



Revelation's Vision of New Jerusalem: God's Life-Giving Reign for the World

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Revelation's vision of New Jerusalem is a prophetic challenge to the impoverished imagination. The city's gemlike appearance and massive size are beyond anything human beings can create. The gates are made of pearls, the street is paved with gold, and the wall extends fifteen hundred miles upward into space. Light shines continually, the river of life flows, and the tree of life is there. One cannot locate New Jerusalem on a map because it belongs to the future in which God makes all things new (Rev 21:5). Yet the vision of the city is designed to shape life in the present by its vivid portrayal of God's life-giving will for the world.

New Jerusalem seems "other," and it is, because Revelation will not allow God's city to be equated with any earthly city. Revelation resists the idea that any form of social and political organization can claim to be the final one. The description of New Jerusalem critiques the power structures of this world from a perspective that is not captive to this world. The vision calls for renewed trust in God in the present by showing that God's purposes extend far beyond the present.

In the book of Revelation, it is easy to be caught up in the vivid panorama of apocalyptic destruction. But in its picture of New Jerusalem, built by God, this book delivers a profound vision of God's care for the peoples of all nations and the redemption of human existence in this world.

They culminate in a future for the world that can be glimpsed through faith but never controlled.¹

NEW JERUSALEM AND CITIES IN THE READERS' WORLD

Revelation was composed in the late first century CE, when the earthly city of Jerusalem lay in ruins. The Jewish war against Roman domination had culminated in the Romans recapturing Jerusalem in 70 CE and destroying its temple. To celebrate the event, Titus, a Roman general, erected a victory arch in Rome, depicting his troops carrying plunder from the Jerusalem temple in a triumphal procession. Prominently displayed are soldiers carrying the menorah, the table for the sacred bread, the pans for removing ashes from the altar, and the trumpets used in worship. The city and its sanctuary had been devastated.

By way of contrast, Rome was the city around which the imperial universe revolved. Rome's population was massive, and its physical structures were imposing. Augustus and his successors had spent enormous sums to beautify the city and improve its infrastructure. Brick buildings were adorned with marble in order to show the majesty of the empire (Suetonius, *Augustus* 28.3). Water flowed through the aqueducts into the city with its many fountains. Rome was said to be the eternal city, and supporters ascribed Roman success to divine providence.

The readers of Revelation lived in cities of the Roman province of Asia, in what today is western Turkey (Rev 1:4, 11). Ephesus and Smyrna were major urban centers along the coast. They had thriving economies fueled by trade and manufacturing. The other cities were located inland and were important regional centers for commerce. Wealthy patrons provided funds for the monumental structures in these cities, which again proclaimed the majesty of the empire. A massive gate at Ephesus was dedicated to Augustus and his family, and a new paved street was inscribed to the emperor Domitian and the goddess Artemis. Laodicea had a new stadium that was dedicated to Titus, who had conquered Jerusalem, as well as an ornate city gate inscribed to Zeus and Domitian. Public structures in other cities displayed similar inscriptions.

Historically, Jerusalem was a source for Israel's national identity. David had made the city his capital over a thousand years before Revelation was written. His successor, Solomon, had built its first temple, an elaborate palace, and other structures (1 Kgs 5–8). After destruction by the Babylonians in the sixth century BCE, the city and its temple were rebuilt, giving Israel a renewed focus for national life under Persian rule. Nehemiah had insisted that Jerusalem have walls to give it both grandeur and security (Neh 2:17). In the late first century BCE, Herod the Great expanded the walls, towers, and temple complex, giving Jerusalem a more impressive appearance.

¹ The perspectives here are developed at greater length in Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 187–197; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation*, Anchor Yale Bible 38a (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 810–836.

After the city was devastated by the Romans in the first century, one might expect visions of hope to center again on the process of rebuilding. There would have been precedent for that in the writings of Israel's prophets. At the time of the Babylonian conquest, Jeremiah anticipated that the city would be refurbished in the future (Jer 30:18–22; 31:38–40). Ezekiel provided an extensive description of what the city and its rebuilt temple would look like, including the design of its walls, gates, and courts (Ezek 40–45).

Revelation, however, alters that expectation by depicting a Jerusalem that is not rebuilt from the ground up but one that comes from heaven downward. Like cities in the readers' world, New Jerusalem has gates and foundations, but the names inscribed on them tell a different story, focusing on the children of Israel and apostles of the Lamb, rather than on the empire and its benefactors (Rev 21:14). Where Ezekiel envisioned a city that was a mile and a half on each side, Revelation pictures a city with walls a thousand times greater—fifteen hundred miles on a side.

