

WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

The Last Judgment (20:11-15)

With Satan banished forever, John takes the reader to the stark scene of the final judgment. Here, the entire company of humans shall appear before Christ, the judge of all (cf. Mt. 13:47-50; 25:31-46; Jn. 5:22; Ro. 2:5-10; 14:10; 2 Co. 5:10). The judgment for each person is either acquittal or condemnation (Mt. 12:36-37). The testimony for and against those who stand in judgment will be given out of “the books,” that is, the record of their lives. A special book, the book of life, is also mentioned. The references to these books come from the Old Testament concept of heavenly records, books in which the deeds of the living were recorded (Ex. 32:32; Ne. 13:14; Ps. 56:8; 69:28; 109:13; 139:16). In later Jewish literature, the idea was expanded to include a single book that contains the names of the righteous people of God (Da. 12:1; 1 Enoch 47:3; 108:3; Jubilees 30:20, 22; 36:10). Jesus himself made use of this imagery (Lk. 10:20), and John here employs it to describe God’s omniscience with regard to human behavior. For those who are believers, the words of Paul are important: “Who shall accuse those whom God has chosen?” (Ro. 8:32-34).

The judgment of believers is not to decide whether they are saved or lost; it is to confirm their salvation based on the acquittal they already have received by faith (cf. Ro. 3:26). Furthermore, it is to determine their rewards in the eternal state (cf. 1 Co. 3:14-15). Those whose names are not in the book of life will be consigned to the same future as the beast, the false prophet, and the dragon.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *How should Christians think about the last judgment in light of:*
 He. 9:27?
 Ja. 2:12-13?
 1 Co. 3:13-15?
 1 Jn. 4:17-18?
- *While the New Testament uses the metaphor of “crowns” several times to describe the rewards of the righteous, what might such crowns symbolize?*

THE NEW JERUSALEM (21:1-22:5)

John’s visions now reach their climax. He has viewed the messianic woes of the final days, the disintegration of the anti-Christian forces of lawlessness, the banishment of all the spiritual powers of evil, the consummation of the kingdom of God on the earth, and the final judgment of the human race. All that is left is to describe the new order, the final redemption of all things (Ac. 3:21; Ro. 8:19-25).

The New Order (21:1-8)

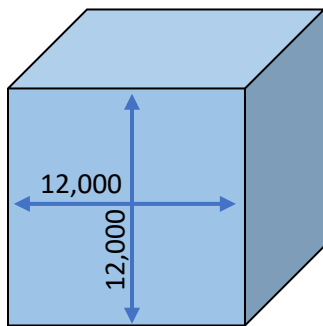
John once again draws from the Old Testament, this time from Isaiah 65:17-25; 66:22-24. The old order is to be dissolved, and a new order will be created, this time without any ocean. The sea, for ancient peoples, was mysterious and treacherous. Its dissolution would have been welcomed. In contrast to Babylon, which had fallen, the New Jerusalem becomes the dwelling place of God and the eternal homeland of his people (Ga. 4:26; Phil. 3:20). Sorrow, death, and pain will have vanished.

The Holy City is depicted dressed as a bride, recalling the previous mention of the marriage festivities of the Lamb and his wife (19:7-8). Recollections of earlier visions are given in the titles Alpha and Omega (1:8), the promise of the water of life (7:17), the hope for the overcomer (given to each of the seven churches of Asia in chapters 2-3), and the banishment of God's enemies (20:10, 14-15).

The Wife of the Lamb (21:9-21)

The metaphor of God as a husband is familiar to the reader of the Old Testament. Metaphorically, Israel was God's wife (Is. 54:5) whom, according to Jeremiah, he divorced (Je. 3:8). In the New Testament the same metaphor is picked up repeatedly and applied to the New Israel, the church (Mk. 2:19; 22:1ff.; 25:1ff.; Jn. 3:29; 2 Co. 11:2; Ep. 5:25-32). John draws from this same imagery as he portrays the people of God as the Lamb's wife. There is a fluidity between the Holy City and the people of God so that to see the city was to see the wife herself (cf. 21:2). This may be a clue that one should interpret the city, not so much as a material structure, as to the eschatological blessedness of God's people, a blessedness that known categories are incapable of describing.

