# The New Jerusalem — a present reality

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**Bible Version**
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The apostle John, in his last vision, saw a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem (Revelation 21 – 22).
What should we make of this new order?

Historically, Christians have understood John's vision as a depiction of the eternal state:
On the last day Jesus will return, and the dead will be raised up and judged along with the living.
Christians who have died will leave the bliss of heaven to be reunited with their former bodies.[1]
According to one common view, the earth will then be radically transformed and renewed.
The new earth/Jerusalem (in this view) represents the Christian's final destiny — a physical utopia inhabited by people with physical, but incorruptible, bodies.

This view should be seriously questioned:

- When John saw and wrote, the new order was about to become a reality (22:6, 10).
- In John's description, wicked people are still present, albeit outside of Jerusalem itself (22:15).
- The city ministers "healing" to the nations and proffers salvation to those outside (22:2, 14, 17).
  (Needless to say, the presence of sinners, the ongoing offer of salvation, and nations in need of healing — all these are incompatible with the traditional view.)
- In Isaiah's description of this new creation, people live long and productive lives and bear children.
  Yet they still die — albeit at a great age (Isa 65:20-23). Again, not a picture of eternity.

It seems obvious that both Isaiah and John are actually depicting the present gospel or kingdom age.

## All of Revelation's visions were to be fulfilled "soon" (1:1)

- Revelation portrays <u>imminent events</u> (1:1, 3; 22:6, 10).
  These imminence statements serve as bookends for the entire prophetic content of Revelation.
  Therefore, all of John's visions were fulfilled in the 1st century; all the events portrayed are in our past.
  The new order shown in chapters 21 – 22 is a present reality!
- John saw and wrote Revelation around AD 64, just prior to the outbreak of Nero's brutal persecution.
  The prophecy served to encourage and prepare its first readers for their impending ordeal (1:3; 22:7).
  It did so by revealing Christ enthroned in heaven: his sovereignty, his judgments, and his ultimate conquest of the world. And by the promise of eternal rewards for those who persevered.

[1] Both the 1561 Belgic Confession (Article 37), and the 1646 Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 32; Article 2), affirm that on the last day the souls of the dead will be reunited with their former bodies — albeit with new qualities.

## The New Jerusalem is a present reality

John's description of the city itself includes the following:

- Identified as the bride or wife of Christ (21:2, 9).
- Its wall has twelve foundations, on which are inscribed the names of the twelve apostles (21:14).
- Cube-shaped, like the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle and temple (21:16).
- Serves as a light to the nations (21:24).
- Ministers healing to the nations (22:2).
- Entry into the city is via cleansing through Christ (22:14; cf. 7:14).
- Excluded are the wicked and impenitent; they dwell outside the city's walls (22:15).
- Extends (with God's Spirit) an invitation for people to come and freely partake of salvation (22:17).

But this is a description of the Church:

- The Church is Christ's holy wife (Eph 5:25ff.).
- The Church is God's new temple, built upon the apostles' teaching (Eph 2:20-22).[2]
- The Church serves as a light and ministers gospel healing to the nations.

## The New Creation and its City

- In the Old Testament (OT), God symbolically dwelt in his temple in Jerusalem, from whence he ruled and judged. But in reality, God dwells in his heavenly city and temple (1Kgs 8:39; Ps 11:4; Heb 12:22; Rev 11:19).
- Jerusalem was also to be the place of Messiah's enthronement (Ps 2:6; 110:1-2).
- Jesus in his ascension was enthroned in the heavenly Zion (Ac 2:30-36; Dan 7:13-14).
  In this way, the Davidic throne has been restored (Lk 1:32-33; cf. Isa 9:6-7).
- John's vision depicts the new world order that Jesus has inaugurated:
  Jesus dwells in "Jerusalem", and all nations are firmly under his rule.
  All nations belong to him as his reward and inheritance (Ps 2:8; Dan 7:14).
  He wins them to himself through the gospel (Mt 28:18-19; Ac 15:16-17; Gal 3:8).
  And he disciplines those that rebel (Ps 2:9; Rev 12:5; 19:15).
- OT prophecies relating to Messiah's kingdom are thereby fulfilled (e.g., Psalm 72; Isa 9:7; 11:1-10).
  The kingdom has come "with power" (Mk 9:1; Rev 11:15).
  In time, all nations will come to worship in "Jerusalem" (Ps 86:9; Isa 2:1-3; Rev 15:4).
- The city's descent from heaven shows it to be a present, spiritual and legal reality.
  The saints are gathered into the city; it's where we "live" under the New Covenant (Heb 12:22).
  God dwells with his people (Rev 21:3); they serve before him as priests in his temple (Rev 1:6; 7:15; 22:3).
  New Jerusalem and its citizens are "holy" — justified in Christ (Rev 21:2, 10, 27; 22:14).
- Jerusalem is the royal city of this new world — the seat of government, its capital.
  From the city Jesus rules the nations, and his people share in this rule (Rev 2:26-27; 5:10; 22:5; Dan 7:27).
- Though John's vision portrays spiritual realities, the New Jerusalem manifests outwardly as the Church.
  John's vision depicts the gospel era, with the Church ministering blessing to the nations.

