

**The Facebook Commentary on Revelation**  
**Jon Paulien**

**Revelation Chapter 21**

**Rev 21 (Introduction)—**

Chapter 21 marks a major turning point in the book of Revelation. The great earthly conflict that began in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3) is now ended. There will be no more suffering and death in the New Jerusalem. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." Rev 21:4. The Bible is like a gigantic cycle: it opens with the creation of a beautiful new world including a place of safety and security (Genesis 1-2). Then sin, doubt, and disobedience come in (Genesis 3). The story of sin and salvation runs from its beginning in the garden (Gen 3:15) to end of the Millennium (Revelation 20). It ends, in a sense, where it began, in a place of peace, security, and safety with sin fully and finally eradicated (Revelation 21:1 – 22:5). The Bible offers a comprehensive picture of the great conflict, but that picture would not be complete without the book of Revelation, nor would the book of Revelation be complete without its two last important chapters.

In Revelation 4:1, John ascends up to heaven (in the vision) to see what is going on there and report back. In Revelation 21, the New Jerusalem descends from heaven to earth (Rev 21:2), reversing the direction of 4:1. Both Revelation 4-5 and 21 are Sanctuary Introductions, setting the stage for their respective visions. See Rev 1:12 (Excursus on the Sanctuary in Revelation). But there is one other major difference between the passages. In Revelation 4 humanity is going up into heaven to see what God and His government are like. In Revelation 21, it is God that comes down to earth. The wretched rebellious planet becomes the governing center of the entire universe, with humanity playing a major role. This is one of the more remarkable contributions of Revelation to our understanding of God and His ultimate purpose for the earth and the universe. That, out of the entire universe, God would choose to center His presence in the place that once was the home of the opposition is a breathtaking act of grace.

Is the description of the New Jerusalem in this chapter meant to be taken literally? Or is it symbolic of an indescribable reality? Many aspects of this description can be visualized as literal, but it is not clear how far one can or should go in reading this account literally. Although the city is placed in the future, it is described in familiar terms from the past: the Garden of Eden, the land of Canaan, old Jerusalem, the temple of Ezekiel. The structure of Genesis demonstrates that Abraham was looking forward to the restoration of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 12:1-3 in larger context). Abraham had reason to anticipate that the promised land would be at least a foretaste of the lost Eden. While he didn't have a name for it, he was looking for the new Jerusalem, the garden city. "For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Hebrews 11:10, NIV. This was also a dream of Abraham's descendants: ". . . they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them." Hebrews 11:16,

NIV. The new Jerusalem is described here as the fulfillment of the dreams of all humanity ever since the loss of the Garden of Eden.

### **Rev 21 (Structure)—**

The chapter naturally divides in two main parts (three parts if you include 22:1-5). There is a general overview of the new earth (21:1-8), followed by a rather detailed description of the New Jerusalem itself. As was the case with chapter 20, there is some ambiguity regarding the timeline of 21:1-8. It is what I have come to call a duodirectional passage. In one sense it forms the climax of the millennial vision of chapter 20. The description of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven to earth would seem prior to the events of 20:7-9. The mention of a bride recalls 19:7-8. The wiping away of tears would be necessitated in light of 20:14-15, to which 21:8 makes explicit reference. On the other hand, 21:1-8 provides an appropriate introduction to the New Jerusalem vision that follows (21:9 – 22:5). John's attention turns from a focus on endings to a new beginning, the reward of the saved in a renewed earth. Each part of the new earth vision is introduced by a formula of seeing: "I saw" a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1-2); "He showed me the Holy City" (Rev 21:10); and "He showed me a river of the water of life" (Rev 22:1). Each section is also followed by a formula of exclusion (Rev 21:8; 21:27; 22:15).

The visions of Revelation 21-22 are progressive: The city is first announced (Rev 21:1-8); then it is described in detail (Rev 21:9-27); after which the central features of the city are described (Rev 22:1-5). The city is described as if John is approaching it from a distance: At first John describes the city as from afar (Rev 21:2 and 10); he then moves closer so that the walls, gates, and foundations are noticed and described (Rev 21:12-17). As John moves even closer, the materials from which the city is made are noticed (Revelation 21:18-21) and an initial view is given of the interior (Revelation 21:21-22). Then John calls attention to the illumination of the city and the kinds of inhabitants that can or cannot enter there (Rev 21:24-27). Finally, the interior of the city is described as if John has passed through the gates. He sees the river of life, the tree of life and the throne of God at the very center (Rev 22:1-2 and 4).

This passage is not only duodirectional (see Rev 21 [Structure]), it is the sanctuary introduction to the vision of Revelation 21:9 – 22:5. The sanctuary, in this case, is the New Jerusalem itself, a perfect cube (Rev 21:16) just like the Most Holy Place in the temple (1 Kings 6:20, cf. Ezek 41:4). Like the Most Holy Place of the Hebrew sanctuary and temple, the New Jerusalem contains the radiance and glory of God (Rev 21:11—Hebrew: *shechinah*).

### **Rev 21:1-8 (Structure)—**

According to Aune's detailed outline (*Revelation*, 1112-1113), this section falls naturally into three parts (although Aune himself ends up settling on two parts—21:1-4 and 21:5-8). The first part (21:1-2) is John's narration of his vision of a new heaven and a new earth, and the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. The second part (21:3-4) is an audition by a "loud voice from the throne". This audition includes the beloved passage about God wiping every tear away from their eyes (21:4). The third part of the section is an audition by God Himself (the one sitting on the throne). While verse 8 changes direction from positives to negatives, there is no indication in the text that it is not a continuation of God's speech in

verses 5-7.

Aune (*Revelation*, 1114) offers a more detailed analysis of this passage, which I find very helpful. If one includes 5a in the analysis of the first subunit, 21:1-4, there is a chiasmic structure. The new (Greek: *kainos*) heaven and new (Greek: *kainē*) earth (21:1a) parallel God making all things new (Greek: *kaina*—21:5a). Then the first (Greek: *prōtos*) heaven and earth having gone away (Greek: *apēlthan*—21:1b) parallels the former (Greek: *prōta*) things having gone away (Greek: *apēlthan*—21:4b). Then there “was no more” (Greek: *ouk estin eti*) sea (21:1c) parallels the statement that there “will be no more” (Greek: *ouk estai eti*) death (21:4a). The middle of the chiasm, in Aune’s analysis, covers 21:2-3: The holy city descends from heaven and God dwells with His people (I have modified Aune’s verse designations slightly). The second subunit (21:5-8—including 5a as a mini-duodirectional passage) is special because it is attributed to God Himself (“the one sitting on the throne”). Aune notes that only here and in 1:8 is God clearly the speaker in Revelation. God’s speech is a collection of seven sayings, which is probably not coincidental (21:5a, 5b, 6a, 6b, 6c, 7, and 8).

### **Rev 21:1—**

**And I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had gone away, and there was no more sea.** The verse begins with “and I saw” (Greek: *kai eidon*), which signals a new section in Revelation (see in this part of the book alone Revelation 19:11, 20:1, 20:4, and 20:11). The scene introduced here seems generally after the judgment scene of 20:11-15, but there are aspects of 21:1-8 that fit better before (21:2, 8). In this part of Revelation sequence of time can be difficult to determine. What John saw was a “new heaven and a new earth” (Greek: *ouranon kainēn kai gen kainēn*). There are two words for “new” in Greek. One of them (Greek: *neos*) relates to time, it is applied to something that newly came into existence. The other (Greek: *kainos*) related to quality. It implies fresh features in something that was there before. It is the latter word (*kainos*) that is used in Revelation 21:1. The use of *kainos* suggests that the old planet earth is not destroyed but renewed (But see Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 586). The new heaven and earth, in that case, would be parallel to what has come before but far superior. It would be a contrast between something that is whole (the new heaven and earth) and something that was defective (the first heaven and earth). But the simple presence of *kainos* doesn't conclusively settle whether John was trying to communicate that the old earth has been remodeled or destroyed.

**And I saw a new heaven and a new earth.** The word heaven (Greek: *ouranon*—without an article) here could be translated “sky”, as a subset of the earth, or it could be translated “heaven”, as in the dwelling place of God and the place where the cosmic conflict originated. Tonstad prefers the latter interpretation (see *Revelation*, 303-304). Heaven was ruined by sin and is restored when the cosmic conflict is ended. There are sayings of Jesus that seem to suggest a dissolution of the entire universe at the end, but in all of these “heaven” is used with an article (Greek *ho ouranos*—Matt 5:18; 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 16:17). This seems a bit of a stretch in this particular context. I agree with Tonstad that the cosmic conflict is a major theme in Revelation, perhaps THE major theme. But that does not require us to find it in every detail of the book. I would prefer seeing “heaven” (Greek: *ouranon*) here as sky. That would suggest

that the entire planet, including its atmosphere, is made new at the end of the conflict.

The concept of a new heaven and a new earth echoes earlier visions of the future. There seems to be a clear allusion to Isaiah 65:17 here. But Isaiah 65:17 not only speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, but that the former things will not even come to mind. “Heaven” is plural in the Hebrew of Isaiah 65:17, while it is singular in the LXX (Greek OT). This would, however, suggest that John is following the Greek of the Old Testament rather than the Hebrew here. On the other hand, articles are present in the LXX of Isaiah 65:17 (LXX: *ho ouranos kainos kai hē gē kainē*) and they are absent in the Hebrew! Perhaps John was operating from memory here or had access to a different Greek version of the OT than the LXX. 2 Peter 3:13 speaks of new “heavens” (plural—Greek: *ouranous*) and a new earth that arise after the old has been “dissolved” by fire (2 Pet 3:11-12). The theme of a re-creation or renewal of creation is widespread in ancient Jewish literature outside of the Bible. See detailed analysis in Aune (*Revelation*, 1116-1117). Jesus speaks about a future time of “regeneration” (Matt 19:28). Paul, on the other hand, uses the idea of a new creation in a figurative way for the experience of the believer after conversion (1 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15).

**For the first heaven and the first earth had gone away.** . . . The idea of a renewed heaven and earth, on the other hand, is in some tension with the second clause of Revelation 21:1. The first heaven and first earth are said to have “gone away” (Greek: *apēlthan*). This would imply that the old earth and its atmosphere no longer exist. The passing away of the first earth was previously described in Revelation 20:11 in stronger language. There the old earth and heaven (atmosphere) are said to have “fled away” (Greek: *ephugen*) from the presence of the One on the great, white throne. The Greek word *pheugō* means to flee away from, escape, vanish or disappear. This language suggests that earth and heaven cease to exist. The physical home of sinful humanity ceases to exist. See more detailed comments on Rev 20:11. Since “no place was found for them”, earth and sky would not be moving from one place to another, they would no longer have any place to go. The implication of Revelation 20:11 is that the old earth and sky will forever vanish to be replaced by a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1). Aune seems to agree (*Revelation*, 1117-1120), as does Stefanovic (*Revelation*, 586-587).

There is a parallel to the concept of the new heaven and the new earth being a renewal or recycling of the old earth. In the Flood story the earth was ruined and returned to the condition of being “without form and void” (Gen 1:2, cf. 8:1). The Flood story describes a “remodeling” project on God’s part rather than a full replacement. But that does not mean that in the context of the final end of sin, God could not decide to start all over. While the word *kainos* favors the renewing of the earth rather than the destruction of the earth, Revelation 20:11 favors starting from “scratch”. So there is a tension in Revelation between seeing the new heaven and new earth as a renewal and seeing them as a replacement. I lean toward the latter, but not with great conviction. The text of Revelation 21:1 leaves that part of the future open-ended.

**. . . and there was no more sea.** This clause has caused distress for readers who love beaches, sailing, and snorkeling. A world without seas would not be attractive to them. But this distress comes from a literal reading of “sea” (Greek: *hē thalassa*). We assume that the chain with which Satan is bound is not literal (Rev 20:1-2). And the lake of fire is not literal (Rev 20:14-

15). The beast and the false prophet are not literal (Rev 20:10). Scholars usually treat the details of the New Jerusalem vision as symbolic (Rev 21:12-21). So why should the sea have to be literal? The default interpretation of entities in Revelation is symbolic (Rev 1:1), so this clause probably does not mean that there will be an absence of bodies of water in the new earth. Taking this declaration with complete literalness makes no sense. Revelation 22:1 has a river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God. Such a river implies a significant body of water feeding it.

If the “no more sea” is taken symbolically, what might the sea symbolism be trying to tell us? In the Bible the sea is usually a negative concept. The beast of Revelation 13 came up out of the sea (Rev 13:1). Prostitute Babylon was sitting on many waters (Rev 17:1). The star Wormwood fell upon the rivers and springs, which became poisonous (Rev 8:10-11). The four beasts of Daniel 7:3 came up out of the sea. The wicked are compared to a troubled sea, whose waters cast up mire and dirt (Isa 57:20). The waters of the abyss made up the chaotic earth in its pre-creation form (Gen 1:2). There is no mention in the Old Testament of the Israelites establishing a navy or being sailors (with the possible exception of Psalm 107:23-30—although even that reference is spoken of poetically, as from a distance). Amos 7:4 describes the fire of God devouring the deep sea in judgment.

The absence of the sea in Revelation 21:1, therefore, is not telling us about the geography of the new heaven and the new earth, it represents a deep spiritual truth, the absence of all that is evil, including forces hostile to God and humanity. The absence of sea in the new earth means that the cosmic conflict is over and the earth, along with the entire universe, is now at peace. Stefanovic (*Revelation*, 588) suggests that this statement reflects John’s own experience on Patmos. It was the sea that separated John from the churches he loved. The absence of the sea in this verse likely means the absence of things that threaten or separate.

#### **Rev 21:2—**

**And I saw the Holy City, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.** This city was the object of an attack while on earth in Revelation 20:9. That attack must be after the descent of the city mentioned here. One must be careful not to make too much of the timeline in Revelation 20-21, especially in 20:11-15 and 21:1-8. In the Old Testament, earthly Jerusalem was at the center of the eschatological hope. In the New Testament, there is mention of a heavenly Jerusalem (Gal 4:26; Heb 12:22) being prepared for us (John 14:1-3).

Revelation 21:2 indicates that the New Jerusalem will be actualized on earth at the end of the millennium. It becomes part of the new heaven and new earth introduced in the previous verse. This fulfills Old Testament connections between the End and old Jerusalem, which is featured at the center of the end-time hope there (Isa 65:17-25, Joel 2:28 – 3:21, Mic 4:1-8, etc.). Aune notes (*Revelation*, 1120) that virtually the entire first half of this verse is repeated verbatim in 21:10. Since there is no indication that the New Jerusalem descends from heaven twice, this verse serves as an introduction to the later part of the chapter, where the New Jerusalem will be described in much greater detail (Rev 21:9-27).

Most translations begin this verse as I do with the typical “and I saw” (Greek: *kai eidon*) formula, but there is a significant difference in this case. While the word “and” (Greek: *kai*) does indeed, come at the beginning of the sentence, the word for “I saw” (Greek: *eidon*) is placed in the clause after “Jerusalem”. This is difficult to translate into good English without violating the Greek word order and emphasis (“And the Holy City, New Jerusalem, I saw coming down out of heaven. . .). The *kai* and the *eidon* in this verse are separated, with the object of what John saw in between. The *kai . . . eidon* in this verse, therefore, does not indicate a strong break between verses 1 and 2, The two verses are linked together rather than separated. The New Jerusalem is clearly part of the new heaven and earth, even though it also plays a part in the conclusion of the Millennium (Rev 20:9). By placing the holy city ahead of “saw”, John places the emphasis of the verse on the city rather than the seeing.

The New Jerusalem is here called the “Holy City” (Greek: *tēn polin tēn hagian*). In the Old Testament, Jerusalem is several times described as the holy city (Hebrew: *īr qodesh* or *īr haqodesh*—Neh 11:1, 18; Isa 52:1; Dan 9:24-25, cf. related expressions in Daniel 9:16 and Zechariah 8:3). This combination occurs even more frequently when one includes the witness of the Septuagint (LXX: Isa 66:20; Joel 4:17; Dan 3:28; Tob 13:10-- *tēn hagian polin Ierousalēm*—cf. Aune, *Revelation*, 1121). But if old Jerusalem was already a holy city, why is there a need for a new one? Because old Jerusalem has become like Babylon. The story of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 is built in part on God’s judgments on Jerusalem in the Old Testament (Ezek 16:1-34; 23:4, 11-35). It was Babylon that destroyed old Jerusalem and Jesus was crucified there (Rev 11:8, cf. 14:8). A New Jerusalem is needed.

The connection between old Jerusalem and “holy city”, however, is also found in Matthew (Matt 4:5; 27:53—*tēn hagian polin*). So the image of old Jerusalem is not entirely negative. “Holy city” is also found in Revelation 11:2, where the word order of the attributive is reversed (Greek: *tēn polin tēn hagian*) and there is no explicit connection to Jerusalem (cf. also Rev 22:10, 19). While the New Jerusalem is introduced in 21:2, it is more fully described in 21:9-21. The mention of Jerusalem here is part of several allusions to Isaiah 65:17-20 in Revelation 21:1-5.

**. . . New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God . . .** Like Saul and Paul, Jerusalem in the New Testament has two names, one Greek (*Hierosoluma*) and one Hebrew (*Hierousalēm*). In the Gospel of John, the Greek term for Jerusalem (*Hierosoluma*) is consistently used with reference to the city in a political sense (John 1:19; 2:13, 23; 4:20-21). In Revelation, however, the Hebrew term for Jerusalem (*Hierousalēm*) is consistently used with reference to the heavenly city (Rev 3:12; 21:2, 10, cf. Gal 4:25-26; Heb 12:22). This reflects the Christian shift from the literal and the local (ethnic and geographical Israel) to the spiritual and worldwide (referring to an Israel that gains its identity from relationship with Jesus Christ). See *The Deep Things of God*, chapter 8 for a detailed explanation of this shift.

