In support of this is Revelation 21:2 where the city is said to be “made ready *as* a bride adorned for her husband,” a clear use of simile, a literary device that makes a comparison between two separate things. Moreover, in Revelation 22:3b the Church (“the bond-servants of the Lamb”) is clearly separate from the city (in which they serve), so it cannot be a symbol of them. In spite of these unusual features, the city qualifies in every sense as a physical reality, with measurable architectural structures, planned design, building materials, rivers, trees, and human inhabitants. What appears (to the reader) as an incredible description is to accommodate our present inability to grasp such heavenly realities. An eternal city designed for an eternal people, is not of earth, and as the handiwork of an infinite God, should not be expected to conform to human convention. To be sure this consummation of God’s purpose in Creation (with a new creation, Revelation 21:5) produces many comparisons with the beginning of God’s program (in Genesis). One example is description of the inner city with “a river of the water of life,” “the tree of life,” and “fruits” and “leaves ... for healing the nations” (Revelation 22:1-2). Although reminiscent of the paradisaical Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8-17), there is no reason to suppose the scene (in either narrative) is symbolic. Like the earthly Tabernacle and Temple which were patterned after the heavenly originals, so the earthly Garden of Eden could have been created as an archetype of the New Jerusalem.

The walls of the New Jerusalem reveal that both the saints of Israel and the Church share equally in the inheritance of the city. Inscribed on its twelve gates are the names of the twelve tribes of Israel while on its twelve foundation stones are the names of the twelve apostles (Revelation 21:12-14). Even though these are all Jewish, they still represent the dispensations of Israel and the Church (as in Hebrews 12:23). This reminder that the Church’s “foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 2:20), was Jewish cautions grafted Gentile Christians not to be arrogance toward the natural branches (Romans 11:18-23). As such, it is fitting that it was still during the dispensation of Israel when Jesus the Jewish Messiah announced to His Jewish disciples that He was going away [to heaven] to prepare a place [this city] for them as His bride (John 14:2). Part of that preparation may be His entrance into the heavenly Holy of Holies as a High Priest in order to qualify us as pure priests to serve the holy God (Hebrews 9:11-14; Revelation 22:3b).

The New Jerusalem is further depicted as “having the glory of God” (Revelation 21:11a). This particular feature seems to have most impressed John, for he emphasized it in his description of the city. The supernatural illumination of the city, eliminating the need for the earthly cycle of day and night, and hence the need for rest or cessation of service) derives from the Presence of God and Christ (Revelation 21:23; 22:5). The illumination of the city also extends to the earth, allowing “the nations to walk by its light” (Revelation 21:24). This verse and verse 26 also state that the earthly kings will bring their tribute into the heavenly city. Gentile pilgrimage to and payment of tribute to the Messiah at the Millennial Temple in the earthly Jerusalem was predicted by the prophets (Isaiah 60:6-9; 66:18-21; Haggai 2:7; Zechariah 14:16-19). This text may support the view that the New Jerusalem descends to earth over the earthly Jerusalem during the Millennium so that the nations respect is accorded to God in both the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem. The immediate objection may be that this context describes the eternal state, not the millennium (Revelation 21:1). However, John may be considering the position of the people (within and without the city) without regard to the position of the city

itself (that is, in the Millennium or eternal state). If so, such considerations are not necessarily bound by the chronology of the immediate context, but determined by whatever contexts establish their identity (in this case those texts in the Old Testament which fit the Millennial Kingdom). In fact, we must also look to another context to explain the “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” as already in the New Jerusalem before the eternal state, if it is contended the New Jerusalem begins with the eternal state rather than is preexistent. Regardless of when the New Jerusalem descends from heaven, it is the prophetic promise of it as the eternal home of God’s people which at the conclusion of John’s Revelation compels the prayer of the saints, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

Bibliography

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