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The structures in earthly cities expressed the majesty of the empire, but New Jerusalem expresses the power of the Creator, who makes all things new (Rev 21:5). The city's dazzling appearance signals the fulfillment of divine promise. According to Isaiah 54:11–12, salvation would mean that the city would have sapphires for its foundations, pinnacles of rubies, and gates made of jewels. New Jerusalem is also connected with the Davidic heritage, but in a transformed sense. Rather than simply restoring the monarchy as it was in Israel's history, the heir to the Davidic throne is the crucified and living Lamb (Rev 5:5–6). The Lamb's royal power is conveyed through love (Rev 1:5–6), he conquers or wins victory through self-sacrifice rather than subjugation (Rev 5:5–6), and he builds God's kingdom by redeeming people with his blood (Rev 5:9–10).

THE HOLY CITY

Revelation refers to New Jerusalem as “the holy city” (Rev 21:2). Historically, Jerusalem was called by that name because that is where the temple was located (Neh 11:1; Isa 48:2; 52:1). By extension, the entire city could be called “holy” because of its role as a center for worship. In Israel's tradition there was only one temple because there was only one God. By way of contrast, other ancient cities had temples to multiple deities, and a particular god or goddess usually had sanctuaries in various locations. Ephesus was known for its temple to Artemis, Smyrna for its temple to

the mother goddess, and Pergamum for its temple to Athena. All three cities had major temples to the Roman emperors and smaller sanctuaries for other deities, and the other cities where the readers lived had temples too. The temples were frequently depicted on coins minted in these cities as an indication of civic identity.

Jerusalem's first temple had been destroyed but then rebuilt, so one might expect that after the Romans destroyed the second temple, a similar structure would be erected again in Jerusalem. The prophets assumed that a temple would be integral to any restored or glorified Jerusalem (Ezek 40–48; Zech 14:16–21; Tobit 14:5), and the same was true in apocalyptic writings (1 Enoch 91:13; 2 Baruch 32:4). Yet the author of Revelation makes the remarkable statement, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev 21:22).

In this vision of the city, the function of holiness is being redefined. Ordinary temples, including the Jerusalem temple, mediated access to God. Israel's sanctuaries had several courts and chambers, and access was limited. Moving from one court to the next required progressively higher levels of holiness. The inner chamber, or holy of holies, could be entered only by the high priest and only once per year (Lev 16:2). In New Jerusalem, however, no structure mediates the presence of God and the Lamb. The barriers of sin and evil have been removed. Revelation can say that God and the Lamb *are* the city's temple because their presence is accessible to all.

To reflect this understanding of holiness, the city itself has the quality of a sanctuary. Its shape is a perfect cube: the length and width and height are equal (Rev 21:16). That corresponds to the holy of holies in Israel's sanctuaries, which were also cubic in shape (1 Kgs 6:20). All those redeemed by the Lamb are considered "priests," who serve in the presence of God (Rev 1:5–6; 5:10). Traditionally, Israel's high priest wore a turban inscribed with the name of God when he entered the inner chamber of the sanctuary (Exod 28:38). But here all the followers of the Lamb have his name and the name of God on their foreheads as they worship in New Jerusalem (Rev 22:4).

NEW JERUSALEM THE BRIDE

New Jerusalem is described as the bride of the Lamb (Rev 21:9). Revelation uses wedding imagery to depict the quality of relationships associated with the city, which center on faithfulness and new life. In ancient social practice, the first formal step in establishing a marriage relationship was betrothal. That was the time when the bride and groom were bound together by promises of mutual faithfulness. The second step was the wedding, when the bride was taken to the groom's home, where they would begin their new life together. That was an occasion for celebration.

The prophets used marriage imagery for God's covenant relationship with Israel. The covenant expressed God's commitment to the people, saying that the Lord would be their God and they would be God's people (Lev 26:11–12; Jer 31:33). God faithfully carried out the commitment by redeeming the people from slavery in Egypt, and in response they were to be faithful to God (Exod 20:1–3). When Israel engaged in worship of other gods, the prophets compared it to marital

infidelity. It was as if they were having an extramarital affair, which violated their covenant relationship with God, the husband (Jer 2:20; 3:1–14; Ezek 16:36; Hos 2:5). Yet the covenant continued because of God’s commitment to it. God’s faithfulness was what made the people’s return to faithfulness possible (Jer 31:31–34).