One additional feature of the New Jerusalem vision is its deviation from the original story in Genesis. While the New Jerusalem has features of the Garden of Eden, there was no city there. God resided with Adam and Eve in a garden. But in the future He will take up residence with His people in a garden city. In the Bible there is a pattern in God’s actions. But God is not indebted to previous patterns when He acts anew. He tends to transcend the original

pattern and incorporate new elements. This is how the Exodus story became added to creation as Israel's combined origin story (Exod 14:22-23). The Exodus was modeled on creation, but added new features and transformed others. See *The Deep Things of God*, chapter two for an elaboration of this theme within the Bible.

There is some evidence for a shift (in language about Israel) from ethnic and geographical to spiritual and worldwide already within Early Judaism. In the Old Testament, the earthly Jerusalem needed only to be purified in order to be the location of the messianic kingdom (Isa 45:14; 54:11; 60:1-22; Ezek 48:31-35; Tob 13:16-17—LXX: 13:17-18). After the time of the Maccabees, however, there was the sense that earthly Jerusalem was too defiled to be a holy city. Its pure heavenly counterpart needed to descend to play that role (1 Enoch 90:28-29; 2 Bar 32:3-4; Testament of Dan 5:12-13, etc.). In Revelation 21:2, the old Jerusalem is replaced with a new one, just as the old earth is replaced by the new (21:1). The New Jerusalem is the place that Jesus promised He would prepare for His disciples (John 14:1-3). It would have "many rooms". But in John 14, Jesus does not hint at a millennium or the descent of the city from heaven. At the Second Coming, He will bring His disciples to Himself in the heavenly city.

According to Jacques Ellul (*The Meaning of the City*, 50, see also *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, 221-224) the history of cities begins with Cain and is a continuous succession of rebellions against God. Not only so, but in Daniel the succession of empires does not improve in quality, but each kingdom is inferior to the one before (Dan 2:29-45) and the entire edifice stands on feet of clay which will not hold together (Dan 2:42-43). Images of failure play out in the context of increasing determination to succeed (Dan 3:1-7; 4:29-30; Isa 47:7-8). So also says end-time Babylon (Rev 18:7). The city builders in the Bible never succeed. Cities are expressions of both human determination and human failure. But in this passage, God turns the emblem of rebellion and failure into an image of reconciliation, community, and permanence. Aspirations exceed reality for every city in history except one, the one not built with coercion and force. But God does not discard human history with its failures. Instead, He incorporates human history into His new creation. Human history is redeemed in the New Jerusalem. This paragraph indebted to Sigve Tonstad (*Revelation*, 306-307).

The "coming down" (Greek: *katabainousan*) here is in contrast with the "coming up" (Greek: *anabainon*) elsewhere in Revelation. The first beast of Revelation 13 was "coming up" out of the sea. The second beast of Revelation was "coming up" out of the earth. This language is anticipated in Revelation 3:12, the promise to Philadelphia. Other examples of "coming down" include heavenly beings and angels (Rev 10:1; 18:1; 20:1), Satan (Rev 12:12), fire (Rev 13:13; 20:9), and hailstones (Rev 16:21). That the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven indicates that the world will never generate an ideal city by effort; for such a city to occur, it must descend from God. It is also notable that the city comes down before the cosmic conflict is over (Rev 20:9). After the cross, the only remaining pockets of resistance to God are on earth, so the final resolution of the cosmic conflict must take place on earth. And as the ultimate demonstration of victory, God establishes his throne, his capital, and the center of his rule on earth, when the last stronghold of the conflict is replaced with the new "city of peace," the New Jerusalem. See comments on Rev 12:12.

. . . **prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.** This language seems to echo Isaiah 52:1, ESV: “Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the unclean.” In Revelation 19:7-8 the bride of the Lamb is described as those who are dressed in fine linen, which represents the righteous deeds of the saints. So, the bride of the Lamb in 19:7-8 is the people of God on earth at the end of time. But here the bride is the city itself. The combination of city and bride is familiar from Isaiah (49:14-18; 61:3-10; 62:1-5). The people of God and the city together, therefore, are the bride of the Lamb. While the adornment of Jerusalem is described in terms of jewels in Revelation 21:9ff., in the New Testament such adornments can be metaphorical of character (1 Tim 2:9; 1 Pet 3:4). For this reason, in Revelation, there is a sharp contrast between the adornment of the New Jerusalem and the adornment of Babylon, the great prostitute (Rev 17:4-5).

The term “bride” (Greek: *hē numphē*) is also repeated in Revelation 22:17, welcoming the reader to partake of the water of life. Aune lists a number of other instances of metaphorical bride language in the Greco-Roman world (*Revelation*, 1121-1122). Note, however, that the New Jerusalem is not called a bride here, it is adorned “as a bride” (Greek: *hōs numphēn*). But in Revelation 21:9-10 John is told that he will be shown the bride and then sees the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven. So while verse 2 is not explicit, verses 9-10 make clear that Jerusalem is understood as the bride of the Lamb. The reconciliation between these two images is that a city is nothing without people. The city and the people together are the bride.

### **Rev 21:2 (Excursus on the New Jerusalem)—**

The new Jerusalem is introduced into the narrative in Revelation 21:2. So I have chosen this location to do some general reflections on the New Jerusalem theme before getting into a verse by verse study of Revelation 21:3 – 22:5, which is the heart of the New Jerusalem narrative in Revelation. This Excursus might be better placed after 22:5, but I’ll make that decision after completing the verse-by-verse studies. I may have to update this Excursus at that point.

As noted already, the new Jerusalem first appears in Revelation in 21:2. Then the focus moves to the nature and the finality of the changes that take place with its arrival: God is with humanity; there are no more tears and death; the changes that have been made are certain; and the criteria for inclusion or exclusion into the city are outlined (Rev 21:3-8).

At this stage of my study, I do not hold that the lake of fire is some ongoing feature of the new heaven and the new earth, it is simply a metaphor for the second death (Rev 21:8; 20:14-15), which may or may not occur as a result of literal fire. It represents an eternal extinction of life for those, like Satan, who have settled on a course that unfits them for inclusion in the holy city, and who would be an ongoing danger to the rest of the universe if they were granted continuing life. I do not understand this exclusion as an arbitrary or vindictive action on the part of God. The rebellious would be miserable in a loving and holy universe (imagine an alcoholic having to spend eternity in a place where there are no bars). God grants the unsaved their wish to be excluded from a universe where they would, at a minimum,

feel completely out of place.

In Revelation 21:1-8, reference is made to the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven (21:2) and to the fiery lake and the second death, which fits better into the previous scene (20:7-15). The passage fits even more closely, however, with what follows (Rev 21:9 – 22:5) than with what precedes. The vision of the new Jerusalem actually contains three parallel visions: Revelation 21:1-8; 9-27, and 22:1-15.

The new Jerusalem is depicted as a universal city (although some are excluded). Its gates, which face in all four directions, are never closed. Its "people" are actually "peoples", made up of all ethnic groups, tribes, and nations. No one who is willing to meet the conditions for entrance will be left out.

The author of Revelation, of course, did not invent the concept of a new Jerusalem. The vision draws on many background concepts. The understanding, importance, and relevance of the New Jerusalem vision is best seen in the light of the rest of the Bible and also of Jewish and Greco-Roman understandings of cities, old Jerusalem, and ideal futures.

An important Jewish and biblical background is found in the book of Genesis. While the New Jerusalem is an urban context, it has many parallels with the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1-3). A river flows from the center of the garden (Gen 2:10—dividing into four rivers outside the garden), and a river flows from the throne in the center of the new Jerusalem (Rev 22:1). A tree of life is at the center of the garden (Gen 2:9) and it is also at the center of the city (Rev 22:2). When sin enters the Garden, there is a resulting curse (inevitable consequences resulting from sinful choices) upon the human race, which included exclusion from the Garden of Eden. In the garden city, on the other hand, the consequences of sin that removed God's people from the garden are done away with, there is no more curse (Rev 22:3). The Garden presumably had both day and night (Gen 1:31, etc.), while the New Jerusalem has day without night (Rev 21:25). So, the Garden of Eden was a garden paradise and the New Jerusalem is a garden city. One major contrast, however, is the absence of a Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the New Jerusalem. There is no more Tempter in the city, it is one of the former things that have passed away. Adam and Eve lived happily together in the Garden and the second Adam--Jesus Christ--lives happily with His people in the New Jerusalem. Heaven will be like the calm, safe, and secure Garden of Eden.

The New Jerusalem, therefore, is the fulfillment of the Garden of Eden. The restoration of the Garden was anticipated throughout history. That anticipation began in the chapters that follow the Garden of Eden story in Genesis. While it is not stated explicitly in Genesis, the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) seems to include a restoration of the Garden of Eden. This will require some explanation. Three basic human relationships were established at creation (Gen 1:26-28); relationship with God, relationship with others, and relationship with the earth and its creatures. After sin, those three relationships were broken (Genesis 3): 1) the ground was cursed with thorns, indicating a resistance to the dominion of Adam, 2) childbirth (result of relationship between man and woman) was cursed with pain and labor, and 3) and Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden represented loss of face-to-face relationship with God.

The story of Abram/Abraham continued the themes at the center of the Eden story (Gen

12:1-3, NIV). "The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to **the land** I will show you. **I will make you into a great nation** and **I will bless you**; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and **all peoples on earth will be blessed through you**.'" In this passage, Yahweh makes three promises to Abram: 1) he would receive a land that God would show him, 2) God would make him into a great nation, 3) and, through him, all the people on the earth would be blessed. These three promises reverse the curses of Genesis 3: 1) the land was cursed and Abram was promised a land, 2) childbirth was cursed, but Abram still would produce many descendants, 3) and the broken relationship with God was reversed through the blessing that all nations would receive through Abraham and his posterity. So, the language of promise in Genesis 12:1-3 pointed back to the relationships and curses in the creation narrative of Genesis 1-3. The story of Abraham is an extension of the Garden of Eden story, as far as Revelation is concerned.

Within the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses), the three promises to Abraham find a partial fulfillment. The patriarchal narratives (Genesis 12-50) focus particularly on the promise of posterity, that Abraham would have many descendants. In the Exodus and the sanctuary (books of Exodus, Leviticus and the first part of Numbers), the promise of relationship with God begins to be established. God dwells in the midst of Israel (Exod 25:8) as He originally did in the Garden. The promise of the land comes into focus in the latter part of Numbers and in Deuteronomy, which provided a constitution for the land of Canaan. But this promise of restoration was only a partial fulfillment. The curse was not completely reversed in the establishment of the nation of Israel. But when the New Jerusalem arrives, the promises to Abraham are fully realized. The new Jerusalem is the ideal completion of the Bible in its fulfillment of a restored Eden.

By using the very name of Jerusalem, Revelation 21 and 22 recalls the history of Israel, whose capital city was old Jerusalem. While it was the political capital of an ancient nation, it could also be called the holy ("set apart") city because the nation of Israel had been set apart as a kingdom of priests to bring blessing to the nations (Exod 19:5-6; Gen 12:1-3). Jerusalem was the location of David's throne, which was founded on God's promise of an eternal throne to the descendants of David (2 Sam 7:7-14). Thus old Jerusalem became a symbol of the covenant between God and Israel, which comes to its consummation in the New Jerusalem of Revelation. See comments on Jerusalem related to Rev 21:2. Jerusalem, therefore, is at the center of the eschatological hope. Eternity would not be the same without the concept of the city, a place with many things to do, great places to eat, and lots to see. The restoration of Jerusalem is the sign that the ideal world has arrived.

Another major Old Testament background to the New Jerusalem of Revelation is the eschatological temple described in Ezekiel 40-48. Ezekiel envisioned a glorious, literal new Jerusalem to be built on a high mountain in Israel (Ezekiel 40). This glorious temple was in the relatively not too distant future, from Ezekiel's perspective, but the prophecy was never fulfilled literally because the conditions were not met. Ezekiel's prophecy, however, was incorporated and reactivated by the New Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21 and 22. Both Ezekiel and John viewed the vision from a very high mountain and the respective temple/city was built

on that mountain as well (Ezek 40:2; Rev 21:10). One could say that John's vision begins where Ezekiel's vision left off. Ezekiel's temple at the center of Jerusalem was filled with the glory of God (Ezekiel 43:2-5), as was the New Jerusalem of John's vision (Rev 21:11). The central theme of Ezekiel's temple was the presence of God, and this is central to the New Jerusalem as well.

Both the temple/city of Ezekiel and that of John had walls with twelve gates, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, three on each side (Ezek 48:30-35; Rev 21:12-13). The gates and walls of both temple/cities were measured (Ezek 40:3 – 47:5; Rev 21:15-17) and both were square in shape (Ezek 48:20; Rev 21:16). Restrictions are placed on the inhabitants of Ezekiel's Jerusalem (Ezek 44:3-10) and similar restrictions are given for citizenship in John's New Jerusalem (Rev 21:8 and 27). In both temple/cities God is on the throne dwelling with His people (Ezek 43:7; Rev 21:3 and 5; 22:1). Ezekiel's vision of a new Jerusalem is fulfilled in the book of Revelation. In summary, Revelation's vision of a New Jerusalem draws on three great Old Testament backgrounds: 1) it builds on the Garden of Eden narrative and its ultimate restoration; 2) it fulfills Old Testament promise of a restoration of old Jerusalem, and 3) it incorporates many elements of Ezekiel's eschatological temple.

Within the book of Revelation itself, there are two major structural parallels to the New Jerusalem visions. One of these is the letters to the seven churches of Revelation in chapters two and three. The citizens of the New Jerusalem receive what was promised to the overcomers among the seven churches. Ephesus (Rev 2:7) was promised the tree of life and this is fulfilled in Revelation 22:2. Smyrna (Rev 2:11) was promised that overcomers would escape the second death, this is fulfilled in Revelation 21:7-8. Pergamum (Rev 2:17) is promised a new name, in Revelation 22:4 the citizens of the New Jerusalem receive the name of the Lamb on their foreheads. Thyatira (Rev 2:26) is promised the authority of Christ (cf. Rev 22:5) and the reign of Christ (cf. Rev 22:5). Sardis (Rev 3:5) is promised white garments and their names written in the book of life, these promises are fulfilled in Revelation 19:8 and 21:27. Philadelphia (Rev 3:12) is promised a place in the temple and in Jerusalem, these promises are fulfilled in Revelation 21:3 and 21:10). Laodicea (Rev 3:21) is promised a place on God's throne (cf. Rev 22:3 and 5). The New Jerusalem, therefore, fulfills the spiritual hopes and dreams of the church throughout the Christian age. The New Jerusalem vision is not given to satisfy readers' curiosity about the exact dimensions of the heavenly city, it is designed to assure the reader that all God's promises to the churches and their members will surely be fulfilled.

An even more complex structural parallel within Revelation is between the New Jerusalem and the fall of Babylon visions of Revelation 17-19. In both the New Jerusalem and Fall of Babylon visions John is carried away in the spirit (Rev 17:3 and 21:10). Both are introduced by an angel from the bowl visions (Revelation 16)—see the introduction to both Babylon (Rev 17:1) and the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:9). Babylon is noted for fornication (Rev 17:2) and the New Jerusalem for faithful marriage (Rev 21:9). Prostitute Babylon holds a cup of abominations (Rev 17:4) and the New Jerusalem offers the water of life (Rev 21:1-2). Babylon is the dwelling place of demons (Rev 18:2) and the New Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God (Rev 21:3). Babylon is the home of unclean things (Rev 18:2) but the New Jerusalem excludes that which is unclean (Rev 21:27). Both are decorated with precious stones (Rev 17:4; 21:11). Both narratives make mention of the book of life (Rev 17:8; 21:27), death (18:8; 21:4, 8) and

mourning (18:8; 21:4), candles (18:23; 21:4), nations (18:3, 23; 21:24, 26, 22:2) and kings (17:2, 10, 12, etc., 21:24); and both narratives are associated with the phrase, "it is done" (16:17; 22:6).

According to Aune (*Revelation*, 1153), the concept of an "ideal" or proto-typical city seems to have originated with Plato's *Republic* (9.13). The ideal city is found nowhere on earth, but exists as a pattern in heaven, which humans can contemplate and align themselves with. Plato's concept influenced both the Stoics and Christian philosophers (such as Clement of Alexandria) after the time of John. In a Jewish writing of the late First Century (2 Baruch 4:2-7), Jerusalem was seen as a pre-existing reality that was shown to Adam, Abraham and Moses and which will be revealed in the future. Similar ideas are found also in the New Testament. In Galatians 4:25-26, Paul contrasts the present (Greek: *nun* or "now") Jerusalem with the Jerusalem that is "above" (Greek: *anō*), a contrast in both time ("now" versus then) and space ("above" versus below). The author of Hebrews speaks of a heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22, cf. Heb 11:10-16; 13:14). But neither Galatians nor Hebrews talks about the heavenly city descending to earth at some point in the future.

