

A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH

NASA photo
showing the birth
of a star.

Right: Closing
of the Book of
Revelation; from
the Martyr's Bible

By Lynn O. Traylor

THROUGHOUT THE SCRIPTURES, God is proclaimed and praised as the One who creates (Gen. 1:1) and gives purpose to all creation (Rev. 4:11). The creative character and purposes of God find ultimate biblical expression in John's vision recorded in Revelation 21, where he sees "a new heaven and a new earth" (v. 1).¹ How would John's readers have understood his words? What would they have thought about a new heaven and a new earth? What significance does John's vision of a new heaven and a new earth have for us today?

Obviously, the meaning of John's vision has been and continues to be intensely debated and discussed among believers, giving rise to various approaches to reading and interpreting John's final book. Named "Revelation" because the book presents an "unveiling" (Greek, *apokalupsis*, from which the word "apocalyptic" is derived) "of Jesus Christ" (1:1), Revelation is among other apocalyptic writings in Scripture (such as Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel), characterized by a cryptic writing style and prophetic tone.² Ironically, often forgotten in the debate over how to read Revelation is the fact that John wrote "to show the servants of Christ things which must soon come to pass" (Rev. 1:1, writer's translation). Clearly, John believed his readers would understand the images in his vision.³ This makes sense only if John and his readers shared a common understanding of those images. Thus a key question is what connections did John make with his readers when speaking of a new heaven and a new earth.

The new heaven and new earth phrase was not original with John. The phrase first appears in Isaiah 65:17, as the prophet received a divine word of encouragement to share with Israel following their release from Babylonian captivity. Whatever struggles they faced, either in captivity or in their return to Judah, Isaiah proclaimed a future hope rooted in what God was doing: "For the former troubles will be forgotten and hidden from My sight. For I will create a new heaven and a new earth; the past events will not be remembered or come to mind. Then be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I will create Jerusalem to be a joy, and its people to be a delight" (Isa. 65:16b-18). A similar note is in Isaiah 66 where, following God's judgment on His "enemies" (v. 14), those who worship the Lord will gather from "all nations and languages" (v. 18) at the "holy mountain Jerusalem" as "a gift to the LORD" (v. 20). God then promised: "'For just as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, will endure before Me'—the LORD's declaration—'so will your offspring and your name endure'" (66:22). The people of God, gathered from all nations, are themselves a "gift" presented to God at Jerusalem. Both passages link

a proclamation of God's glory and majesty to a creative work of God ("new earth"), with Jerusalem serving as the centerpiece of a restored relationship between God and humanity. The wording of Isaiah 65:17-18 supports this link as God's creative work (a new heaven and a new earth) and finds tangible expression in God's intention to "create Jerusalem to be a joy, and its people to be a delight" (v. 18b).⁴ In short, the phrase new heaven(s) and a new earth portrays a time when God's people, delivered from bondage, enjoy a renewed, intimate relationship with God as was intended in the exodus from Egypt.⁵ For John's readers, no doubt familiar with the exodus and Isaiah's writings, references to the new heaven(s) and new earth would bring to mind a redemption scene rich in fulfillment of such themes as the covenant and the return from exile.⁶

The only other time the new heaven(s) and new earth phrase occurs in Scripture is in 2 Peter, where the apostle encouraged continued faithfulness to Christ: "But based on His promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth" (2 Pet. 3:13). Like the passage in Isaiah, Peter anticipated a time when "righteousness will dwell" (v. 13) following God's judgment of the "immoral" (v. 17). Although Peter did not claim to "see" the new heaven(s) and new earth as did John, he was familiar enough with the idea to claim the promise as motivation for his readers to continue living "in holy conduct and godliness" (v. 11). This emphasis on righteousness and judgment is very much in line with Isaiah's prophetic character as God "show(s) His wrath against His enemies" (Isa. 66:14) and