Revelation uses contrasting city images to show readers the difference between the ways of faithfulness and unfaithfulness. New Jerusalem is the bride, signifying fidelity and life. Babylon is the harlot, whose ways are unscrupulous and destructive. Feminist interpreters of Revelation rightly note that the writer is using stereotypical feminine images, and such images can be problematic if they reinforce the idea that women must be placed in one of two categories: bride or harlot. Yet Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Barbara Rossing have also shown that Revelation uses conventional images to develop a pointed social critique.²

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Revelation makes scathing use of satire when portraying Rome as a harlot whose relationships with others have become a commercial transaction. In Revelation 17–18, the writer depicts Rome as a prostitute, who may be clothed with gold, jewels, and the elegant purple and scarlet robes worn by the rich, but whose manner of life is repulsive. The writer’s goal is to startle readers out of the illusion that Roman life is glamorous and appealing so they can recognize how society has made wealth the ultimate value and has numbed them to the persistent violence that destroys innocent lives. Calling the harlot “Babylon” presses readers to see that the ruling power of their own time is as destructive as that under Babylon, which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple generations before.

The vision of the harlot depicts a society driven by the insatiable desire to consume. In Babylon’s world, everything is reduced to a commodity—even human lives. All that the world produces is brought to the city in a vain attempt to satisfy its voracious appetite for luxury. The list of commodities begins with gold, silver, jewels, and pearls, and it culminates with human trafficking: the sale of “slaves—and human lives” (Rev 18:11–13).³ Yet the vision also shows the city being destroyed by its own destructive tendencies. The city’s relentless desire to consume means that it too is consumed, and the city that perpetrated violence against others finally falls victim to the violence it unleashed (Rev 17:16).

New Jerusalem the bride is a vision of the future, but it shows readers an alternative way of life in the present. The Lamb’s way is characterized by self-giving

² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 12–15; Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

³ On Revelation’s depiction of commerce and especially the slave trade, see Koester, *Revelation*, 718–723.

(Rev 5:6–10). God's way is to give and renew life (Rev 4:11; 21:5). Their faithfulness is truly glorious, and Revelation wants that vision to capture the imagination of readers in their own time and place. In the face of powers that seem alluring, but that are ultimately destructive, Revelation calls readers to the path of resistance. In these visions, faithfulness to the way of God and the way of the Lamb is the supreme act of resistance, which is ultimately the way of life.⁴

THE CITY FOR THE NATIONS

Another surprising aspect of New Jerusalem is its openness to the nations of the world. The city is illumined by the glory of God and the Lamb, the nations walk by its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory into it (Rev 21:23–24). The city has massive walls but there are twelve gates, three on each side of the city, in order to welcome nations from every direction. Moreover, the gates are open continually. They are never shut by day and there is no night there (Rev 21:21, 25). The open gates are depicted as an invitation and a means of access, since life in the city is what God wants for the nations of the world.

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The vision presents a contrast to patterns in the readers' world. Latin writers could call Rome "the light of the whole world and the citadel of all nations" (Cicero, *Against Catiline* 4.11). Virgil celebrated the way the triumphant Augustus sat in splendor as conquered nations were brought to Rome and paraded before him (*Aeneid* 8.714–28). The vision of New Jerusalem, however, focuses on the redemption of kings and nations rather than their subjugation. The language recalls prophetic texts about nations and kings being drawn to the light of God's glory in Zion (Isa 60:3). The prophets envisioned a time when both Israel and the nations would "walk in the light of the Lord" (Isa 2:2–5).⁵

Revelation recognizes that at present, the nations become captive to the forces of evil and the result is oppressive and destructive. The book personifies evil in the form of a satanic dragon, the beast that represents political oppression, and Babylon as the materialistic harlot. Often, the nations are seen as allies of these destructive powers, which are antithetical to the ways of the Creator and the Lamb.⁶ The

⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 187–192; Rossing, *Choice between Two Cities*, 155–165.

⁵ Also see Mic 4:1–4; Jer 3:17; Pss 22:27–28; 86:9; 138:4.