Babylon and Jerusalem represent the two basic types of relationship with God: 1) faithful and 2) unfaithful. The exclusionary passages in the New Jerusalem visions use terms that describe the inhabitants of Babylon: nothing unclean will enter the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:27) and Babylon is the home of the unclean (Rev 18:2). No abomination will enter the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:27) and Babylon is the home of abominations (Rev 17:4-5). Murderers will be excluded (Rev 21:27) but Babylon is filled with them (Rev 17:6 and 18:24). Fornicators are excluded from the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:27) but fornication is a major feature of Babylon (Rev 17:1, 2, 5, 15, 16, and 18:3 and 9). Idolaters and liars are excluded from the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:27) but they are very present in the Babylon visions. Babylon represents earthly hopes--everything that the people thought they wanted, and the best that this world could offer. When Babylon falls, it is the shattering of all illusions about life on the earth and the reversal of all earthly dreams--money, sex, power, and influence. Babylon is mourned when it falls (Revelation 18) and is replaced by the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22). Real life is not about the accumulation of earthly things, it is about an intimate relationship with God.

As noted earlier, the Bible begins with a picture of an ideal world, perfectly suited to the needs of the humans God creates. There is no city in the original garden. As Tonstad points out (*Revelation*, 306-307), based on the work of Jacques Ellul, the concept of a city begins with Cain (Gen 4:17). It is an idea born in rebellion against God. The city of Babylon is also born out of rebellion against God (Gen 11:1-9). This urban rebellion matures in ancient Babylon, which becomes the poster child for opposition to God in the prophets. Babylon's rebellion comes to its culmination in the book of Revelation (Rev 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21). But, in Revelation 21 and 22, God turns the city, a symbol of rebellion, into a symbol of reconciliation and blessed community. When God makes "all things new", He incorporates the city into the original image of paradise and redeems it. God can take concepts that originated in human rebellion, and make something beautiful out of them. The God of Revelation seems to appreciate human creativity, even when it goes awry. While God stands in judgment over against human history, He incorporates the best human efforts into His new creation. He not only preserves human

beings (1 Cor 13:12), He preserves the best of their works as well. For more on this idea, see Tonstad (*Revelation*, 311-312).

What relevance does the vision have for a skeptical age? The images are those of the author's time and place but the central theme is clear: everything that human beings hoped for and dreamed about is not attained by human effort--things, achievements, who you know--but by the work of the Lamb of God. The concept of the city is born in rebellion yet is incorporated into paradise in the end. So, no matter what anyone has done or where they have gone, God is capable of redeeming humanity fully and turning our mistakes into blessings. The New Jerusalem vision can make a major difference in our lives because it keeps our minds and hearts focused on the only thing that really matters. To put it in reverse, Revelation warns that if human beings put their hopes on anything other than the New Jerusalem, they will be disappointed in the end. With the conclusion of this Excursus on the New Jerusalem, we turn to a verse-by-verse examination of Revelation 21:3-27.

### **Rev 21:3—**

**And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with human beings, and He will tent with them. They will be His peoples, and God Himself will be with them and be their God.”** Instead of “and I saw” (Rev 21:1) this verse opens with “and I heard”. So 21:3-4 could be distinguished from 21:1-2 in terms of John’s structure (I prefer to see 21:1-4 as a unit). The two subunits recall the “heard and saw” pattern of John’s literary style (Rev 1:10-12; 5:5-6; 7:4, 9; 17:1-3), except here the two terms are reversed in order. What John hears and sees are very different in the vision (lion vs. Lamb, for example, Rev 5:5-6), yet represent the same reality (in 5:5-6 both lion and Lamb represent Jesus). If that literary pattern was intended in 21:1-4, the tabernacle of God here is equated with the new heaven and the new earth of verse one.

The stunning reality portrayed in this text is that not only are the people of God transported back to earth in this vision, but God Himself chooses to make the journey with them. And this is not a temporary arrangement. God “tents” with them, takes up His residence on earth. The entire governing center of the universe is transferred from “heaven” (out there somewhere) to the new earth. This places the human race at the center of God’s governance of the universe after the Millennium (cf. Rev 7:15-17; Heb 2:5-9). This arrangement was foreshadowed in the Garden of Eden at the beginning. God embraces the Sabbath (Gen 2:1-3), which is grounded in the weekly cycle, a local phenomenon related to the rotation of the earth. God was deeply engaged in this earth from the beginning (Gen 2:7-10, 19-22; 3:8). In the new earth, God restores the relationships He had planned to have from the beginning, but takes those relationships to a new level.

**And I heard a loud voice from the throne . . .** The “loud voice” (Greek: *phonēs megalēs*) comes from the throne of God itself. Revelation regularly utilizes the theme of an unidentified voice from heaven or from the throne (Rev 6:6; 10:4, 8; 11:12; 12:10; 14:13; 18:4; 19:5). Commentators have debated who the speaker is. Coming from the throne makes it seem likely that the voice is either that of God Himself (the Father) or of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. But there is a third possibility, the four living creatures. They are described as “in the midst of the throne”

(Greek: *en mesō tou thronou*) in Revelation 4:5-6. In favor of the third option in this case is the fact that the voice speaks of God in the third person, “He will tent with them”, “they will be His peoples”, “God Himself will be . . . their God”. In favor of God or Christ are the parallels to Revelation 1:8 and 21:6, where a divine figure is clearly speaking. Also in favor is verse 7, where the speaker says, “I will be his God and he will be my son.” Since the speaker is also “the Beginning and the End”, which is applied to Christ only in 22:13, I would lean toward Jesus being the speaker here as well.

**. . . the tabernacle of God is with human beings . . .** The masculine plural of *anthropon* (“humanity” or “men”) is somewhat difficult to translate. “Men” can seem to exclude women and “humanity” does not reflect the plural form well, so I have chosen to go with the more awkward (in English) “human beings” to be both inclusive and accurate to the plural. The language of this text seems to be a direct allusion to Ezekiel 37:27, KJV, where it is said, “My tabernacle also shall be with them: yea, I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Similar language can be found in Leviticus 26:11-12, Zechariah 2:10-11, Ezekiel 43:7, Exodus 29:45 (see Aune, *Revelation*, 1123). This is the language of the covenant. What God promised to Old Testament Israel is now fulfilled in the New Jerusalem. In a sense, Revelation 21:3-4 seems a summary in advance of the New Jerusalem vision of Rev 21:9 – 22:5.

As noted by Stefanovic (*Revelation*, 589) the concept of tabernacle or tent sanctuary has a rich history in the rest of the Bible. The original tabernacle housed God’s living presence in the middle of the Israelite camp (Exod 25:8). That was where the glory of God was seen (Exod 40:34-35; Lev 9:23). Later on in Israel’s history, the tent sanctuary was replaced with the temple of Solomon (1 Kings 6-8) and eventually destroyed by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar. Then in John 1:14, the incarnate Word (Jesus Christ) tabernacled with human beings and was a tangible expression of God’s glory (cf. Heb 1:1-4). In the New Jerusalem, God “tabernacles” with His peoples. It has all the characteristics of the Old Testament temple. God and human beings will never again be separated, they live together in the life-giving presence of God’s glory (cf. Ezek 48:35).

**. . . He will tent with them . . .** The word “tent” (Greek: *skēnōsei*) is the verb form of “tabernacle” in the previous clause (Greek: *hē skēnē*). This specific choice of words refers back to the Old Testament tabernacle where God “tented” with humanity in the center of the Israelite camp (Exod 25:8). Tokens of the presence of God in the Israelite tabernacle foreshadowed the full presence of God with His people in the New Jerusalem (Rev 22:5; 21:22). There is a strong parallel to this text in Revelation 7:15. There it says that “the One sitting on the throne will spread His tent over them”. The verb for “tent” in 7:15 is also *skēnōsei*. But there is one interesting difference. In 7:15 “tent” is followed by the preposition *epi* (meaning “upon” or “over”). He places a shelter over them, like the pillar of cloud during Israel’s time in the wilderness. It is a metaphor for protection from discomfort. In 21:3 He is tenting “with” or “among” (Greek: *meta*) them, a metaphor for relationship. This concept of God “tenting” with us is found in one other place in the New Testament, John 1:14. The Word became flesh and “tented among us” (Greek: *eskēnōsen en hēmin*). We beheld His glory (recalling the Shekinah glory in the tabernacle). Sanctuary language was employed to express the significance of Jesus Christ coming down to earth and dwelling among human beings to show them what God is truly

like (John 1:18).

**They will be His peoples. . . .** It is somewhat surprising to see a plural here rather than the singular of “peoples” (Greek: *laoi*). In the Old Testament, Israel is commonly referred to as the people of God (Hebrew singular: *‘am Elohim*) in contrast to the nations (Hebrew plural: *gōyīm*). Israel as a nation became the “people of God” when they entered into covenant with Him ahead of their conquest of Canaan (Deut 27:9). As we will note below, the language that follows in verse three (“God Himself will be with them and be their God”) is the Old Testament language of God’s covenant with Israel (Gen 17:7; Jer 32:38; Ezek 11:20, etc.). But there is one striking exception to how Israel and the nations were designated, Exodus 19:5-6. There the nations of the world are designated as the “peoples” (Exod 19:5-- Hebrew plural: *‘amīm*) and Israel is designated as a “holy nation” (Exod 19:6—Hebrew singular: *gōy qodesh*). Just as Abraham was to be a blessing to the nations (Gen 12:3), so Israel was to be a holy nation in anticipation of the day when all the nations would have access to the blessings of Abraham and “holy nation” status. Revelation 21:3, I believe, uses “peoples” (Greek: *laoi*) with an eye to Exodus 19:5-6. Just as Israel was called from among the nations to be the bearers of God’s blessing, so this verse signals the fulfillment of the promise to bless all the nations. In eternity all nations from every era will be “God’s people” in the sense that only one nation was at the beginning.

Some see language like this (Revelation 21:3 in light of Exodus 19:5-6) as pointing to universalism, the idea that all will one day be saved. But the concept of corporate personality needs to be kept in mind when evaluating the Bible’s use of the “nations”. God viewed Israel as a whole, and Israel’s obedience or disobedience was evaluated as a whole nation (Deuteronomy 28). But while Israel had “holy nation” status (God setting them apart as a whole people), the vast majority of Israelites were far from holy, as subsequent history demonstrates (Exod 32:1-9). If Israel is a model for the conversion of the nations, that conversion could also be seen as a whole, while allowing individuals to choose not to participate in that “conversion”. So, it seems more likely to me that the inclusion of the nations in Revelation means all will have equal access to God through Jesus Christ and many from every nation will join with the many believing Israelites before the throne of God (Rev 5:9; 7:9). If John had wanted to teach universalism, the language was available to state so unequivocally, but the overall impression of Revelation is that many will ultimately be lost as they reaffirm their rebellion in the end (Rev 20:7-9).

**God Himself will be with them and be their God. . . .** As noted above, this is the language of God’s covenant with Israel. The purpose of the covenant was so a holy God could have a relationship with a far-from-holy people. This is reminiscent of the name Immanuel (Matt 1:23) and of texts like Jeremiah 24:7, Ezekiel 11:20, and Zechariah 8:8. In spite of Israel’s shortcomings, God is faithful to the covenant and continues His relationship with them. A reading of Nehemiah, chapter 9, is very instructive. Nehemiah 9 reads like a summary of the whole Old Testament, from creation to exile. Throughout that summary, Israel as a whole is portrayed as unfaithful (there are notable exceptions to this unfaithfulness, of course—see, for example, 1 Kings 19:14, 18). But throughout, God remains faithful to them and to His covenant with them. The covenant provided assurance that God’s faithfulness to Israel was never in

question. In Revelation 21:3, God's faithfulness continues throughout eternity with peoples who have willingly embraced covenantal relationship with Him. Sadly, in the end, many will be granted the right to decline God's offer of faithfulness (Rev 21:8).

**Rev 21:4—**

**[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death, neither will there be any more sorrow or crying or any more pain, because the former things have gone away.** This is one of the most beloved passages in all of the Bible. In my understanding, the saved have had a thousand years to recover from sin and deal with past memories and relationships, but now God wipes away every tear. Getting over the past takes time, but when God has dealt with the causes of tears, and when pain, separation, abuse, and death are gone, it's time to move on to a new level of existence. This passage echoes Revelation 7:15-17, with one significant difference. In 7:17 the subject of "wiping away tears" is explicitly "God" (Greek: *ho theos*). In 21:4 the implied pronoun "he" picks up on the last word of 21:3 in the best manuscripts, "God" (Greek: *theos*). The meaning is the same, but a difference in style. When God "spreads His tent" over His people (7:15-17), the causes of suffering will be eliminated, and He will wipe all the tears from their eyes. As noted by Stefanovic (*Revelation*, 590), tears are normally caused by sorrow, pain, and death. They are the result of the Fall. This text portrays a time when every cause of tears is banished, including pain and death. This is the fulfillment of what was promised in Isaiah 25:8, ESV: "He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken." It is the reversal of all the negative aspects of human experience.

The Epicurean philosophers of the Greco-Roman world believed that the gods lived free of all sorrow, grief, and pain and that they were models of what human beings could aspire to. On the other hand, the Epicureans also believed that it was death that brought an end to pain and sorrow. This idea was echoed also in the writings of Plutarch (see Aune, *Revelation*, 1124-1125). John, however, proclaims the end of death as well as the end of pain and sorrow. The God of Revelation exceeds human expectations. The time referred to in 21:4 is the same as the time mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:26, where death is the last enemy that will be brought to an end. Even second death is abolished in the lake of fire (Rev 20:14-15). The word for "sorrow" (Greek: *penthos*) means grief or mourning in the face of loss. In my view, there will be great loss in the universe with the elimination of Satan, his angels, and all the unsaved. So, this verse hints at a further process of recovery from loss in the aftermath of the post-millennial events.

**[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes . . .** The word for wiping away (Greek: *exaleipsei*) means to erase, remove or obliterate. It will be as if it had not been. Not just some tears or even all tears, but "every" tear (Greek: *pan dakruon*) will be wiped away.

**. . . and there will be no more death, neither will there be any more sorrow or crying or any more pain . . .** It seems that the glories of the new heaven and the new earth are so far beyond human imagining that they cannot be described in positive terms. They can best be described in terms of negatives. There will NOT be any more death, there will NOT be any more

sorrow, there will NOT be any more crying, and there will NOT be any more pain. In fact there are six negatives in all. There will be no more sea, tears, death, sorrow, crying or pain. Isaiah 25:8 predicts that at some point God will “swallow” up death forever. At that point all tears will be wiped away. The word for “sorrow” (Greek: *penthos*) is a word used of mourning for the dead, among other things. It won’t be needed after death is abolished. In Isaiah 65:19, there is no more sound of weeping or cry of distress. The word for “crying” (Greek: *kraugē*) is crying of the loud kind, a loud cry of sorrow, wailing.

. . . **because the former things have gone away.** The “former things” (Greek: *ta prōta*) here are actually “first things” in the Greek. This term expresses a sequence in time, things that come before something else. These former things have now “passed away” (Greek: *apēlthon*). This repeats the idea in verse one where the first heaven and the first earth have passed away (Greek: *apēlthan*). This also echoes the language of Isaiah 65:17, where the “former things” (LXX: *tōn proterōn*) will not be remembered or even come to mind. In Isaiah 65 the former things that pass away do not include death (Isa 65:20). But already in John’s day, there were elements of Judaism that associated with Isaiah’s eschatology the cessation of death (see Targum of Isaiah 65:20 [Aune, *Revelation*, 1124]).

#### **Rev 21:5—**

**And the one sitting on the throne said, “Behold, I am making everything new!” And he said, “Write, because these words are faithful and genuine/true.”** With the exception of Revelation 1:8, this is the only place in Revelation where God speaks directly to John or the reader, although the one speaking from the throne could be either the Father or Jesus Christ at this point in Revelation (Rev 3:21; 22:1). The throne mentioned here is more likely the governing throne of Revelation 4:2 than the judgment throne of 20:11. The opening clause picks up on the description of God’s end-time actions in verses three and four. “Making everything new” sounds more like recycling the old earth rather than creating a new planet, continuing the ambiguity we have seen throughout the passage. This is likely an allusion to Isaiah 43:19. There Isaiah alludes to the Exodus story as a model for God’s future deliverance of His people from captivity. Again, a way through the waters will be provided (Isa 43:16). But there will be more (Isa 43:18). God declares, “I am doing a new thing” (Isa 43:19). So, the New Jerusalem scene also builds on Judah’s return from Babylonian exile to rebuild the city that Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed. In that sense, it was a “new” Jerusalem. This is related to the fall of Babylon/New Jerusalem motif that lies behind the last third of Revelation.

**“Behold, I am making everything new!”** “Everything” (Greek: *panta*) implies a total renovation of the old heavens and the old earth. But this is not the first time God has undertaken total renewal. Aune notes (*Revelation*, 1125) that there is a “microcosmic application” of this renewal of the world in 2 Corinthians 5:17, where believers are a new creation in Christ, “the old has gone away, the new has come.” This new creation of individuals is a down payment on the full restoration of creation that is contemplated in the book of Revelation. Paul also speaks of the groaning of creation, looking forward to its liberation from corruption (Rom 8:18-23). These texts assure that the present order of sin, death and corruption will not always endure. This dramatic change is startling to human experience (cf. Jer

13:23), it is not the usual outcome of cause and effect. It is, instead, grounded in the intention and ability that can only come from God.