John viewed the Holy City as situated on a great mountain, the eschatological Zion (cf. 14:1), just as the old Jerusalem had been situated at the old Zion. In his description, he maintains the unity of the people of God, bringing together ancient Israel under the names of the twelve tribes and the new Israel under the names of the twelve apostles (cf. Ep. 2:20). The city was shaped like a cube, perhaps



in likeness to the most holy place in the ancient tabernacle and temple. The distances, which are given in human measurements (12000 stadia is about 1400 miles), are multiples of the number of God's people (12) and the number of God's kingdom (1000). Since the cubed city has twelve edges, each of them 12000 stadia, the sum of them all equals 144,000, the number representing God's elect (7:4; 14:1). The city's foundations were made of various precious stones reminiscent of Ezekiel's description of the garden of God (Eze. 28:13). The city's gates were each a single pearl, and its streets were like transparent gold, once more a description that discourages literalism.

The Glory of the Holy City (21:22-22:5)

The Holy City is blessed with the immediate presence of God, thus eliminating the need for a temple. The city itself IS the temple, and since the city symbolizes the people of God, the people of God are the temple, as is elsewhere describe by St. Paul (cf. 3:12; 1 Co. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Co. 6:16; Ep. 2:21). God himself is the light of the city, shining through Christ the Lamb (cf. Is. 60:19-20). The nations of the earth, which once gave their honor to Babylon, will now give their honor to the Holy City. Drawing from the pictures of Eden (Ge. 2:9) and the visions of Ezekiel (47:1-12), John describes the quality of eternal life, symbolized by the river and the tree. The regular sequence of fruit-bearing, the leaves for healing, and the trees on each side of the river are drawn from Ezekiel's language. Alluding to Zechariah 14:11, John promises that the curse, the judgment pronounced upon the earth at the disobedience of the first humans (Ge. 3:14-19), will be reversed. Unlike Moses, who was forbidden to see God's face (Ex. 33:18-23), in the new order God's people shall be able to face God directly (1 Co. 13:12). The fact that God's name will be on each forehead (cf. 3:12; 14:1) is a way of representing the familial relationship between God and his people.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *How much did ancient believers, like Abraham, know about the coming city of God do you think (cf. He. 11:8-10, 13-16)?*
- *Paul, of course, uses the metaphor of the bride to refer to the church (e.g., Ep. 5:25-27). Since John seems to include both ancient Israel (the gates) and NT believers (the foundations) as constituent parts of the Holy City, is the idea of “the church” large enough to include both ancient Israel and NT believers?*

THE EPILOGUE: 22:6-21

John’s final remarks sum up and emphasize the central message and authority of the book. In whatever way one wishes to understand all the complex symbolisms and allusions throughout the book, here are surely some of the most important points.

The Authority of the Prophecy (22:6, 8-9, 16, 18-19)

The authority of the prophecy is based upon its source. It comes from “the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets” and from “Jesus.” The author assumes that his name John carries with it the integrity of faithful reporting. It is apparent that John considers his visions to be predictive, not merely speculative. A curse is pronounced upon anyone who would distort the contents. Such a precaution was certainly not superfluous in the ancient world in which all copies of a document were handwritten, and distortions were sometimes intentional for theological and/or philosophical reasons. John’s words parallel the injunctions issued concerning the law of Moses (Dt. 4:1-2).

It is probably unwise to use 22:18-19 as a foundation for closing the canon of the New Testament, even though this idea is not uncommon among some branches of conservative Christianity. In the first place, the reproduction, collection, and preservation of the various documents in the New Testament were gradual, and the evidence is lacking of John being aware that his document was the final one. Indeed, it is openly debated whether or not the Apocalypse was indeed the final document at all, even though it comes last in our Bibles. In any case, the closing of the New Testament canon was not unanimously agreed upon this early. Athanasius was the first to name exactly the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as we now know them, no more and no less (AD 367). As such, the closing of the New Testament canon is grounded upon the decision of the early church as to which books had apostolicity rather than upon a particular verse of scripture such as this one.