⁶ Rev 11:18; 13:7; 14:8; 18:3, 23; 20:3.

nations are shown rejoicing over the slaughter of those who bear witness to God (Rev 11:9–10), and they trample the holy city in a display of contempt (11:2). Following that destructive path then culminates in the nations' demise (Rev 20:8–9). Similarly, the kings of the earth are often depicted as the adversaries of God, who make war on the Lamb and his followers and then meet defeat.⁷

Yet New Jerusalem persistently calls the nations to a different future. The Lamb died to redeem people of “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9; 7:9). God is the “King of the nations,” who created the earth and all that is in it, and whose will is that all nations come and worship (Rev 10:6; 15:3–4). When New Jerusalem descends, a heavenly voice announces that the dwelling of God is not only in Israel but among humankind (Greek *anthrōpoi*, Rev 21:3). The divine voice also transforms the covenant promise into the plural: God “will dwell with them and they will be his *peoples*” (Rev 21:4).

The open gates of the city welcome the nations so that they find life by walking in the light of God and the Lamb (Rev 21:23–25). The image of light connotes life and well-being, and that is what the nations receive in God's city (Pss 56:13; 97:11). Previously, Ezekiel had envisioned a river flowing out of the glorified Jerusalem, so that trees would grow along its banks and their leaves would provide healing (Ezek 47:12). Revelation adapts that image by speaking of one tree, the tree of life, and adding that the leaves are for “the healing of the nations” (Rev 22:2).⁸

Revelation couples the vision of the nations streaming into New Jerusalem with the warning that “nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood” (Rev 21:27). The warning is addressed to those living in the present, and it emphasizes that New Jerusalem will not be an extension of the corrupt practices associated with the powers of this age. The Lamb died to redeem people of every nation (Rev 7:9), and redemption includes liberation from the destructive forces that now hold them captive. To heed the warning is to engage in resistance against those destructive forces. To trust the promise is to orient one's life toward God's will for life for all.

THE CITY AND THE CREATION

Popular imagination usually assumes that Revelation is a book centered on destruction. The term *apocalypse* regularly evokes images of nuclear war and the annihilation of the cosmos. Yet the God of Revelation is the Creator. The heavenly company says God is worthy of power, “for you created all things and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev 4:11). In a rightly ordered universe “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea” praises the God who gives life and the Lamb who redeems (Rev 5:13). God's goal is not to destroy the earth but to rid it of the destructive powers that have now invaded it, like a

⁷ Rev 17:2, 18; 18:3, 9–10; 19:19–21.

⁸ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 137–140.

cancer in the body (Rev 11:18). Therefore, when the forces that destroy the earth have been defeated, the God who made all things declares, "See, I am making all things new" (Rev 21:5).⁹

New Jerusalem is a city, but one that encompasses the goodness of creation. Revelation does not anticipate movement backward to a primeval Eden but forward toward the point where the urban world and the wider created world are in harmony. In the story of creation, the tree of life was situated in a garden, where rivers flowed and gave life to all (Gen 2:9–10). Scripture tells how the ancestors of all humankind disobeyed God, so that the earth was cursed because of their sin, and they were driven away from the tree of life to toil and die (Gen 3:1–24). The first city was built outside the garden of Eden, not within it (Gen 4:17).

Revelation, however, envisions creation and city together. It depicts God's reversal of the curse placed upon sin, which affected the creation itself. In New Jerusalem nothing will be "accursed" any longer, and the way to the tree of life is open so that all can eat from the fruit that it bears each month (Rev 22:2–3). The description of Babylon emphasizes how that city's relentless desire to consume ravaged the world God made. The underlying value in New Jerusalem, however, is divine giving. God declares, "To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life" (Rev 21:6).

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This vision of God's future is designed to shape life in the present. Revelation is clear that New Jerusalem will never be created by human efforts at city planning or urban renewal. The city comes "from God" (Rev 21:2, 10), it is illuminated by God, and it reflects the splendor of divine grace. But for those who are claimed by the Creator and the Lamb, this vision rightly has a profound impact on the way they see the present world and live within it. God's will is for the redemption and not the destruction of creation. To live as people for whom the Lamb gave himself is to follow the way of self-giving, which is directed toward the well-being of all that God has made. ⊕

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⁹ On the creation themes see Bauckham, *Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 47–53; Barbara R. Rossing, "For the Healing of the World: Reading Revelation Ecologically," in *Christianity and Ecology: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 165–182.