There are rabbinic traditions that elaborate on what Revelation's new creation might look like (*Shemot Rabba*, section 15, folio 101.3-- I am indebted to John Gill, an 18<sup>th</sup> Century commentator, for this reference). According to them, God will make ten things new in the world to come. I have added texts from the Hebrew Bible that might have led the rabbis to these conclusions (suggested to me by Gily Ionescu). First, God will enlighten the world (Isa 60:19, cf. Rev 21:11), second, He will bring living water out of Jerusalem (Zech 14:8, cf. Rev 21:6), third, He will make trees bring forth their fruit every month (Ezek 47:12, cf. Rev 22:2), fourth, God will rebuild all the waste places, including Sodom and Gomorrah (Ezek 16:55), fifth, Jerusalem will be rebuilt from sapphire stone (Isa 54:11, cf. Rev 21:19), sixth, the cow and the bear will feed together (Isa 11:7), seventh, a covenant will be made with Israel and with the animal world (Hos 2:18), eighth, there will be no more weeping and howling in the world (Isa 65:19, cf. Rev 21:4), ninth, there will be no more death in the world (Isa 25:8, cf. Rev 20:14; 21:4), and tenth, there will be no more sighing, groaning and sorrow in this world (Isa 35:10; 51:11, cf. Rev 21:4). As can be seen, there are many parallels with Revelation, which would be very interesting if John were familiar with them when he received his vision. But since this particular Jewish tradition is much later, it is possible that some or all of it is indebted to Revelation rather than the other way around.

**And he says, "Write, because these words are faithful and genuine/true."** I am not sure what to make of the shift in tense from "the one sitting on the throne said" (Greek: *eipen*) to "he says" (Greek: *legei*), but I have reflected this shift in my translation. The instruction to write means these things are worth preserving for the future. Things that align with truth are always worth preserving. That the words are faithful and true is repeated exactly in Revelation 22:6. But this sentence is also the last of several commands in the book to write or not to write (Rev 1:11, 19; 10:3-4; 14:13; 19:9). In the book of Revelation, Jesus is the one who is faithful and true (Rev 3:14, cf. 19:11). So, it stands to reason that His words, especially His promises, are faithful and true. In the words of Stefanovic, "They (God's words) are reliable as He himself is reliable."

In verse five, God is addressing John directly. In verse six He addresses the reader of the book with an appeal to drink from the water of life. That the words John is asked to write are faithful and true imply that the book of Revelation is not just a dream, but concerns things that are expected to actually take place. The One saying them is faithful and true, then His words are also faithful and true. As Aune notes (*Revelation*, 1126), the language of faithful and true warns against the possibility of unreliable or false revelations.

#### **Rev 21:6—**

**And He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the one who is thirsty I will give freely (without cost) from the spring of the water of life.** This verse can be divided into three parts. The first part focuses on the brief sentence, "It is done". The second part is the self-declaration of the one sitting on the throne. The third part is a sentence about the free gift of salvation. We will take up these three parts of the verse one by

one.

**And He said to me, "It is done.** The Greek for "it is done" is a single word (*gegonan*), which contains within itself the third person plural subject and its implied verb. This plural is in contrast with the singular (Greek: *gegonen*) of Revelation 16:17. The implied plural subject means that many things are finished, not just one. A possible translation would be "all things (implied in Greek: *panta*) are finished." This is probably the "all things" of verse 5, the making of all things new. This would echo Matthew 24:33-34 and parallels, where Jesus describes what must happen before "all these things" take place. "It is done" is also proclaimed by a voice from the throne in Revelation 16:17, but that occasion is before the Second Coming, this one is after the Millennium. A similar expression was uttered by Jesus from the cross, "It is finished" (Greek: *tetelestai*) although a different Greek word is used in John 19:28. The first time it was said from the cross, the second time it is said from the throne. Jesus' pronouncement from the cross, therefore, had eschatological implications, his death and resurrection anticipated the conquest of death announced in Revelation 21:4.

. . . **"It is done."** When God says "It is done" it means that the change from the old heaven and earth to the new is complete. If this is Jesus speaking (likely), it is the same Jesus who died on the cross, ministers among the churches, and is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and End, that pronounces, "It is done." In the ultimate sense, it means that all the promises that God has ever made to the human race are now fulfilled.

**I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.** The divine title Alpha and Omega occurs three times in Revelation (1:8; 21:6; 22:13), with a fourth reference in the Received Text that was the basis for the King James Version (Rev 1:11). In Revelation 1:8 it is God the Father speaking because He identifies Himself with "the one who is and was and is to come" (Rev 1:4). In Revelation 22:13, it is clearly Jesus Christ, the one who is coming soon (22:12), who is speaking. The speaker is more ambiguous here (see comments on Rev 21:5). In each of these three cases, Alpha and Omega is associated with other divine titles. The variety of divine titles helps to expand the expression God's character and actions. In a spiritual sense, this concept may express that the one who begins a good work in believers will see it through to the end (Phil 1:6, cf. Col 1:16-20, which highlights the work of Christ past, present, and future).

The title "the Beginning and the End" serves as an explanation of the Alpha and the Omega. "The Beginning and the End" occurs just twice in Revelation, in 22:13, where it refers to Christ, and here, where the speaker is more ambiguous. Aune (cf. *Revelation*, 1126-1127) notes that this title has a rich history in Hellenistic religions and philosophy. In Plato, for example, God "possesses (Greek: *echōn*) the beginning, and the end, and the middle of all things" (my translation-- Plato, *Leges*, 4.715e). This statement was quoted by many early Jewish and Christian writers. In the First Century, Beginning and End was a title of the Greek goddess Hekate (see comments on Rev 1:18). In Marcus Aurelius the beginning and the end is associated with the mediator God Logos (*Meditations* 5.32). God as the beginning and end of all things is also found in Philo and Josephus. So the phrase was in common use in the wider world of John.

More likely, however, John was building on a specific Old Testament context here. The primary background texts are Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12. In Isaiah 44:6, Yahweh, Israel's king and

protector, calls Himself the First and the Last. This is in the context of an assertion of absolute monotheism. If Yahweh is the first and the last, there is no room for other gods, “Besides me there is no god”. In the return from exile to Babylon, Yahweh offers abundant waters representing the pouring out of the Spirit on the spiritually thirsty (Isa 44:3). In Isaiah 48:12, Yahweh as the First and Last grounds His future salvation on the power of His creation in the past (Isa 48:13-14).

**To the one who is thirsty I will give freely (without cost) from the spring of the water of life.** Tonstad points out that thirst is a general metaphor for human need (*Revelation*, 310). This sentence offers the free and complete satisfaction of all human needs and spiritual desires. The source of spiritual “thirst” in human beings is two-fold. On the one hand, it arises out of the emptiness and futility of a sinful life (1 Pet 1:18). The lack of meaning and purpose evokes a desire for something better, which can only be fulfilled in Christ. On the other hand, it is knowledge of Christ that attracts many to salvation. Either way, this appeal is directed to those who sense a need for salvation. The appeal is an individual one (as in Rev 2:7, etc.; 16:15; 22:11-12; 22:17). Any individual who feels a need and is ready for something better is encouraged to come. Since drinking this living water will slake the spiritual thirst (John 4:14), this appeal is not to followers of Jesus but to readers of the book that have not yet “tasted” the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As noted by Stefanovic (*Revelation*, 591), drinking from the water of life is in contrast to drinking from the wine of Babylon (Rev 14:8; 17:2; 18:4). These represent two different solutions to humanity’s greatest need, one from God and the other of human origin. John is very clear about which side the reader should be on.

Springs of water are frequently used as a metaphor of salvation in the Bible. Later on in Revelation, the water of life is seen flowing from the throne (Rev 22:1). Then in the epilogue to Revelation, readers are invited to take a free drink from the water of life (Rev 22:17). This is a parallel passage to 21:6. The salvation that God offers in both places is as free as water from an open spring. The language here is a direct allusion to Isaiah 55:1: “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters . . . without money and without price.” The implied speaker in Isaiah 55:1 is Yahweh (cf. Isa 54:17; 55:3). In the New Testament this divine admonition is placed in the mouth of Jesus (John 4:10-14; 7:37-39), who is often portrayed as the Yahweh of the Old Testament (see, for example, Philippians 2:9-11, compared with Isaiah 45:22-23). Jesus’ role in salvation is part of the “revelation of Jesus Christ” (Rev 1:1). There is also a strong parallel to this sentence and to John 7:37-39 in *Odes of Solomon* 30:1-2: “And come all you thirsty and take a drink . . . Fill for yourselves water from the living fountain.” Like John 7, the *Odes* leave out the theme that the water comes without cost, freely. While the *Odes* are attributed to Solomon, they were probably written by a Jewish Christian in the Second Century, so it is likely not a work John was familiar with. See David Aune, *Revelation*, 1127-1129 for a more detailed analysis of the interaction among the above texts.

**I will give freely (without cost) from the spring of the water of life.** The word “freely” (Greek: *dōrean*) is translated “without a cause” in John 15:25. There was every cause in Christ that human beings should have loved Him, instead, they hated Him “without a cause”. Similarly, there was every cause in humanity that God should have hated the human race, yet God’s love

is freely offered. Salvation is “without a cause” in humanity, it is a gift of God, and the abundance of the fountain indicates that it is more than enough. God is by nature a giver, in contrast with Satan, who takes away, kills and destroys (John 10:10; Rev 13:15-17). Even in eternity, drinking at the fountain of salvation will remain a gracious gift.

The phrase “water of life” (Greek: *tou hudatos tēs zōēs*) can, in the more secular sense, mean moving water, like a stream. But in the religious realm it came to mean spiritual “water” that leads to eternal life. It was “drinking in” the spiritual truths revealed by God in the Scriptures.

#### **Rev 21:7—**

**The one who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be my son.** “Everyone who overcomes” (Greek: *ho nikōn*) alludes to the promises given to the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 2 and 3 (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:5, 12, 21). As noted in Rev 21:2 (Excursus to the New Jerusalem), the New Jerusalem vision is the fulfillment of the repeated promises to the one who overcomes in the seven churches (Revelation 2-3). The two visions parallel each other closely. The New Jerusalem is reserved for the “overcomer”. This is military language, but the intended meaning is not military, it is spiritual (cf. 2 Cor 10:3-5; Eph 6:10-17; Rev 16:14-16). It is a conflict with self and with Satan. The challenges of daily life are seen as part of a much bigger conflict that had its origin in the rebellion of Satan and the original conflict in heaven (Rev 12:7-9). God is at work in every situation, and so is Satan. Since Jesus is the speaker in the seven churches, it is further evidence that He is likely the speaker here as well.

**The one who overcomes will inherit these things. . . .** “These things” (Greek: *tauta*) is a different word than the “all things” (Greek: *panta*) of verse 5, but both are neuter plurals, so *panta* (“all things”) is likely the antecedent of *tauta* (“these things”). As noted by Aune (*Revelation*, 1129), the “all things” of verse 5 includes the negatives of verse 4, no more dying, sighing, crying, or pain. The one who overcomes will inherit all the things that God makes new in verses 4 and 5. The language of human inheritance has become a metaphor for the future reward of those who have placed God first in this life (Matt 6:33, cf. Eph 1:11, 14; Col 1:12; 3:24; Heb 9:14; 1 Pet 1:4). The transformation of believers becomes a down payment (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13-14) on the ultimate inheritance promised in the New Jerusalem vision.

**I will be his God and he will be my son.** The general promise of verse 3 is repeated here, but in singular instead of plural. As noted in the comments on Rev 21:3, this is the language of the covenant in the Old Testament. While this language is particularly reminiscent of texts in the prophets like Jeremiah 24:7, Ezekiel 11:20, and Zechariah 8:8, the singular employed here fits even better with 2 Samuel 7:14-16. There God promises an everlasting covenant to David and his descendants. One of Jesus’ self-designations was as “son of David”. The promises made to David are fulfilled in the Kingship of Christ (Heb 1:5), who was born into the line of David (Matt 1:1-17). In Jesus Christ gospel believers become the spiritual descendants of David and inherit the everlasting covenant given to him. Aune suggests (*Revelation*, 1129) that this language is a metaphor based on ancient adoption law. God “adopts” David and his son when David is set up as king.

In the Greco-Roman context, “son of God” was generally applied to Augustus and the other Roman Emperors, so this is a very high and powerful title. Believers in Jesus are treated like kings (Rev 1:5-6; 5:9-10). In the covenant language of Revelation 21:7, that role is securely promised to all who are in relationship with Christ (cf. John 1:12).

The purpose of covenant language in the Old Testament was to provide Israel with security in their relationship with God. The covenant clarified where Israel stood with God and how God would respond to their behavior. God even bound His own future actions to the language of this earthly covenant, so that Israel would know how God would respond to every circumstance. Pagan gods tended to be arbitrary and capricious. You never knew what they were going to do. The God of Israel, on the other hand, pledged Himself to specific responses so that Israel would not think their relationship with God was in jeopardy every time they made a mistake. The covenant, therefore, provided Israel with security. In the New Testament, covenant language serves the same purpose for followers of Jesus. What was a national promise in the Old Testament is individualized in the New. The language of verse 7 places the new Jerusalem within that covenant. It is for every believer in Jesus. Covenant language provides God’s pledge that the coming of the New Jerusalem is guaranteed and certain.

**Rev 21:8 (Excursus on Exclusion from the New Jerusalem)**— In contrast to the overcomers of verse 7 are those who are excluded from the New Jerusalem. A sharp contrast is drawn here. Revelation 21:8 is the first of three exclusion passages in the last part of Revelation (Rev 21:8, 27; 22:15, see also the list of those who “refuse to repent” in Rev 9:20-21). These exclusion passages are similar to the vice lists found elsewhere in the New Testament and in both Jewish and pagan sources. According to Aune (*Revelation*, 1132), such vice lists regularly have two main sections; a list of vices (21:8a) followed by the penalty for those who do such things (21:8b). Here these texts each contain a list of the kind of people that will not be welcome in the New Jerusalem. To borrow the words of Tonstad: “John’s main point is the emergence of two utterly different realities” (*Revelation*, 310). There are two contrasting paths in Revelation with two contrasting outcomes. This list of categories of “sinners” has parallels with the Ten Commandments and traditional applications of the Ten Commandments, including the Old Testament (Psalm 15; Prov 6:17-19; Hos 4:1-2; Jer 22:17; Ezek 18:5-17, etc.) and early Christian vice lists. In addition to New Testament vice lists (Matt 15:19; Mark 7:21-22; Rom 1:29-31; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-21; Col 3:5-8; 1 Tim 1:9-10; 1 Pet 2:1; 4:3, 15; Re 9:21, etc.), early Christian vice lists can be found in the *Didache* and the *Epistle of Barnabas*, two early Second Century Christian works. See Aune, *Revelation*, 1131, for more detail on these precursors to the exclusion texts of Revelation.

Vice lists are also common in early Judaism, being found in *Enoch*, *Jubilees* and the *Sibylline Oracles*, among others. They are also found in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Plutarch in the Greco-Roman context outside of Judaism and Christianity. The vision of the New Jerusalem, therefore, treads familiar ground in its context. As noted by Aune (*Revelation*, 1132), there was a common core of ethical concerns that characterized all morally sensitive groups in the Greco-Roman world. Those practicing these kinds of things would be excluded from pagan temples as well as Jewish and Christian congregations. Within Revelation, these are all in contrast to those

who “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Rev 14:12). In all, there are five categories of sinners that at least two of Revelation’s lists have in common; murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters and liars. We will deal with all five of these in this Excursus. The singular references will be dealt with in the verse-by-verse comments.

The only category of sinner that is common to all three exclusion verses has to do with falsehood. The Greek word *pseudos* is the origin of the English word “pseudo”, that which is not genuine. Revelation 21:8 excludes liars (Greek: *tois pseudesin*), the adjectival form suggesting a class of people, “the lying ones”. Revelation 21:27 excludes those who “practice” (or “do”—Greek: *poioun*) “that which is a lie” (Greek: *pseudos*) or “lying”. The noun form focuses on the action of speaking something that is false. Similarly, Revelation 22:15 excludes those who “practice falsehood” (Greek: *poiōn pseudos*). The single, common denominator of the three passages of exclusion has to do with one’s relation to the truth. Through practicing falsehood, the excluded ones have become chronic liars. It is part of who they are. As such they have imbibed the character of Satan, whose essential character in Revelation trades on deception (Rev 13:13-14; 16:14, cf. John 8:44). In contrast are the 144,000, who avoid the lie (Rev 14:5--Greek: *pseudos*) and have modeled their character on that of God, whose ways are “true” (Rev 15:3--Greek: *alethinai*). If repetition signifies importance in the Hebrew way of thinking, the issue of truth versus lies is central to the distinction between the saved and the lost in Revelation.

Among the three exclusion texts in the New Jerusalem vision, the greatest number of parallels is between Revelation 21:8 and 22:15. Both lists include murderers (Greek: *phoneusin*, *phoneis*), sorcerers (Greek: *pharmakois*, *pharmakoi*), idolaters (Greek: *eidōlolastrais*, *eidōlolastrai*), and fornicators (Greek: *pornois*, *pornoi*). The difference in these words between Revelation 21:8 and 22:15 has to do with location in the sentence. Another difference is that the order of murderers and sorcerers is reversed in 22:15. The list of prohibited behaviors in 21:8 is in dative case, and in 22:15 in nominative case. We will take up the meaning of these four terms one-by-one here. In the verse-by-verse commentary we will take up the prohibited behaviors that are exclusive to each list.