The Nearness of Christ’s Return (22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20)

The threefold repetition of the phrase, “I am coming soon,” impresses upon the reader the closeness in which he or she stands to this ultimate event. So also do the phrases “which must soon take place” and “the time is near.” The Christian community should always live under the expectancy of the Lord’s return. Such is also the force of the parables Jesus gave on the Mount of Olives in his final week in Jerusalem (Mk. 13:32-37).

The Call for Decision (22:7, 11-15, 17-19)

The Apocalypse closes in an evangelistic tone. The one who obeys the warnings and maintains faith

in Christ will be blessed. The lines are drawn between those who wish to do wrong and those who wish to do right. The call for decision is clear as it comes from the Holy Spirit and the church.

THE FINAL PROBLEM

There is, of course, a final problem that all students of eschatology must address. It is the tension between the idea, on the one hand, that the Lord's return is to be constantly watched for, and on the other, that there are clear predictions of intermediate events which must occur before the Lord comes. In the Apocalypse there are continual warnings that the Lord is coming *tachys* (= speedily, without delay, cf. 2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20; cf. 3:3), yet at the same time, a variety of closing events to precede the actual epiphany described in 19:11. Similarly, in the teachings of Jesus, the unknown and hence impending nature of the *parousia* is stressed (Mt. 24:36--25:13//Mk. 13:32-37//Lk. 21:29-36). Also, in the teachings of Paul, the eager anticipation of the church is for the coming of the Lord (Ro. 13:11; Phil. 3:20; 1 Th. 1:10; 4:15-18; 5:6; 1 Ti. 6:14; Tit. 2:13). Other New Testament writers voice the same urgency (Ja. 5:8-9; 2 Pe. 3:9-12). At the same time, certain events were predicted and expected to occur in the period prior to the return of the Lord, such as, the great famine in the Roman Empire (Ac. 11:28), the martyrdom of Peter in his old age (Jn. 21:18-19; 2 Pe. 1:14), the arrest of Paul in Jerusalem (Ac. 21:11), the empire-wide preaching of the gospel (Mt. 24:14//Mk. 13:10; Ac. 1:8), the destruction of Jerusalem (Lk. 21:20-24), and finally, a great rebellion and the exposure of the Man of Lawlessness near the end (2 Th. 2:1-3). How is this tension to be resolved?

Dispensationalists resolve it by bifurcating the second coming of the Lord into two phases, only the first of which is truly imminent. As such, while the rapture of the church is always impending, the actual epiphany of the Lord is not but is always at least some seven years into the future following the rapture. There are at least two serious exegetical problems with this view. In the first place, it simply ignores the fact that some intermediate events, such as the death Peter and the arrest of Paul in Jerusalem, could only have been fulfilled before the catching away of the church. At best they can only say that the rapture of the church is *now* imminent, although it was not imminent for the first two or three decades of Christianity. Secondly, and more importantly, the dividing of the second coming of Christ into two phases separated by a seven-year tribulation period strains the Greek exegesis of the actual use of New Testament terms for Christ's second coming, i.e., *parousia*, *apocalypsis* and *epiphaneia*, terms which seem to be used interchangeably to refer to a single event, not an event in two stages separated by seven years.

Post-tribulationists attempt to maintain imminency without succumbing to a divided second coming of Christ. This is possible, first of all, due to a preference for interpreting the seventy weeks of Daniel in a consecutive sequence and as already fulfilled. As such, the references to the 70th week in the Apocalypse of John are allusions more than they are direct correspondences. Furthermore, since the beginning of the great tribulation cannot be definitely marked, and since the apocalyptic symbolisms in the Revelation cannot be infallibly tied to any particular historical events (at least until after they occur), then the hope of the church is still the imminent return of the Lord.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *How do the repeated warnings of nearness and the soon return of Christ shape the way Christians should live in the world?*