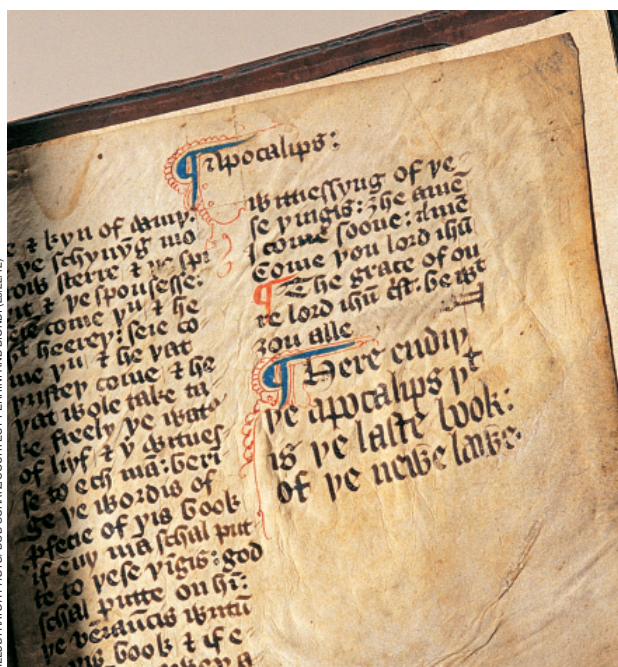


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LESSON REFERENCE

BSFL: Revelation 21



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ILLUSTRATION PHOTO/BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON (31/9/85)

Above: Port of Patmos as seen from the entrance to the Cave of the Apocalypse.

Left: The Gilgamesh flood tablet records

the Assyrian epic of the assembly of the gods destroying the earth with a flood. One man, Utnapishtim, saves himself, his family, his

workmen, and animals by building a boat. After the floodwaters recede, the earth is renewed and the gods offer Utnapishtim immortality.

reflects an emphasis shared by Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings on a final judgment.⁷

What might it be like to experience the new heaven and new earth? John told his readers that when he saw a new heaven and earth, “the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea existed no longer” (Rev. 21:1). Does this mean God is removing or destroying the earth and making a totally new creation, including heaven? A literal reading of this verse, along with the words of 2 Peter 3:10, seems to support this view. However, in keeping with the context of Isaiah 65:17, the emphasis is not on God creating again, but the restoration of God’s righteousness and glory throughout creation, with all that opposes God having been defeated.⁸ Rather than making “all new things” and announcing a “second heaven and earth,” God declared: “Look! I am making everything new” (Rev. 21:5).⁹ Instead

of a destruction of the earth, a divine “renewal” of creation calls for God’s people to exercise more than just a consumer mentality when using the earth’s resources, since we are stewards of a world that joins us as believers in an eagerly anticipated deliverance.¹⁰ As Paul wrote: “For the creation eagerly waits with anticipation for God’s sons to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it—in the hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage of corruption into the glorious freedom of God’s children” (Rom. 8:19-21). In reminding believers of God’s ultimate triumph over sin, John’s vision continues to encourage believers, while challenging the people of God to exercise faithful stewardship as we await His redemption. **B**

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations in this article are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

2. A. T. Robertson, *The General Epistles and the Revelation of John*, vol. 6 in *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1933), 270.

3. Bruce J. Malina, *The New Jerusalem in the Revelation of John: The City as Symbol of Life with God* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 23.

4. Pilchan Lee, *The New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation: A Study of Revelation 21-22 in the Light of its Background in Jewish Tradition* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 19.

5. David Mathewson, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Meaning and Function of the Old Testament in Revelation 21.1-22.5* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 63.

6. *Ibid.*, 69.

7. Gale Z. Heide, “What Is New About the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40.1 (March, 1997): 49 (fn. 35).

8. *Ibid.*, 42-44.

9. M. Eugene Boring, “Revelation 19-21: End Without Closure,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Supplementary Issue 3 (1994): 74-75.

10. Heide, 40-41.

Lynn O. Traylor is pastor, Buckner Baptist Church, LaGrange, Kentucky.