The Greek word for a murderer is *phoneus*. It occurs seven times in the New Testament, two of which occur in Revelation 21:8 and 22:15. In Matthew 22:7 the word is used in the context of Jesus’ parable of the wedding feast. In the parable, a king sends out servants to invite people to his son’s wedding feast. When some of those people kill the messengers (22:6), the king sends out his army to destroy “those murderers” (*tous phoneis ekeinous*) and burn up their city. In Acts 3:14, the word is used for Barabbas, who was probably charged with acts of violence against Roman authority. In Acts 7:52 Stephen accuses the Sanhedrin (cf. Acts 6:12, 15—Greek: *sunedrion*) of being “murderers” on account of their complicity in the crucifixion of Christ. In Acts 28:4, the locals of Malta assume that Paul’s snake bite was punishment for him being a murderer. In 1 Peter 4:15, being a murderer is listed along with being a thief, an evildoer, or a mischief maker as behaviors Christians should avoid. The latter two references do not assist in defining the term *phoneus*, but the three earlier references suggest that a murderer is someone who ends the life of another in an unlawful way.

The Greek verb for murder is *phoneuō*. It is used in the Sixth Commandment, which is

found in the Greek Old Testament in Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17. This commandment is echoed in the New Testament in Matthew 5:21, 19:18 and Romans 13:9, among others. In English the word for “murder” generally means the pre-meditated taking of a life that is contrary to law. The Hebrew term (*ratsach*) is fairly rare and is somewhat more ambiguous. It does not always refer to pre-meditated killing (see Deut 4:42; 19:3-6; Josh 20:3). The ancient Israelites were able to distinguish between the meaning of manslaughter and murder by the context. The death penalty was imposed for pre-meditated murder but not for unintentional manslaughter. The word *phoneis* in Revelation 21 and 22 clearly refers to the former.

The Greek word for a sorcerer is *pharmakos*. Of the five categories of sin found in both Revelation 21:8 and 22:15, this is the only one that is absent from the Ten Commandments. The word means two related things in ancient Greek usage. One is someone skilled in using herbs or drugs for healing, psychedelic experiences, or ritual acts of human sacrifice which were designed to placate the gods or purify a society from ritual uncleanness. The other meaning is someone who uses occult means to do extraordinary things that harm people or influence events. Revelation’s emphasis on the cosmic conflict suggests a primary reference to human beings who are deliberately allied with Satan and his demonic forces (Rev 16:13-14). The actions of sorcery are seen as human attempts to undermine God’s power and authority and are, therefore, acts of rebellion. A Greek word that John could have used was *magos*, which means magician or someone who possesses supernatural knowledge and ability. Since that word is used for the “wise men” who brought gifts to the baby Jesus, that term may have been too positive for John to choose here. See Kittle et al, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, 356-359 for a more detailed discussion of these terms.

While “fornicator” is not a term widely used today, it is the English word that seems to come closest to the meaning of the Greek word *pornos*, from which we get the English word pornography. More recent translations used the phrase “the sexually immoral” (NET, NIV), which is accurate in meaning but implies a definite article that is not in the original. The word *pornos* stood for a wide range of sexual immorality in the ancient world. In a general sense it referred to any act of intercourse that occurred outside of marriage, including adultery, pre-marital sex, and incest. It was often used for prostitutes or for those who have intercourse with prostitutes. Prostitution in the ancient world came in two forms, cultic prostitution and secular prostitution. Temple prostitution was widespread in Persia, Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt, less so in Greece. Prostitution in general was very common, the sexual urges being thought a natural part of life in the Greek world. The “harlot” seems to have been a familiar figure in Old Testament Israel (Ge 38:15, Josh 2:1; Jdg 11:1; 16:1; 1 Kings 3:16, etc.). The *pornos* was also a metaphor for unfaithful Israel (Hosea 1-3). The New Testament is characterized by a total repudiation of extra-marital intercourse (Matt 19:9-10; Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; 1 Cor 6:9; Eph 5:5; 1 Thess 4:1-5). So in Revelation sexual immorality is taken as seriously as murder and idolatry. See Kittle et al, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 6, 579-595 for a more detailed discussion.

The Greek word for idolater is *eidōlolatrēs*. In both Old and New Testaments idolatry is the worship of anyone or anything that is not the one and only true God. It was particularly associated with the worship of images. While monotheists would often mock the worship of

images as the worship of one's own creation (see Isaiah 43:10-12, 44:6-20, and 1 Corinthians 8:4, for example), pagans genuinely believed that, after appropriate ceremonies, the genuine spirit of the gods came to inhabit the images that they had built. Paul acknowledged that behind the surface worship of images lay the power of Satan (1 Cor 10:19-21). Judaism had a strong aversion to idolatry, and this aversion continued within the church. Idolatry was considered a gross sin and was included in many lists of vices in the New Testament outside of Revelation (1 Cor 5:10-11; 6:9; 10:7, 14; Gal 5:20; Col 3:5; Eph 5:5; 1 Pet 4:3). The sentiments of Revelation 21:8, 21:27, and 22:15 are very much in harmony with the rest of the New Testament.

There is one unique parallel between Revelation 21:8 and 21:27. In 21:8, the category of "detestable persons" (Greek: *ebdelugmenois*) is paralleled with "that which defiles" (Greek: *bdelugma*) in 21:27. In secular Greek this word group arises with a sense of causing abhorrence or exciting disgust. It is something that is loathsome, detestable, vile, or repugnant. It could also denote a shameless or improper attitude. In the Greek Old Testament, the word group is largely used in the relationship between God and Israel. It expresses God's hostility to evil in contrast with actions that bring God delight (Prov 6:16-19; 11:1; 12:22; 15:8-9; 21:27). It can be used both cultically (in relation to the sanctuary services, certain objects and pagan practices are unclean and abominable to God—Lev 5:2; 18:26; Deut 7:25; 12:31; 17:1, etc., cf. Mark 13:14 and parallels) and ethically (Lev 18:26; Job 15:16; Jer 4:1-4; Ezek 11:18-21). The word group underlines Israel's obligation to separate itself from everything that is related to pagan religion and idols. Jesus continues that contrast in Luke 15:16— "What is exalted among men is an abomination (Greek: *bdelugma*) to God." Likewise, the term (Greek: *bdelugmatōn*) is used in Revelation 17:4-5 in relation to Babylon, which is the ultimate expression of human self-exaltation (Dan 4:30; Rev 18:7). For Paul, the things of God are naturally detestable to the carnal spirit (Rom 8:7), in Revelation the exalted things of human achievement are detestable to God and are excluded from the New Jerusalem. See Kittle et al, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, 598-600 for a more detailed discussion.

The three exclusion texts differ somewhat in their account of the outcome of these behaviors. Revelation 21:8 says that the outcome of hardened sin is to end up in the lake of fire, which is the second death. What happens in the lake of fire? Revelation 20:9 says that the result of the lake of fire is that it "consumed" (Greek: *katephagen*) the unrighteous. This means complete destruction or ending of life. See comments on Rev 20:9 for a more detailed account of this consuming fire. With Revelation 20:9 in mind, second death would refer to permanent extinction of life.

Revelation 21:27 says that the unclean and those who practice detestable and false things will not enter into the city. This is in contrast with the nations of the saved (Rev 21:24-26), those whose names are written in the Book of Life. According to Revelation 20:15, those who end up in the lake of fire are those whose names are not written in the book of life. Entry into the city requires that one's name is written in the Book of Life. The other option is the lake of fire. In Revelation 22:15, the end-result of these excluded behaviors is to be found outside the city (cf. 22:14).

Putting all three texts together, exclusion from the New Jerusalem is on the basis of the

behaviors listed and on the fact that the names of those who have consistently practiced such things are not found in the Book of Life (something like a citizenship list of the New Jerusalem). The alternative to living in the city is ending up in the lake of fire, second death, which I understand to be permanent end of life for those who would be miserable in a universe whose basic principles they have rejected. The focus in these lists is not so much the sins themselves, but the kind of people who practice them. These are not sins done in ignorance. To borrow some words from Elliott, the sins that exclude from the city are sins that are loved, sins that are not repented of. No one is excluded from the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:24-26), but those who are firmly committed to these sins would be miserable there and would ultimately undermine the peace and tranquility of eternity. Hence the language of “exclusion” for those who have committed to such a course.

### **Rev 21:8—**

**But to everyone who is a coward, unfaithful, detestable, a murderer, a fornicator, a sorcerer, or an idolater, and to every liar, comes their portion in the lake burning with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.** This verse is in direct contrast with verse 7 which briefly outlines the reward of “the one who overcomes.” The contrast is made explicit by the “but” (Greek: *de*) near the beginning of the sentence, and the plurals of each category in the list of sinners that follows (hence the translation “everyone” [21:8] instead of “the one who” [21:7]). The contrasting conjunction, with which verse 8 begins, is followed by a list of seven categories of sinners who specialize in specific vices. These are all in the dative case introduced by a definite article (Greek: *tois*) and separated by repeated “ands” (Greek: *kai*), which are not reflected in the English translation, as it would be unnecessarily repetitive. The eighth category of sinner, that of “liar” (Greek: *pseudēs*), is separated by a repetition of the article in Greek dative (*tois*) and the word “every” (Greek: *pasin*). This highlights “liar”, which is also noteworthy as the only category repeated in all three exclusion texts (Rev 21:8; 21:27; 22:15). These eight categories of sinner are consigned to the lake burning with fire and sulphur (the second death). Six of these categories of sinner are found also in either Revelation 21:27 or 22:15. See Rev 21:8 (Excursus on Exclusion from the New Jerusalem) for a short discussion of the meaning of each of these six terms.

The first two of the eight categories in this verse, “coward” (Greek: *deilois*) and “unfaithful” (Greek: *apistos*), are unique to this verse among the three exclusion texts. In fact, according to Aune (*Revelation*, 1131), these two words occur together only here in Revelation and are found in no other vice lists in the New Testament. Cowardice was a designation in the Greek world for general moral degradation, so it may be functioning as a comprehensive summary of all eight categories of sinner. There may also be an allusion to Matthew 8:26, ESV (cf. also Mark 4:40), where Jesus associates cowardice with lack of faith: “And he said to them, ‘Why are you afraid (Greek: *deiloi*), O you of little faith (Greek: *oligopistoi*)?’ Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.” We will take up the meaning of each of these two categories next.

**. . . to the one who is a coward. . . .** The word for “coward” (Greek: *deilois*) indicates a someone who is timid or fearful, lacking in courage or mental strength. In this context it seems

to serve as the antonym of the one who overcomes (Greek: *ho nikōn*) in verse 7. Cowards are those who do not exert the needed effort to overcome. This may seem a strange way to open a list of very serious sinners. Most of us would not rank cowardice at the same level as murder or lying. After all, to be naturally timid or introverted is a personality trait, not necessarily a moral failing. But the term “coward” here is in the context of end-time tribulation. Courage and cowardice are what happen when people are tested to the limit. In that context, as far as John is concerned, it is a serious thing to be timid, to choose personal and immediate safety over faithfulness to God. In spiritually significant contexts, spiritual timidity can lead to serious consequences (John 12:42-43; Mark 8:35; and Matthew 13:21). The need for “patient endurance” (Rev 13:10; 14:12—see comments on these verses) in the context of the end-time places cowardice at the forefront of the final conflict. They chose personal comfort and safety over genuine commitment to the things of God (see Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 592). That is why cowardice is first on the list and lying is the only vice mentioned in all three exclusions texts (Rev 21:8; 21:27; 22:15). It is those content to make the easy choices in this life that will believe the lie when tested to the limit (2 Thess 2:10-12).

. . . **unfaithful.** . . . The Greek word for unfaithful (*apistois*) is the opposite of faithful (Greek: *pistos*). To have faith is to trust in God. To be faithful is to be trustworthy, reliable in one’s response to God and the everlasting gospel (Rev 14:6). The core meaning of an “unfaithful” person, then, is someone who doesn’t trust in God. By extension, it also means someone who is unreliable, who cannot be trusted. Just as faith is a positive response to God’s prior action, lack of faith is a negative response to God’s action and is therefore often classed with rebellion. In the Christian context “unbeliever” came to be a technical term for someone who is not a Christian (1 Cor 14:22; 2 Cor 6:14; Tit 1:15). But in Revelation it carries the more specific meaning of someone who once believed but has now “slipped away from their faith” (Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 592). In the end-time context, there will be some (also called “cowards”) who exclude themselves from the Jesus community and are thus excluded from the New Jerusalem.

. . . **comes their portion in the lake burning with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.** On both the lake of fire and the second death, see Rev 20:9-10 (Excursus on the Fate of the Wicked) and comments on Rev 20:14-15. The one element in this verse that we have not yet discussed in this context is that of sulphur (Greek: *theiō*). Sulphur is a non-metallic chemical element that is extremely reactive. It is one of the ten most abundant elements on earth, and while sulphur does not react in water, it reacts with nearly all other elements, especially in the presence of heat. So sulphur burns readily and rapidly. In the KJV it is called “brimstone” which means stone that burns readily. Sulphur occurs several times in Revelation before this (Rev 9:17-18; 14:10; 19:20; 20:10), always associated with fire. In the Old Testament, sulphur first appears in Genesis 19:24, where it is associated with the fires that burned up Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Luke 17:29). As in Revelation 20:10, that fire was described as coming out of heaven. In Deuteronomy 29:23, a consequence of Israel’s disobedience would be a land ruined by sulphur and salt like the Dead Sea area (see the fate of Edom and God in Isaiah 34:9 and Ezekiel 38:21-22). In Isaiah 30:33 the breath of Yahweh is like a stream of sulphur. Bildad uses sulphur as a metaphor for Job’s suffering (Job 18:15). Psalm 11:6 predicts that the fate of the

wicked will be by fire and sulphur. See comments on Revelation 9:17-18 and 19:20 for more on “sulphur”.

**Rev 21:9 – 22:5 (Introduction)**— Revelation 21:9 through 22:5 is a continuing vision, focusing directly on the New Jerusalem, which was introduced in 21:2. The standard chapter break after 21:27 is not helpful. 22:1 simply begins with “and” (Greek: *kai*) rather than “and I saw” or after these things I saw”. 22:1-5 continues the narrative of 21:9-27. 22:6-21 is also a distinct unit.

In reading this vision of the New Jerusalem one wonders how much of it should be taken literally. One way to read it is to take everything literally. John is viewing a movie of the future and seeing the actual city just the way it will be. The other option is to see the vision as a symbolic representation of the future city, offering general understanding, but not intended to be taken completely at face value. While the truth may lie somewhere in between the two options, I would be inclined toward the symbolic perspective on the basis of Revelation 1:1, which states that the vision of Revelation is “signified” (Greek: *esemanen*), a vision of the future in symbolic language like the vision of Daniel 2. See comments on Rev 1:1.

If the vision of Revelation 21:9 – 22:5 is primarily symbolic, what would we learn from it? First of all, it represents a community that gets its glory from its proximity to God (Rev 21:11, 23; 22:5). The New Jerusalem will be a safe place, just as walls around ancient cities represented safety (Rev 21:12). Nevertheless, It is also an inclusive city, with gates open in all directions (21:12-13), it is not intended to house only a few. The heavenly and earthly will be joined together in it. On the one hand, God and the angels inhabit the city (21:22; 22:1-5; 21:12). On the other, the apostles and tribes of Israel represent the earthly side of the city (21:12, 14). It will be the culmination of God’s plan to unite the whole universe in Christ (Eph 1:9-10). The unity of the city will be a unity in diversity, as the diverse characters of the apostles, the sons of Jacob, and the diverse nations of the world (Rev 21:12, 14, 24-26). It is almost unbelievably vast, there is room for all who desire to be there (21:16). It is a place where everything is in perfect proportion (21:16-17). The things that are necessary for human life to flourish on earth will not be needed there (21:22-23). Everything that human beings have thirsted and hungered for will be provided there (22:1-3). It will be a place of continuous and intimate communion with God (22:3-4). The New Jerusalem is the culmination of all human hopes.

#### **Rev 21:9—**

**One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls which are filled with the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”** John here introduces a new section in the structure of Revelation by repeating almost verbatim the introduction to chapter 17 (Rev 17:1—“One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying, ‘Come, I will show you. . . .’” [Greek: *kai ēlthen eis ek tōn hepta angelōn tōn echontōn tas hepta phialas kai elalēsen met’ emou legōn: deuro, deixō soi*]; Rev 21:9—“One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls . . . came and spoke with me, saying, ‘Come, I will show you. . . .’” [Greek: *kai ēlthen eis ek tōn hepta angelōn tōn echontōn tas hepta phialas . . . kai elalēsen met’ emou legōn: deuro, deixō soi*]). This is as clear

as John can get that there is an intentional parallel between Babylon the prostitute and New Jerusalem as the bride in the book of Revelation. There is no more extensive verbal parallel in the book than this one. On the broader series of parallels between these two cities in Revelation, see Rev 21:2 (Excursus on the New Jerusalem). Babylon is focused on the peoples and nations of the world (Rev 17:1-2, 15), Jerusalem's attention is on the Lamb. The angel here may or may not be the same angel as the one in chapter 17 (the angel of the sixth bowl—see comments on Rev 17:1—see a detailed parallel between the two passages in Aune, *Revelation*, 1144-1146). One interesting difference is that the interpreting angel of Revelation 17ff. speaks to John frequently, the angel of 21:9 speaks only once. His role from then on is to show John the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:9, 10; 22:1).

At this point in the commentary, it is important to note that there are four women portrayed in the book of Revelation, three of them are clearly symbolic. The fourth is Jezebel, who seems to represent a leader of the church at Thyatira, who may or may not have been an actual, historical woman (see comments on Rev 2:20-24). In chapter 12 there is the pure woman who gives birth to the male child, representing Jesus. She represents the people of God, both Israel and the church. In chapter 17 is prostitute Babylon, who represents an end-time, worldwide, religious alliance in opposition to God. In this text there is reference to the bride, the wife of the Lamb. Two of these women (Jezebel and Babylon) are negative figures in terms of the narrative of Revelation, while the other two (the woman of 12 and the bride of the Lamb) are positive figures.

