

Revelation 21:1-14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Revelation chapter 21 verses 1 to 14 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.

And he who was seated on the throne said, Behold, I am making all things new. Also he said, Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.

And he said to me, It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.

[1 : 08] The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God, and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.

And he carried me away in the spirit to a great high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. Having the glory of God, his radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper clear as crystal, It had a great high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed. On the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Revelation chapter 1 verses 1 to 28 concludes the third vision of the book, which began at the start of chapter 17. Babylon has fallen, the rider on the white horse has come forth to conquer, Satan has been bound for a thousand years, released for a brief window of time, defeated, and then cast into the lake of fire.

[2 : 42] The final judgment has also occurred. Now, at the beginning of Revelation chapter 21, we see the destiny of those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life, a holy city descending from heaven.

Peter Lighthouse makes the perceptive point that there are two descents of the holy city in this chapter, the first in verse 1, and the second in verse 9. The two cities also have different characteristics.

The city of the first eight verses seems to describe the final form of the city. Death has been destroyed, there is no sorrow nor pain, and the wicked are in the lake that burns with fire.

The city of the verses that follow, by contrast, has gates from which things come in and out. Impure things still exist, but yet are excluded. There are still treasures to be brought in.

The city of these verses is not yet consummated. Recognizing such things, we might observe the importance of the descent of the city. The city does not come all at once.

[3 : 41] Rather, it comes through a sort of gradual descent, as the heavenly city slowly takes form on earth. The declaration of a new heaven and a new earth and other descriptions of these verses

take up language familiar from the Old Testament in Isaiah chapter 65, verses 17 to 25.

For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create.

For behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people. No more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.

No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days. For the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.

They shall build houses and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit. They shall not plant and another eat. For like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

[4 : 52] They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity. For they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord, and their descendants with them. Before they call, I will answer.

While they are yet speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall graze together. The lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

The new heavens and the new earth described in this prophecy of Isaiah is not the final completely restored creation awaited after the final resurrection. Death is still present, as are sinners.

Rather, Isaiah's prophecy is primarily about the return from exile. As Lighthouse points out, we have seen the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth in history in the book of Revelation.

Heaven has changed as the lamb and the 144,000 have been raised up and enthroned, and as the dragon has been cast down. The earth has changed as the power of the beasts has been broken, and the reign of Christ established.

[5 : 56] The statement in verse 1 that there is no more sea may relate to the sea of the Gentiles. With the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple and the end of the old covenant order, the Jew-Gentile polarity no longer operates in the same way.

The sea, which symbolizes the Gentiles, is no more. All humanity is now land. We should notice that the city starts in heaven and descends to earth, rather than beginning on earth and being raised up into heaven.

The heavenly pattern is being impressed upon the earth. The tabernacle and temples in scripture were constructed according to heavenly patterns. God gave Moses the pattern for the tabernacle on the top of Mount Sinai.

It was a heavenly pattern for that building. In the end of the book of Ezekiel, there is a vision of a heavenly temple. A heavenly temple that is never built, but which provides the pattern for the reordering of Israel's life after the period of the exile.

Later in the chapter, John will be placed on a very high mountain, much as Ezekiel was in chapter 40 of his prophecy. This vision is of a heavenly pattern that will be brought down to earth.

[7 : 04] God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The city is prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. In scripture more generally, and also in the book of Revelation, cities are often described as women.

And these feminine cities are described in marital terms. They are either faithful or unfaithful. A few chapters earlier, we have read about the downfall of Babylon the Great.

She was the harlot city and the mother of prostitutes. The faithful were called out of her, in order that they might not share in her ruin. Warren Gage has suggested the possibility that the bridal city of this chapter is related to the harlot city of a few chapters earlier.

The bride is formed by people called out of the harlot. Thinking about this typologically, this would not be unfitting. In the book of Joshua, Rahab the harlot is called out of a city that is destroyed with seven trumpets, as she is delivered from the ruin of Jericho.

Gage also observes possible parallels between the story of John's gospel and the Samaritan woman at the well. He writes, We begin by noting the patterns of the correspondence between the Samaritan woman and the whore of Babylon.

[8 : 40] The gospel account begins with Jesus sitting upon the well, a posture that corresponds to the whore of Revelation, who sits upon many waters. The Samaritan woman is thirsty and comes to the well with her water pot to draw.

Similarly, the Babylonian whore is depicted with a cup in her hand, satisfying her thirst with abominations of fornication. When challenged by Jesus, the Samaritan woman lies about her marital status, claiming that she has no husband.

In fact, Jesus tells her that she has had five husbands and the one she is now living with is not her husband. But when the Samaritan woman and the villagers receive Jesus, he remains among them two days.

Similarly, John tells us that the Babylonian whore also lies about her marital status, claiming, I am not a widow. But in fact, Babylon has known five kings who have fallen, and one is, and the other has not yet come.

When he comes, however, he will remain with her a little while. Christ redeems the Samaritan woman in spite of her impure past and transforms her into a picture of the bride of Christ.

[9 : 47] Her thirst having been satisfied, she leaves the one she loves at the well, going back into the village to share with everyone the love she has found without cost. And so she calls for the people, any who thirst for living water, to come out of the city to meet Jesus, who gives so freely by the well of waters.

In this she conforms to the picture of the bride in Revelation, who invites all who thirst to come out of the city and partake of the water of life without cost. Gage's thesis is remarkable and surprising. Even though it is likely overstated, it most probably has some merit. Marital themes have been present to this point in the book. The book begins with Christ being portrayed as the heavenly bridegroom, with what is called a wasif describing him from his garments upwards.

There have been anticipatory references to the wedding feast and also to wedding garments. As the Messiah and bridegroom, Christ is fulfilling themes that we see in the Old Testament, not least in the book of Song of Songs.

The king is a husband of the people, and in places like the books of Samuel, is described as a sort of romantic figure. The relationship between the people and their king has a sort of erotic flavour to it.

[11 : 01] The people desire and love their king. This also returns us to the themes of Genesis chapter 1 to 3. In this and the chapter that follows, we see a garden city, a garden city that fulfills the garden sanctuary that we have in Genesis chapter 2.

In Genesis chapter 2, the man and the woman were brought together. Now at the end of the scriptures, there will be another union, as the lamb and his bride are united. In Genesis chapter 2, we saw the riches of the surrounding lands, precious stones and gold.

Now those treasures of surrounding lands have been brought in to dress the city. And in verses 9 and following, we see a city that has pearls as gates, the riches of the sea, not just the riches of the land.

Water flowed out from the Garden of Eden to water the surrounding lands. And here there are also waters that flow out, the river of life that quenches thirst and brings healing.

These chapters at the end of Revelation also fulfil other biblical themes. The tabernacle theme of God dwelling with his people is taken up here and fulfilled. God will dwell with his people.

[12 : 08] There will be a union of heaven and earth, no longer separated by the firmament. There will be a marriage of the heavens above and the earth beneath. The statement that God will be their God and they will be his people is one that comes as a refrain throughout the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel and is taken up here again.

This bridal city is a place where this promise will be fulfilled. All things will be made new. John is instructed to write this message down. There is also the offer of the water of life to the thirsty.

This is reminiscent of Jesus' teaching in John's Gospel, especially in the conversation with the woman of Samaria at the well. It also hearkens back to Isaiah chapter 55, verses 1 to 3.

Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

[13 : 16] Incline your ear and come to me. Hear that your soul may live, and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. The promise to the one who overcomes is that God will be his God, and that he will be God's son.