[2] The city's wall serves to demarcate and protect the city from those outside (cf. Rev 22:15). Undoubtedly its twelve foundations, with the names of the twelve apostles inscribed on them (Rev 21:14), signify the apostolic teaching upon which the Church is based and defined (cf. Eph 2:20; Jude 1:3).

As Kurt Simmons explains:

> The new Jerusalem symbolically describes the covenantal habitation of the saints under the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the new heavens and earth [describes] the world beneath Jesus' righteous dominion.[3]

## New Jerusalem represents the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy

OT prophecies pointed forward to the person and work of Jesus (Lk 24:25-27, 44; 1Pet 1:10-12).
Likewise, those prophecies foretelling the establishment of God's kingdom, the Judgment, Israel's restoration, the Resurrection of the Dead, and so forth, were all fulfilled by AD 70.
See Luke 21:22, 31-32; Acts 3:21-24; Revelation 10:7.

The city that descends from heaven (Rev 21:2ff.) pictures the fulfillment of the many OT prophecies relating to Jerusalem's restoration and the regathering of God's people from exile and into his presence.
In Isaiah, the exile of God's people in Assyria and Babylon epitomized the universal exile of all mankind in Adam.
But now, through the work of Yahweh's Servant — through his atoning death (Isaiah 53) — Jerusalem has been definitively restored and the exiles gathered (e.g., Isa 54:1; 56:8; 60:1ff.; 65:17ff.).
God has delivered his people (Gentiles too) from the captivity of sin and gathered them to himself.
In Christ, Man's banishment and exile that began in the Garden has finally ended (Rev 22:1-4).

This AD 70 gathering into Jerusalem is probably what Jesus was referring to in Matthew 24:31:
After the Tribulation and the fall of Jerusalem he will "send out his angels with a loud trumpet call" to "gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."
The language that Jesus employs suggests this is a gathering <u>of exiles</u>:
They are gathered from the four winds (Isa 11:12; 43:5-6; Zec 2:6) and from the "uttermost parts of heaven" (Dt 30:4). This is a Jubilee (trumpet) gathering into Jesus' presence in Jerusalem.
But of course, these saints would have been earlier gathered via the gospel as well.

The prophet Isaiah anticipates these gatherings in 2:2-3; 11:6-12; 25:6-7; 27:12-13; 35:8-10; 56:6-8.
God's people will be gathered to his "holy mountain" in Jerusalem (Isa 11:9; 27:13; 56:7).
Gentiles are amongst those gathered.
And Paul in Romans 15:12 cites Isaiah 11:10 (LXX) to support his assertion that Gentile salvation was God's intention all along (cf. Rom 15:9-12).

And so, the new creation and its city depict the <u>definitive fulfillment</u> of OT prophecies in and through Jesus.
This fulfillment took place in the 1st century AD.

[3] From Kurt Simmons' online article *The New Jerusalem The Covenantal Habitation of the Saints*.
See: http://www.preteristcentral.com, under the Heaven & Earth section.

## What about the absence of pain and death?

Doesn't the absence of sorrow and pain, death and curse (Rev 21:4; 22:3) suggests a description of the final consummate state rather than the present gospel/kingdom/church age?