**“Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”** In Revelation, there are two brides of the Lamb: 1) the wife of the Lamb, who represents His faithful followers (Revelation 19) and the city, which was adorned like a bride (Rev 21:2). The bride of the Lamb is the lovely woman dressed in the righteous acts of the saints (Rev 19:7-8). This language is echoed in Revelation 21:2, where the city is “prepared as [or like] a bride” (Greek: *ētoimasmēn hōs numphēn*). Here the city is also introduced as “the bride” (Greek: *tēn numphēn*) of the Lamb, which makes the connection with the bride of Revelation 19 clear. A further connection is that both brides are “prepared” (Rev 19:7—“made . . . ready”, Greek: *ētoimase*; Rev 21:2—“prepared”, Greek: *ētoimasmēn*). The word for wife here (Greek: *gunaika*) may be a deliberate parallel with the woman (Greek: *gunaika*) on the scarlet beast of Revelation 17:3, who is identified as Babylon in 17:5. Just as woman Babylon and city Babylon are different images for the same thing, so the bride here is both the saints and the city. See parallels between the New Jerusalem and Babylon in Rev 21:2 (Excursus on the New Jerusalem).

The two brides are clearly the same, even though one is introduced as a woman and the other as a city. But Revelation 21:9 adds “the wife” (Greek: *ten gunaika*) of the Lamb, so there seems to be some progression from the situation in Revelation 19. Both women are beautifully dressed. The dress of the woman of 19:8 is simple, but lovely—“fine linen, bright and clean,” to emphasize the contrast with Babylon the prostitute. The dress of bride Jerusalem, on the other hand, has gold, pearls, and every kind of precious stone (Revelation 21:11-21). That the wife of the Lamb is both a bride and a city suggests that literal detail is not the primary purpose of the New Jerusalem narrative. This is not a movie of the future, it is a symbolic representation of aspects of that future (see comments on Rev 1:1). There is an Old Testament background to the

imagery of God's bride (cf. Hos 2:19-20). In Isaiah 49:18, those among the nations who come from afar are described as ornaments on a bride (the bride is Israel). In Isaiah 61:10 it is the returning Israelites themselves that are the bridal jewels (cf. Isa 62:5). Literal Israel is in focus in Isaiah, the followers of Jesus are in focus here. In the words of Stefanovic, "In the Old Testament, the restoration of Jerusalem is described in terms of a wedding."

The word Lamb (Greek: *arnion*), appears 28 times in the book of Revelation with reference to Jesus Christ. The 29<sup>th</sup> occurrence of the word is applied to the beast from the earth in Revelation 13:11. That beast has two horns "like a lamb" (Greek: *homoia arniō*). The number 28 is the number seven four times over, which is not surprising in a book so filled with the number seven. In the Gospel of John (1:29, 36) a different word for Lamb is used, even though it is also applied to Jesus. Some think *arnion* is a more aggressive, battering ram, kind of image in the Greek, appropriate to the conquering Lamb of Revelation (Rev 17:14), whereas *amnos* represents the gentleness of Jesus, as seen in the Gospel. Aune notes that "Lamb" occurs exactly seven times in the New Jerusalem vision (Rev 21:9, 14, 22, 23, 27: 22:1, 3).

#### **Rev 21:10-11—**

**He carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, possessing the glory of God. Its radiance was like a precious stone, like a jasper, clear as crystal.** For the fourth time in Revelation (see also Rev 1:10; 4:2; 17:3), John is carried away in the Spirit (Greek: *en pneumati*), indicating a major change in his visionary state. The first two times John "became" (Greek: *egenomēn*-- Rev 1:10; 4:2) in the Spirit. The latter two times he was "carried away" (Greek: *apēnegken*-- Rev 17:3; 21:10) in the Spirit. In 17:3 John was carried away into the desert, where he viewed the woman, Babylon, riding on the beast. Here John is carried away into a great and high mountain, so he can see the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. Some commentators have speculated that 21:10 is at a different stage than 21:2. John is placed on a high mountain to see that the city has already landed. But the word for coming down (Greek: *katabainousan*) is identical in both texts. It is a present participle, which indicates ongoing action in the context of the main verb, which is a visionary aorist of seeing in each case (21:2—"I saw"-- Greek: *eidon*; 21:10—"he showed"—Greek: *edeixen*). In both verses (Rev 21:2 and 10) John sees the New Jerusalem in the process of coming down from heaven. Revelation 21:10, therefore, picks up the vision exactly where it left off in 21:2.

The language here is very reminiscent of Ezekiel 40:2, ESV: "In visions of God he brought me to the land of Israel, and set me down on a very high mountain, on which was a structure like a city to the south." There are a number of verbal parallels between Revelation 21:10 and Ezekiel 40:2: "mountain" (LXX: *orous*), "high" (LXX: *upsēlou*), "city" (LXX: *poleōs*), and "God" (LXX: *theou*). Thematic parallels include a prophet in a visionary state, both cities are Jerusalem, even though the city is not named in Ezekiel 40 (it is the location of the temple). For a structural parallel it is sufficient to note that John refers to Ezekiel consistently throughout the book of Revelation and that the New Jerusalem vision, in particular, makes multiple references to Ezekiel 40-48. See comments on Ezekiel's temple in Rev 21:2 (Excursus on the New Jerusalem). So an allusion to Ezekiel 40:2 is very probable here.

. . . **showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.** This language is almost identical with that of Revelation 21:2, with the exception that in 21:2 it is “New Jerusalem” (Greek: *Hierousalēm kainēn*) that is coming down from heaven. In 21:10 it is simply Jerusalem (Greek: *Hierousalēm*) that comes down from heaven. “New” Jerusalem places the holy city in contrast with old Jerusalem. Here old Jerusalem has faded from view and a new reality is fully in focus. Old Jerusalem itself was on top of a mountain (Psa 48:1-3), and so is the city described in Ezekiel 40. But the Jerusalem of this vision is not seen as on a mountain, but is viewed from a high mountain as it is in the process of “coming down” (Greek: *katabainousan*—present participle) out of heaven to earth. At this instance the city is still moving, it has not yet landed. So this description seems to be prior to Revelation 20:9, where the city has already landed and comes under attack from “the nations” (Rev 20:8), who were deceived by Satan (20:7). That point in time may well apply to the entire New Jerusalem vision.

Aune (*Revelation*, 1151) notes that in the ancient mind, mountain tops were closer to heaven and, therefore, were ideal places to receive revelations from God and visionary experiences. Prominent in the Old Testament are Moses’ experiences on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:2-3; 20:18-22, 24:9-13, etc.) and later Mount Nebo (Deut 34:1-4). In the New Testament, Jesus was transfigured on a high mountain (Matt 17:1-3; Mark 9:2-4; Luke 9:28-31), delivered His eschatological sermon on the Mount of Olives (Matt 24:3ff.; Mark 13:3ff.), and was carried away by Satan to a high mountain during the temptation sequence (Matt 4:8-9; Luke 4:5-7). In addition to these examples, there are more than a dozen similar descriptions both in early Judaism and also in the wider Greco-Roman world. See Aune (*Revelation*, 1151-1152) for a detailed listing of these descriptions. There may be an intentional parallel between the “mountain” (Greek: *oros*) here and the seven mountains (Greek: *orē*) upon which the prostitute Babylon sits (Rev 17:9), continuing the series of contrasts between end-time Babylon and the New Jerusalem. See Rev 21:2 (Excursus on the New Jerusalem).

. . . **possessing the glory of God.** The city as a whole displays the glory of God. According to Aune (*Revelation*, 1154), the phrase “glory of God” occurs three times in Revelation. The first time (Rev 15:8) the phrase represents the powerful presence of God in the heavenly temple. In 21:23 the city has no need of sun or moon because the glory of God is the source of its light. Here the glory of God is embedded in the city itself. The very presence of God is the city’s glory (cf. Isa 60:1-3 and Ezek 43:1-5). The glory of God is a reflection of God’s character (John 1:14, 18; 12:23-24). A major factor in the sin problem is that human beings fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). This implies that they misunderstand the character of God and/or fail to reflect that character in their lives. In the New Jerusalem, both the city and its inhabitants fully reflect the glory of God. This is a complete reversal of the human condition since the Fall. Human beings know God, even as they are known by Him (1 Cor 13:12). They will not only understand the love of God, they will embody it in their daily lives.

**Its radiance was like a precious stone, like a jasper, clear as crystal.** The word “radiance” (Greek: *phōstēr*) is used with reference to the moon in *Sirach* 43:7. The only other reference in the Protestant Bible is Philippians 2:14-15, ESV: “Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights (Greek: *phōstēres*)

in the world. . . .” This connection between the church and the New Jerusalem recalls the temple language of the New Testament (Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:4-10). In the temple of the church, the stones are the individual believers, and collective body becomes a “spiritual temple” (Eph 2:21—Greek: *naon hagion*). The precious stones in the new Jerusalem may, therefore, be a symbol of the glory that comes to God because of the faith and the actions of His people. The radiance of the city recalls the Shekinah glory of God which graced the tabernacle (Exod 40:34-35) and temple (1 Kings 8:10-11) in the Old Testament. It is God’s presence, rather than the architecture or materials, that make a temple a temple. There is no need for a temple in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:22) because the whole city is a temple.

The radiance of the New Jerusalem is like jasper (Greek: *iaspidi*). In Revelation 4:3, the one sitting on the throne was like jasper in appearance. This connection suggests that the New Jerusalem includes the throne room of God, the center of the universal government. Just as Jesus included humanity into the godhead, the throne room of the universe is no longer centered in “heaven” but on the new earth. “Clear as crystal” (Greek: *krustallizonti*) is a present participle in the same case as “jasper”, so it serves like an adjective to “jasper”. While glass does occur in nature, truly transparent glass was invented centuries after Revelation, so pure transparency when John was writing would express rarity and high value. This jasper is “clear-as-crystal jasper”, it is transparent. So, the reference may be to a diamond rather than the opaque and colorful, semi-precious, quartzite stone we call jasper today. But it is a diamond that sparkles in multiple colors like jasper. In Revelation 21:18, the gold with which the city is made is also “clear as crystal” (Greek: *huelō katharō*), a gold-tinted transparency. In the New Jerusalem there will be nothing to hide. All will be transparent to view.

#### **Rev 21:12-14—**

**(The city) has a great and high wall, having twelve gates. And at the gates are twelve angels. And the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel are written on the gates. Three gates are on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city has twelve foundations, and upon them are twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.** The description of the city is modeled on the pattern of ancient cities. There are walls for security and gates to keep out people who do not belong. There are watchmen on the walls and at the gates. This does not make complete sense in a place where rebellion and sin have been eliminated. This is further evidence that the description of the New Jerusalem is not to be taken literally. It is grounded in the thought-world of John, which includes the Old Testament, early Judaism, the Greco-Roman world, and everyday life in the area of the Mediterranean Sea. So the reader has to pay careful attention to the biblical and extra-biblical backgrounds in order to catch the deeper purpose of this inspiring vision. The restored temple of Ezekiel 40:5 was surrounded by a wall that was six cubits (about ten feet) high and six cubits thick, much smaller than the massive wall described in Revelation 21:17. Stefanovic (*Revelation*, 598) notes that the wall of the New Jerusalem symbolizes safety and security, while the gates of the city represent universality. He connects the latter with Luke 13:29, where Jesus talks about the many who will come from east and west and from north and south to recline at the table in the Kingdom of God.

**And at the gates are twelve angels.** The concept of angels guarding the gates of the New Jerusalem is possibly an allusion to Isaiah 62:6-7, NIV: "I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the LORD, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth." Isaiah 62:6-7. The immediate context of this passage provides thematic and structural parallels to the New Jerusalem vision (Isa 62:1-5). It is the promise that Jerusalem will be like a bride of Yahweh when it is restored. Verbal parallels to Isaiah 62:6 include Jerusalem (LXX: *Ierusalēm*; Rev 21:10: *Ierusalēm*), walls (LXX: *teicheōn*; Rev 21:12: *teichos*) and a bride (Isa 62:5, LXX: *numphē*; Rev 21:12: *tēn numphēn*). It is very possible, therefore, that a direct allusion to Isaiah 62 is intended. Aune (*Revelation*, 1154-1155) observes that *cherubim* (a Hebrew term for a class of angels) were assigned to guard the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:24, cf. Ezek 28:14, 16 and several ancient Jewish sources). Since the New Jerusalem is the end-time counterpart of the Garden of Eden (Rev 2:7; 22:1-5), angel guards at the gates would be appropriate to the tradition.

The New Jerusalem, therefore, is the fulfillment of ancient prophecies depicting the ideal city with watchmen taking care of its security on the walls and making it a safe place. The Old Testament prophets anticipated a restored, literal Jerusalem in the ancient historical context, with all its security challenges. In the New Testament, the language of Jerusalem and bride is applied to the church. The followers of Jesus are like a city set on a hill (Matt 5:14). But this is clearly metaphorical language. In Revelation, on the other hand, the dream of a new Jerusalem that exists on a whole different level than the ones before is promised. See Jon Paulien, *What the Bible Says About the End-Time*, 55-64 and 75-83 for an elaboration on the eschatology of the prophets and the New Testament.

**And the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel are written on the gates. Three gates are on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west.** Adding "sons of Israel" (Greek: *huiōn Israēl*) to the mention of twelve tribes is an exact verbal parallel to Revelation 7:4. There are so many similarities with the distinctive account in Ezekiel 48:30-34 there nearly all major commentators on Revelation see a direct allusion to Ezekiel in this outline of the city gates. John builds on Ezekiel 40-48 throughout his accounts of the end of sin (Revelation 20) and the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21 and 22). This is what I call a structural parallel. For those who read German, Beate Kowalski (*Ezekiel in the Apocalypse*) sees the entire book of Revelation as a structural parallel with the whole of Ezekiel. But the parallels are particularly clear here. Ezekiel is talking about the new Jerusalem that was to appear after the exile to Babylon (unfulfilled prophecy). Ezekiel's city was square in shape with three gates on each of its four sides (Ezekiel 48:30-34). In alluding to Ezekiel John is using the language of the past and giving it a new meaning. In Ezekiel, the temple is the center of the city and the people live around it. The gates of the city are for people to leave in order to garden their allotted land.

In Ezekiel 48:30-34 the tribes associated with the twelve gates of a future Jerusalem are spelled out in detail. To the north of Ezekiel's city are three gates, named after the tribes of Reuben, Judah, and Levi (Ezek 48:31). On the east side of Ezekiel's city are three gates, named after the tribes of Joseph, Benjamin, and Dan (Ezek 48:32). On the south side of the city are the gates of Simeon, Issachar, and Zebulun (Ezek 48:33). And on the west side are the gates of Gad,

Asher, and Naphtali (Ezek 48:34). Although John is clearly alluding to Ezekiel's account of the city gates of Jerusalem, there are significant differences between the tribes listed in Ezekiel and the listing of the twelve tribes in Revelation 7. For one thing, the tribes that Revelation and Ezekiel have in common are listed in a different order. Ezekiel begins with Reuben and Revelation with Judah. The second position in each list is reversed, Reuben is second in Revelation and Judah is second in Ezekiel. Levi, Joseph, and Benjamin are listed in the same order in both lists, but these three are near the beginning of the list in Ezekiel 48 and near the end in Revelation 7. Ironically, Gad, Asher, and Naphtali are in the same order in both lists, but they are at the end of the list in Ezekiel 48 and near the beginning in Revelation 7.

In addition to the differences in order of the tribal listing between Ezekiel 48 and Revelation 7, there are surprising elements in the two lists. First of all, even though Levi is not listed among the twelve tribes who received an inheritance in Canaan, Levi is listed in both Ezekiel 48 and Revelation 7. Second, Ephraim is missing in both lists, so they agree on these two oddities. The tribe of Dan is included in Ezekiel 48, but is missing in Revelation 7. On the other hand, Manasseh is included in Revelation 7, but is missing in Ezekiel 48. Apparently, Joseph, the father of both Ephraim and Manasseh, takes the place of his sons in Ezekiel 48. In Revelation 7, on the other hand, Joseph takes the place of Ephraim, while Manasseh remains as a tribe in his own right. Differences like these, along with those in other listings of the twelve tribes in the Bible, have puzzled commentators through the centuries. See Rev 7:4 (Excursus on the 144,000: Literal or Symbolic?) for a fuller outline of the various tribal lists in the Bible and their possible interpretations. In Ezekiel 48, the list is not so much the tribes of Israel as the sons of Jacob (the same is true of the *Temple Scroll* at Qumran—11Q19 39:12-13; 40:11-14). That is why Dan is included and Joseph replaces Ephraim and Manasseh. In Revelation 7, Joseph replaces Ephraim and Levi replaces Dan. The names of the tribes are probably not named in Revelation 21 because the author is more interested in the number twelve than in the components that total up to that number.