Response:

- Yes, "Jerusalem" does indeed (also) represent our posthumous destiny (Heb 13:14; Rev 21:7-8).
  In the perfection of heaven there will absolutely be no more sorrow or pain, death or curse.
- But Revelation 21:4 is consciously echoing OT promises concerning the joy of the redeemed gathered from exile into restored Zion (e.g., Isa 25:8; 35:10; 51:11; 55:12; 60:20; 65:19; Jer 31:13).
  Jerusalem's restoration means the end of the gloom and sorrow associated with exile.
- Likewise with Revelation 7:16-17:
  No more hunger, thirst, or scorching heat; being led to "springs of living water".
  This is certainly a description of the New Jerusalem (compare Revelation 7:15 with 22:3).
  Yet here too, the language is directly borrowed from Isaiah 49:10, which pictures the Jewish captives' return to their land through the work of Yahweh's Servant.[4]
  So, while this passage can legitimately be related to the post-Resurrection heavenly solace of the martyrs, its primary application is probably to those on earth who have come through the first-century persecutions (Rev 7:14). It is sometimes unclear what exactly John intends.
- Importantly, the absence of any curse (in Revelation 22:3) applies only within the confines of the city itself.
  The wicked dwelling outside the city's walls (Rev 22:15) remain under God's wrath and curse, and their final destiny (without repentance) is the lake of fire.

## Restoration to God's presence is the overarching theme

- With the city's descent, God himself has come down to dwell with his people (Rev 21:3), thereby fulfilling his promises to Israel (Lev 26:11-12; Eze 37:27; Zec 2:10).
- The city's cube shape recalls the temple's inner sanctuary (the Most Holy Place) where God sat enthroned (Rev 21:16; cf. 1Kgs 6:20).
  God's people in the city serve before him as priests in his temple (Rev 22:3; cf. Rev 1:6; 5:10; 7:15).
- Within the city itself we see Eden restored: the "river of the water of life" with the tree of life on its banks, along with the absence of any "curse" (Rev 22:1-3).
  (Compare with Genesis 2:9-10; 3:17-19.)
- Those in the city see God's face (Rev 22:4).
  Adam was banished from God's presence, but here, the saints are fully restored.
- Those in the city — who have been washed from sin — may eat from the tree of life (Rev 22:14).

John's point is obvious:
Christ, the definitive deliverer, has ended our banishment and exile by dealing with sin.
Through his death we are fully restored to God's presence in the inner sanctuary (Mt 27:51; Heb 10:19-20).
The long exile that began with Adam is finally over.

[4] John has here modified Isaiah's "springs of water" (Isa 49:10) to "springs of living water". We also read of "living water" in John's gospel (in 4:10; 7:38). The imagery (in John's last vision) of life-imparting water emanating from God's throne in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:6; 22:1, 17) derives from Ezekiel 47:1-12. Similar imagery is employed by Joel (in 3:18) and by Zechariah (in 14:8).

## Parousia

With the city's descent, Jesus, too, has come down to dwell with his people.
He is on the throne with his Father in the city (Rev 22:3).
Christ's bride (i.e., the Church) had made herself ready for her husband (Rev 19:7).
And, just as a Jewish bridegroom would return to collect his bride, so also Christ came to receive his people to himself that they might live with him forever (Mt 25:1-13; Jn 14:2-3).
We live with him now, this side of eternity, and we will do so even more when we die and enter heaven itself.[5]

With Jesus' return his people would be gathered into his presence (Mt 24:30-31).
Paul seems to reference this same gathering in 2 Thessalonians 2:1:
*Now concerning the coming* [parousia] *of our Lord Jesus Christ and <u>our being gathered together to him</u> …*

It's true that Jesus promised to be present with his disciples always (Mt 28:20), and he was so via the Holy Spirit.
Nevertheless, early Christians longed for his *parousia* — his "personal arrival and ongoing presence" with them.
With his coming, believers would be "gathered together to him".

## Conclusion

John's vision is not about the future, at least not our future.
Rather, the focus is on <u>fulfillment</u> — the fulfillment of God's purposes and promises.
Fulfillment of all that the OT prophets anticipated.
Fulfillment in the 1st century AD, through the person and work of Jesus.

[5] In John 14:2-3, Jesus informs his disciples that he is returning to his "Father's house" in order there to prepare a place for them. From thence he will come again to collect them, so that they might live with him there. The context of Jesus' promise in John 14 — his going to the Father (Jn 13:1, 3, 33, 36; 14:12, 28) — shows that "my Father's house" is a reference to heaven.