There is also a possible allusion to the Israelite encampment in the wilderness, as recounted in Numbers, chapter 2. The twelve tribes were each numbered and camped facing the tabernacle on all four sides (Num 2:1-2), with the tribe of Levi in the midst of the camp (Num 2:17). Applied to the New Jerusalem, this fits with Revelation's assertion that all followers of Jesus play the role of priests (Rev 1:5-6). To the east of the tabernacle were the tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulon (Num 2:3-9). To the south of the tabernacle were the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, and Gad (Num 2:10-16). To the west were the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin (Num 2:18-24). To the north were Dan, Asher, and Naphtali (Num 2:25-31). This listing of twelve does not include the tribe of Levi (Num 2:33), with Ephraim and Manasseh both representing the lineage of Joseph (the double portion going to the firstborn son of the favored wife of Jacob). So, this listing of the tribes deviated from the list of the sons of Jacob (Gen 49:1-27).

Ancient cities tended to have one or, at the most, two gates. Every gate is a point of vulnerability in the city's defenses. So having twelve gates squanders the protection advantage of a great, high wall. Tonstad (*Revelation*, 312-313), therefore, suggests that safety and security are not the primary purpose of the gate symbolism or of the great, high wall around the New

Jerusalem. The twelve gates, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel, instead point to the full and final restoration of Israel. Many of the twelve tribes never returned from captivity to Assyria. But in this and other accounts, they are not forgotten. The New Jerusalem embodies the promise that, in the end, no tribe will be lost. This is one sense in which there is continuity between the old Jerusalem and the new, between the old Israel and the new. The ultimate essence of the city is not the materials of which it is made, but the people whose lives have been impacted by God.

**Rev 21:12-14—(Excursus on the Time Sequence of Rev 20-22)--** The role of the gates in the New Jerusalem vision seems as good a place as any to include a short Excursus on the time sequence of Revelation 20-22. Since “the nations” are hostile to the end in Revelation 20:7-9 (cf. Rev 11:18; 17:15; 18:3, 23; 19:20), readers of Revelation have wondered why the nations are still there in chapter 21 and welcome in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:24, 26). And who are the enemies of God that still lurk outside the city after the “nations” are welcomed in (Rev 21:8, 27; 22:15)? Are they being tortured eternally in the lake of fire, as many readers think? Or are they in the process of being purified in the same lake of fire, well after the Millennium, until they are ready to enter the city (the universalist position)? If one sees these chapters from an annihilationist or conditionalist perspective (two common words for the same perspective), that evil is brought to an end in 20:7-15, what are the traces of evil doing outside the city? While I personally hold to the latter view, the scholar in me is forced to admit that the evidence of Revelation, as I am digging into the details for this commentary, is less clear than I thought before. The decision one makes regarding the above question is in large part determined by the time sequence of the New Jerusalem vision (Rev 21:1 – 22:5). Is it after the events of 20:7-15, which seems to bring the “dogs and sorcerors” (Rev 22:15) to an end? Or is there an End after the End (eternal torture or a process of universal reconciliation)?

Here is where I am now in regard to the time sequence of Revelation. Chapters 20 and 21 do not seem to be in a linear sequence. The city is on earth and surrounded by the nations in 20:7-10. But in 21:2 the city is seen prior to its landing on earth. While 21:1 gives the initial impression that 21:1-8 is after 20:7-15 (cf. Rev 21:1—“and I saw”—Greek: *kai eidon*), the full elimination of death and tears is still in the future (Rev 21:4—note the future indicative of “wipe away” [Greek: *exaleipsei*]). The renewing of “all things” is still in process (Rev 21:5—note the present indicative of “am making” [Greek: *poiō*]). The full heritage of the righteous is still future (Rev 21:7—Note the future indicative of “inherit” [Greek: *klēronomēsei*]). While the main verb of 21:8 is not stated, the most natural reading it to find the tense of the implied “to be” (Greek: *eimi*) in the sentence that precedes. If so, the vision of 21:1-8 comes to John after the vision of 20:7-15, but it is largely a description of what comes **during** or **before** 20:7-15 rather than after.

Where does the New Jerusalem vision of 21:9 – 22:5 fit into the time sequence of Revelation 20-22? This vision also comes to John after the vision of 20:7-15. But the introduction of the New Jerusalem vision places John at the same standpoint in time as 21:2 (see comments on Rev 21:10-11). The New Jerusalem is still descending out of heaven to earth. It has not yet landed, and the final destruction of Satan, sin, and sinners has not yet taken

place. John is getting a “before the end” tour of the New Jerusalem, which includes elements that will continue in eternity (like 21:24-26), but also includes elements that seem more appropriate to the situation in Revelation 20 (like the references to “outside the city” in the exclusion texts of 21:8, 27, and 22:15). My understanding of the time sequence in Revelation 20-22 is a work in progress, but this is how I process the sequence at this time. If I am correct, the “nations” (Rev 21:24, 26; 22:2-- Greek: *ethnē, ethnōn, ethnōn*) of Revelation 21 and 22 are the nations of the saved, rather than those who surrounded the city and were “consumed” in 20:9. For more on this see Rev 21:24-26 (Excursus on the Identity of the Nations in Revelation).

**The wall of the city has twelve foundations, and upon them are twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.** The phrase “the twelve apostles” (Greek: *tōn dōdeka apostolōn*) occurs elsewhere in the Bible only in Matthew 10:2 (Greek: *tōn dōdeka apostolōn*). Eleven apostles are mentioned in Acts 1:26. The “twelve disciples” occurs in Matthew 10:1 and 11:1 (it also occurs in some manuscripts of Matthew 20:17 and 26:20). The word “apostles” also occurs in Revelation 2:2 and 18:20.

Revelation 21:14 does not say that the city has twelve foundations, but that the wall of the city has twelve foundations, each of them bearing one of the names of the twelve apostles. So the foundations of the wall are associated with the apostles, but the twelve gates through the walls are associated with the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus associated His twelve disciples with the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28, ESV, cf. Luke 22:30): “Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” So this connection within Revelation would not have surprised the early Christian readers of Revelation. When you combine the two twelves of this chapter, you are reminded of two other numbers in the book; the twenty-four elders of Revelation 4, etc. (twelve plus twelve), and the 144,000 of Revelation 7 (twelve times twelve). The New Jerusalem houses the people of God from both Israel and the church.

The twelve foundations are not buried under the ground, they are open to view and the names of each are visible on them. There are two possibilities for how these twelve foundations are distributed around the city. One possibility is that the wall is divided into twelve sections, each with a foundation associated with a single apostle. In this case, the foundation of the wall would be twelve massive stones placed under the wall at intervals around the city. The other possibility is that the entire wall is built on twelve foundations, one stacked on top of the other. In favor of twelve foundations distributed around the city is the fact that each of the twelve gates is associated with a single tribe. Joshua (whose name is the equivalent of Jesus) was commanded to appoint one man from each tribe to pick up twelve large stones from the bed of the Jordan River to set up a memorial of the crossing (Josh 4:1-9). With that in mind, each foundation stone, with the name of its apostle, could be associated with a particular gate. In favor of twelve foundations stacked on top of each other is the fact that the wall (Greek: *to teichos*) of the city is singular and is linguistically connected with all twelve foundations by a participle (“having” rather than “have”—Greek *echōn*). The literal Greek of this sentence (which does not translate well) is “the wall . . . having twelve foundations” (*to teichos . . . echōn themelious dōdeka*). This agrees with Ephesians 2:20, where the church has a single foundation,

made up of the apostles and prophets. Since Revelation seems designed to be heard more than seen (Rev 1:3), the reader is free to decide which view is intended.

**Rev 21:15-17—**

**The one who spoke with me had a measuring rod made of gold, in order that he might measure the city, its gates and its wall. The city is laid out square, its length is equal to its width. He measured the city with the rod; it was twelve thousand stadia, the length, width, and height are equal. He measured its wall, 144 cubits according to the measure of a man, which the angel was using.** In the Old Testament, Ezekiel describes the measuring of the new temple envisioned for eschatological Jerusalem (Ezekiel 40-48). The temple of God was also measured in Revelation 11:1-2, but in neither Ezekiel nor Revelation 11 is the measuring stick said to be of gold. As we have noticed, the two images are tied together--the new Jerusalem is a temple as well as a city. It is not only the place where the people of God dwell, it is also the dwelling place of God Himself (Rev 21:22; 22:1-5).

The New Jerusalem vision echoes the narrative of the Garden in the beginning. There God lived in direct relationship with human beings (Gen 2:16-17; 3:8-19). But after the Fall, sin separated God and humanity. So, God gave Moses detailed instructions to make a tabernacle/sanctuary, so that God could again dwell in the presence of His people (Exod 25:8). But it was a limited presence. The high priest was the only Israelite authorized to enter into God's direct presence, and that happened only once a year (Lev 16:2-17; Heb 9:7). In the New Jerusalem vision, on the other hand, there is no need for a temple, because all can now live in the direct presence of God. Intimate relationship between God and humanity has been fully restored. See Rev 1:12 (Excursus on the Sanctuary in the Book of Revelation) and Rev 21:2 (Excursus on the New Jerusalem). I am using temple in two different ways in this paragraph. If by temple one means a building that separates the sacred precincts from the rest of life, there is no temple in Eden or the New Jerusalem. But if by "temple" you mean the principle of God dwelling with His people, then both Eden and Jerusalem are temples. They are the higher meaning of temple, of which the tabernacle was a faint reflection.

**The one who spoke with me had a measuring rod made of gold, in order that he might measure the city, its gates and its wall.** The order of measuring is spelled out here; first the city, then the gates, and then the wall. But in verses 16 and 17 the city and the wall are measured, the gates are not measured. The opening clause, "The one who spoke with me", is close to the wording of Revelation 21:9 (which is parallel to Rev 17:1), the introduction to the description of the New Jerusalem. But here John's angel guide does not speak. Instead, he acts to measure the city. That the measuring stick is of gold seems appropriate to measuring a heavenly city. The prevalence of gold in the vision could represent the faith and the love that holds the New Jerusalem community together (1 Pet 1:7, see comments on Rev 3:18). While measuring sticks have not been discovered in ancient Israel, a cubit-length golden measuring stick from the time of Moses has been found in Egypt (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4:836).

As noted earlier, this passage is parallel with Revelation 11:1-2, where John is given a measuring stick to measure the heavenly temple. But in the description of Revelation 11, John

does not actually carry out the instruction, and no measurements are given there. Here it is the angel, not John, that does the measuring, the results of these measurements are given, and it is the measuring of a city rather than a temple. While the purpose of the golden measuring stick is for the angel to measure “the city, its gates and its wall”, the size of the gates is not given in verse 16. As noted above, in Ezekiel’s vision a man appears with a measuring stick (Ezek 40:3). The man proceeds to measure all aspects of this visionary temple (Ezekiel 40-42) and then he measures the waters that flowed from that temple (Ezek 47:1-12). The New Jerusalem vision clearly alludes to Ezekiel’s temple.

There are a number of published fragments from Qumran (location of the “Dead Sea Scrolls”) of an apocalypse concerning the heavenly Jerusalem. These fragments portray a visionary like John who is transported to heaven and sees an angel with a measuring rod who measures the wall of the heavenly city. So, the account in Revelation 21 is firmly grounded in the context of John’s time. For more detail on the Qumran fragments see David E. Aune, *Revelation*, 1159-1160. The concept of measuring an eschatological city in such detail offers assurance of the great care and exactness with which God secures the quality of life in the new reality.

**The city is laid out square, its length is equal to its width. He measured the city with the rod; it was twelve thousand stadia, the length, width and height are equal.** Cities are deeply affected by the landscape they are built on. In the landscape of Roman Palestine, city walls were usually quite irregular in shape because of the hilliness of the landscape. But square and rectangular cities were common in Egypt and Mesopotamia where the landscape is extremely flat. Various Roman historians described Babylon, Ninevah, Nicea, and possibly even Rome as square in shape (see Aune, *Revelation*, 1160-1161). So, the shape of the New Jerusalem parallels the shape of ancient Babylon in Revelation.

In Ezekiel 40-48 and the Temple Scroll from Qumran (11QTemple, also designated 11Q19 and 11QT), the square is the dominant shape associated with the eschatological sanctuary. In Zechariah 2:1-2 (LXX: Zech 2:5-6), an angel with a measuring stick is interested only in the width and length of the eschatological Jerusalem. The breastplate of the High Priest is square (Exod 28:15-20; 39:8-13). So ancient Judaism was quite invested in squares. In the second part of this verse, however, John makes clear that the New Jerusalem is more than just a square, it is a perfect cube in shape.

The Greek word *stadiōn* represented roughly the length of ancient stadiums, a distance of 600-630 feet or 185 meters, more or less. By that standard, the New Jerusalem is portrayed as roughly 1,400 miles on each side and is equally high—it is in the shape of a cube. The gigantic dimensions of the New Jerusalem are hard to square with our scientific understanding of the size of this planet, but it underlines the point that the future realities are far beyond what any human “eye has seen or ear heard” (1 Cor 2:9). This cubic city has twelve edges of 12,000 *stadia* each, making a total of 144,000 *stadia*. These measurements are reminiscent of the 24 elders in Revelation 4 and 5, the people of God in Revelation 7:4-8, the dimension of the city wall (Rev 21:17), the twelve tribes of Israel, and the apostles of the Lamb (Rev 21:12-14). It is the ultimate home of Israel, both Old and New Testament Israel. It is also reminiscent of the Israel’s sanctuary. The only other cube in the Bible is the Most Holy Place of the Israelite tabernacle

and temple (1 Kings 6:20, cf. 2 Chr 3:8-9, where only the length and width are mentioned). One interesting ancient parallel to this cubic shape is in the *Gilgamesh Epic*, where the boat used by Utnapishtim to survive the flood was cubical in shape (Aune, *Revelation*, 1161).

In actual fact, however, the text of Revelation does not explicitly say that the New Jerusalem is cubical in shape. One could, therefore, argue that the city is a giant pyramid, which would be more practical in a structure this size. But the prevalence of the number twelve in this account points to a cubical shape rather than a pyramid. A pyramid has only eight edges, whereas a cube has twelve edges. Also, there is no biblical parallel to a pyramid-shaped New Jerusalem, whereas the Most Holy Place of Solomon's temple is a perfect cube (1 Kings 6:20). But there is a great irony here. The Most Holy Place was the smallest room of the temple, the New Jerusalem is a cube of humongous proportions. "Where God's glory once filled the Holy of Holies, it now fills the New Jerusalem" (Craig Koester, *Revelation*, Anchor Yale Bible, 816). All space is now sacred space, all space is the Holy of Holies.

**He measured its wall, 144 cubits according to the measure of a man, which the angel was using.** Cubits were a practical measurement about a half of a meter in length (based on the distance from the tip of the fingers to the elbow. In fact, the word for "cubit" (Greek: *pēchōn*, *pēchus*) means both "forearm" and a unit of measure in the Bible. The same is true of the Hebrew equivalent (Ezek 40:5-- *'ammāh*, LXX: *pēchei*). Oddly enough, the English word cubit came from the Greek word *kubiton*, which means "elbow". The length of a cubit is roughly 18-20 inches, or a half meter. 144 cubits would be roughly 70 meters. But more importantly, 144 is twelve times twelve. Just as the 24 elders represent the tribes and the apostles—twelve plus twelve-- the 144 cubits (twelve times twelve) is another reminder that the New Jerusalem is destined to be the home of all God's people from every nation and background.

The meaning of the resulting text is challenging. The natural reading of the text indicates a city 1400 miles tall. If the wall of the New Jerusalem is 70 meters tall, it seems grossly out of proportion to the massive size of the city. However, in the Greek, it is not clear if the 144 cubits indicates the height or the thickness of the wall. In verse 12 the wall is described as "great" (Greek: *mega*) and "high" (Greek: *hupsēlon*), "great" probably referring to the width and "high" to the height. The "man" in Ezekiel 40:5 was measuring both the width and the height of the wall. In Ezekiel 41:5, on the other hand, the man measured only the width of the wall. The width of walls seemed of considerable interest to the ancients (Jer 51:58, cf. Aune, *Revelation*, 1162 for non-biblical references to support that point). If width is in view here, the wall would likely be considerably higher than 70 meters. Since the height of the wall would be the more obvious feature, I would lean in that direction, but either way the numerical symbolism of Israel is retained. The measurement of the wall is 144 cubits.

The most puzzling aspect of this text is the last part, ". . . the measure of a man, which the angel was using." The Greek here is literally "a measure of man, which is of an angel" (*metron anthropou, ho estin aggelou*). In my translation, I have taken that to mean that the measurement is in human terms, and that it (measurement in human terms) is what the angel was using. Since God meets people where they are, angelic measurements would make no sense unless human equivalents were given, which does not happen here. So, the most natural explanation is to take the measurements to be as they normally would have been understood

at the time. This doesn't resolve the difficulty of a city measured in thousands of *stadia* while its wall is measured in hundreds of cubits. Verse 17, therefore, is further evidence that we should not take the New Jerusalem vision too literally. The 144 cubits continues the tendency in Revelation to highlight numbers that recall the twelve tribes of Israel and the apostles of the Lamb. There is both continuity and discontinuity between the old Jerusalem and the new.

**Rev 21:18-21— The material of the wall is jasper, and the city is pure gold as clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth green quartz, the eleventh jacinth and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate was made of a single pearl. The main street of the city was made of pure gold, as transparent as glass.** This portion of the New Jerusalem vision moves to outline the materials with which the city is built. The foundations (Greek: *themelioi*) contain a variety of precious (Greek: *timiō*) and what we would call semi-precious stones. The listing corresponds somewhat to the twelve gems in the breastplate of the high priest (Exod 28:16-21; 39:9-14—compare the Greek and Hebrew with Rev). This picks up on the parallel between the shape of the New Jerusalem and the Most Holy Place of the Hebrew tabernacle and temple. The privileges reserved for the High Priest are now all freely available to all God's people. The ultimate privilege is to be face to face with God, which is provided in Rev 21:22; 22:3-4; cf. 7:15-17).

The material with which the wall is built was jasper (Greek: *iaspis*). Jasper is a very hard and durable stone. It is normally understood as a reddish variety of quartz. But in Revelation 4:3, jasper stone is associated with God Himself, the one sitting on the throne in chapter 4. So even the city wall reflects the glory and the presence of God. The concept of the eschatological Jerusalem being built with precious stones has strong Jewish predecessors. In Isaiah 54:11, Yahweh says (ESV), "I will set your stones in antimony (Heb: *pūk*, LXX: *anthraka*—black like coal) and lay your foundations with sapphires" (Heb: *saphirim*; LXX: *sappheiron*). Isaiah 54:12 continues (ESV): "I will make your pinnacles of agate (Heb: *cadcad*-- possibly rubies; LXX: *iaspin-jasper*), your gates of carbuncles (Heb: *le'aveni 'eqdach*—"sparkling stones"; LXX: *lithous krustallou*—"rock crystals"), and all your wall of precious stones (Heb: *le'avne chēphetz*; LXX: *lithous eklektous*—"choice stones")." The mention of sapphires (Greek: *sapphiros*), jasper (Greek: *iaspis*) and stone (Greek: *lithō*) in Revelation 21:19 form a verbal parallel with Isaiah 54:11-12. There is also a strong thematic/structural parallel in visions of the materials with which a future Jerusalem would be built. So, it is probable that John had Isaiah 54:11-12 in mind as he described his vision of the New Jerusalem.

Another interesting background to these verses can be found in the Apocrypha, which contains many Jewish works from the period between the Testaments. One of these is *Tobit*, which contains the following passage, which may be based on Isaiah 54:11-12: "Let my soul bless God the great King. For Jerusalem shall be built up with sapphires and emeralds and precious stone; thy walls and towers and battlements with pure gold. And the streets of Jerusalem shall be paved with beryl and ruby and stones of Ophir. And all her streets shall say,

‘Alleluia’; and they shall praise Him, saying, ‘Blessed be God, who hath extolled it for ever.’” Tobit 13:15-18, TMBA Bible. While the specific materials of the future Jerusalem are different than in Revelation 21, the use of gold and precious stones expresses the shared vision of a new Jerusalem that far transcends the old one. Aune (*Revelation*, 1163) notes other parallel texts at Qumran and in the wider Greco-Roman world.

. . . **the city is pure gold as clear as glass.** Most people are familiar with the “streets of gold” in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:21). But, according to verse 18, the entire city is made from gold that is so pure it is clear like glass. Barnes encourages us to imagine the city as if it were made entirely of glass with the setting sunbeams falling upon it. The “main street” of the city is also made of pure gold as transparent as glass (Rev 21:21). But there is one difference, which I have reflected in my translation. In verse 18 the gold is “clear” (Greek: *katharō*—the Greek word for “clean”) as glass. In verse 21, the gold of the streets is “transparent” (Greek: *diaugēs*) as glass. While “clear” translated a very common word in the New Testament, “transparent” is unique to this occurrence.

That the streets of the New Jerusalem are of gold might remind the ancient readers of Solomon's temple, which had a gold floor (1 Kings 6:30, cf. 11QTemple 36:11; 39:3; 41:15). Since the redeemed in Revelation are priests for God (Rev 1:6; 5:9-10), the gold might suggest the priestly nature of life in the city (more on this later). Much of old Jerusalem has been constructed out of yellow sandstone, which may have suggested to its residents a truly golden future for the Jerusalem to come. Perhaps even more significant is Josephus' observation that the temple of Herod was covered with plates of gold that gleamed with “fiery splendor” when struck by the rays of the morning sun coming up over the Mount of Olives (Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 5.5.6).

**The foundations of the wall of the city were decorated with every kind of precious stone.** The word “decorated” (Greek: *kekosmēmenēn*) is the same as “adorned” (Greek: *kekosmēmenēn*) in verse 2. I chose a different English word in verses 2 and 19 because of the respective contexts. “Adorned” is appropriate to a bride, “decorated” is appropriate to a city. But even though the word “decorated” is used here, the next verse makes clear that the foundations are constructed of these stones, they are not fastened onto something else like marble panels on concrete. The first foundation is jasper, just like the walls, so the walls and first foundation must be distinguished by some architectural feature. This inclines me toward the idea that the twelve foundations are stacked one upon the other rather than each foundation supporting a twelfth portion of the wall and the city. While there may be a definite meaning to each of the stones, it is only the general meaning of the whole that can be understood with reasonable certainty.

The decoration of the New Jerusalem with precious stones reminds the reader of the prostitute Babylon in Revelation 17:4-5. See Rev 21:2 (Excursus on the New Jerusalem). There is also a possible allusion to Ezekiel 28:13. There the king of Tyre was dressed in every kind of precious stone (Heb: *kōl'eben qārāh*). There is a verbal parallel between the passages (LXX Ezek 28:13: *pan lithon*; Greek Rev 21:19: *panti lithō*) and a thematic parallel of being dressed or decorated in precious stones. This recalls the ambitions of Lucifer (Isa 14:12-14). The New Jerusalem is a part of God's plan to set right the rebellion in the universe that began with the

fall of Satan.

The big picture of all the stones in the following verses is to remember that the New Jerusalem is depicted as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev 21:2). In Revelation 21:18-21, the fabulous listing of jewels suggests that the New Jerusalem is the bride of all brides. In Isaiah 61:10 the same image is de-gendered. There Israel is metaphorically bejeweled in the way a bridegroom is adorned like a priest and the bride is adorned like a bride. So the image can be male as well as female in Scripture. In whatever way one reads this visionary account, it seeks to portray the ultimate fulfillment of all human needs and desires. But “every kind of precious stone” also recalls the preparations for the temple made by King David in 1 Chronicles 29:2. So temple, bride and city imagery are mixed together in the descriptions of the New Jerusalem.

**The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth green quartz, the eleventh jacinth and the twelfth amethyst.** The materials of the New Jerusalem represent variety rather than sameness. Each foundation has a stone peculiar to it. If the foundations are stacked one upon the other, the unique qualities of each stone could be seen all at once below the city. If the foundations are set side by side around the city, only three or four would be visible from any particular point of view. The fact that all twelve are listed together in this single verse suggests to me that they are stacked from John’s perspective rather than scattered. The top foundation, in that case, is jasper, which may represent the diamond, because the jasper of the city is described as “clear as crystal” (Greek: *krustallizonti*) in 21:11. See comments on that verse. Since a different Greek word is used here, the transparency of the jasper is somehow different than that of the gold in Revelation 21:18 and 21.

There is, very likely, an allusion to the breastplate of the High Priest in this listing of precious stones. The High Priest’s breastplate was square in shape and contained four rows of three stones each, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. The main texts are Exodus 28:15-21 and 39:8-14. The two lists of the twelve stones on the High Priest’s breastplate are identical in both the Hebrew and the Greek of Exodus. Nine of these stones are also listed as the covering of the king of Tyre (Ezek 28:13), who serves as the counterpart of Lucifer in Isaiah 14:12-14. But in the LXX (Greek OT) of Ezekiel 28:13, all twelve of the High Priest’s stones are listed, so the connection between Ezekiel 28 and Exodus 28 and 39 is made explicit by the time the LXX was written. It is noteworthy that the foundations of the New Jerusalem represent the apostles of the Lamb, which the stones of the High Priest’s breastplate represent the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus, the two groupings of twelve (tribes and apostles) are tied even more closely together (cf. Matt 19:28).

These stone listings are somewhat problematic. First of all, it is not always clear exactly which ancient stone is being referred in either the Hebrew or the Greek of the Bible. So English translations of the stone lists in Exodus, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Revelation are all over the map, often contradicting each other. It is also not clear whether John in Revelation 21 was following the Hebrew or the LXX (Greek Old Testament). If he was following the LXX, only eight of the twelve stones of the New Jerusalem have exact equivalents in the High Priest’s breastplate. If he was working from the Hebrew or from memory, the parallels are potentially closer. But the

LXX lists are identical for Exodus 28, Exodus 39 and Ezekiel 28, so the early Greek translators had consistent equivalents for each of these stones. But the Greek of Revelation 21 differs for four of them. Where the LXX of Exodus 28 has *anthrax, ligurion, achatēs, and onuxion*, the Greek of Revelation 21 has *chalkēdōn, sardonux, chrusoprasos, and uakinthos*. These differences make the most sense if John was working from the Hebrew or from memory (likely, in my view). See the discussion in my published dissertation (*Decoding Revelation's Trumpets*, 72-100).

**The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate one by one was made of a single pearl.** The twelve foundations of the city are diverse in terms of the materials with which they are constructed. The twelve gates of the city are all made of the same material, pearl. "Each gate one by one" (Greek: *ana heis hekastos tōn pulōnōn*) was made of a single pearl. In the ancient world, the pearl was the only precious stone that could not be improved by human skill. The twelve gates of the city represent the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev 21:12-), just as they did in Ezekiel 48:30-35. In the ancient world, pearls were rare and extremely valuable. The twelve gates are described as twelve enormous pearls attached to walls 144 cubits high. The ancients reading this text must have imagined the size of the oyster that could produce gates that large! In 1 Enoch 18:7 an entire mountain of pearl was seen in vision. The idea of gigantic pearls is also found in some later Jewish traditions. The great value of pearls in the ancient world is illustrated in one of the parables of Jesus. There was a pearl so valuable that a merchant sold his entire net worth in order to obtain it (Matt 13:45-46).

**The main street of the city was made of pure gold, as transparent as glass.** Most major translations speak of "the street of the city", but I have translated "main street" because the word for "street" (Greek: *plateia*) can mean a particular street, all the streets in the city, or even a central square of the city (cf. Rev 11:8; 22:2), like a Greek *agora* or a Roman *forum*. The latter is likely the meaning here. So the main street or central plaza of the city is pure gold, transparent like crystal. There may be a deliberate contrast between the street (Greek: *plateia*) of the New Jerusalem and the street (Greek: *plateias*) of the great city in Revelation 11:8. The great city of 11:8 was not only Sodom and Egypt, but "where also their Lord was crucified", in other words, old Jerusalem. In 11:8, the witnesses of God were exposed to mockery and death. In the New Jerusalem, the followers of "their Lord" dwell permanently in safety. In the words of Stefanovic: ". . . the street of oppression and suffering that they trod has been replaced by the street of victory and glory" (*Revelation*, 601).

**And I did not see a temple in her, for the Lord God Almighty is her temple, and also the Lamb.** As we have noted, there is much sanctuary imagery in the New Jerusalem vision, but there is no temple in the city. Having said this, it appears that there was once a temple there: "For this reason they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in his temple, and the One sitting on the throne will spread His tent over them." Rev 7:15, cf. 3:12. There are three possible explanations that I am aware of: 1) The temple may have been there during the millennium because that's where the records of human history are stored. The saints need those records during the Millennium for their work of judgment and processing their own growth and development (Rev 20:4; 22:2). In that view, after the Millennium the heavenly temple may no longer be needed. The New Jerusalem itself functions as a temple. 2) The

temple may be outside the city as is the case in Ezekiel 40-48. 3) The word “temple” is used in a metaphorical sense in Revelation 3:12 and 7:15 as in 1 Corinthians 3:17. I prefer the first option, in which case some mediation of God’s presence is still needed during the Millennium but will not be necessary afterward.

In Jewish end-time expectation, the standard view was that eschatological Jerusalem would have a glorious, eschatological temple (Ezek 40-48: Zech 1:16; 6:12-15; 11QTemple 45:7-18—see Aune, *Revelation*, 1167-1168 for further examples from Qumran for an eschatological temple in Jerusalem). Jesus seems also to have left room for an eschatological temple in Jerusalem (John 2:19-21, cf. Matt 26:61 and parallels; Matt 27:40 and parallels; cf. Heb 6:19-20; 8:4-5; 9:1-12). John himself makes multiple references to a heavenly temple elsewhere in Revelation (see Rev 1:12 [Excursus on the Sanctuary in Revelation]). So the absence of a temple in the New Jerusalem after the Millennium is somewhat of a surprise. But the idea has precursors in both Judaism (Jer 3:14-18; Zech 2:4-5 [LXX: Zech 2:8-9]) and early Christianity (John 4:21-24; Acts 6:14; 7:47-50). Aune (*Revelation*, 1167) gives a number of examples of the absence of temples in Greco-Roman utopias as well. Perhaps Zechariah 2:4-5 (LXX: Zech 2:8-9) anticipates a time when no temple is needed because God’s presence surrounds Jerusalem like a wall (cf. Jer 3:14-18).

**And I did not see a temple in her. . . .** “I did not see” (Greek: *ouk eidon*) implies “I expected to see and did not” (Aune, *Revelation*, 1166). Pretty much all ancient cities had one or more temples in them. It would often be the highlight of the city’s skyline. For most of its history, Jerusalem had its own highlight temple. These temples enabled a mediated presence of God within the city. Priests served as go-betweens representing the presence of God or the gods to the residents of the city. For this reason, the absence of a temple here would be much more jarring in John’s day than it is in ours. But having a temple in the New Jerusalem would make as little sense as offering an opening prayer during a face-to-face meeting with God! In Exodus, the sanctuary was a place to hide God or shield the people from His glory (Exod 25:8). No building or mediator is needed to stand between God and His people in the New Jerusalem. Neither is there any church or denomination. Churches, denominations, and temples are tools that God has used to accomplish various missions in the course of the great conflict with Satan. Now that the conflict is over, there is no more need for these, as the goal, intimacy with God and others, has been achieved.

The word for temple occurs twice in this verse (Greek: *naon, naos*). This word has a double meaning. The Greek *naos* can mean the sanctuary as a whole or it can refer specifically to the inner shrine of the temple, equivalent to the Most Holy Places in the Israelite tabernacle and temple. If there is no temple in the New Jerusalem, it would be because no temple is needed. Every resident of the city has daily the kind of access to God that only the High Priest on the Day of Atonement had in the Old Testament. For Israel, access to God was only once a year in the person of the High Priest. In the New Testament, on the other hand, there is direct, spiritual access to God (John 16:25-27; Rom 5:2). But Revelation 21 takes that access to another level. In the New Jerusalem, access to God becomes a living, daily, face-to-face reality. Localized expressions of worship have come to an end (John 4:21-24). Throughout human history, the temple is not God but rather the place where God is present. That place is now the New

Jerusalem. Its cubical shape is matched by the Most Holy Place of the Israelite tabernacle and temple. See Rev 1:12 (Excursus on the Sanctuary in Revelation).

The fact that the idea of a sanctuary was introduced quite late in the experience of Abraham and his descendants may be an indication that sanctuary and temple instructions were temporary expedients from the first. There is even a hint in Jeremiah 7:21-23 that sacrifices and temples were never part of God's ultimate intention (Jer 7:21-23; cf. 1 Kings 8:16-19, 27, Psa 40:6, Isa 57:15, Hos 6:6, and Mic 6:6-8). Like the kingship, tabernacle, temple and sacrifices were temporary expedients that enabled God to maintain relationship with stubborn and willful humanity. Ellen White (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, 364) seems to endorse a similar line of thinking: "If man had kept the law of God, as given to Adam after his fall, preserved by Noah, and observed by Abraham, there would have been no necessity for the ordinance of circumcision. And if the descendants of Abraham had kept the covenant, of which circumcision was a sign, they would never have been seduced into idolatry, nor would it have been necessary for them to suffer a life of bondage in Egypt; they would have kept God's law in mind, and there would have been no necessity for it to be proclaimed from Sinai or engraved upon the tables of stone. And had the people practiced the principles of the Ten Commandments, there would have been no need of the additional directions given to Moses." The "additional directions" would be those related to tabernacle and its sacrifices in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. The New Jerusalem is the full expression of God's ultimate intentions.

. . . **for the Lord God Almighty is her temple, and also the Lamb.** "For" (Greek: *gar*) positions this sentence as the explanation of the previous. There is no temple in the New Jerusalem because the full presence of God itself is the temple. It is not part of the vision, it is John's explanation of that part of the vision. "Her temple" is my translation of "the temple of her" (Greek: *ho naos autēs*). As complementary parts of a predicate nominative, God and the temple are equated. They are the same thing. "Also" translates the Greek *kai* in *kai to arnion*. It is not clear grammatically if "the Lamb" is part of the subject or the object and in this case it doesn't change the meaning. God and the Lamb together are the temple of the New Jerusalem (see Rev 5:12-14; 22:5).

While Jesus Himself functions as a temple in the Gospels (John 2:19-21, cf. Matt 12:6; 18:20), the idea of God being a temple is somewhat new within Judaism, but it is compatible with some ancient eschatological texts. In the Old Testament (Zeph 3:5, 15; Zech 2:10 [LXX: Zech 2:14]; 8:3), the eschatological Jerusalem is filled with God's direct presence. The closest passage of all to Revelation 21:22 may be 4QShir<sup>b</sup> 35:3, which reads: "God himself [is] an eternal sanctuary. . . ." See Aune (*Revelation*, 1168) for more on this and other possible references within early Judaism. In the New Testament, local churches are seen as temples (1 Cor 3:17; 2 Cor 6:16) in that the real presence of Christ in them is like the Shekinah in the tabernacle and temple of Israel (Matt 18:20, cf. *Pirke Aboth* 3:2).

#### **Rev 21:23—**

**And the city has no need of the sun or the moon in order that they might give it light, for the glory of God has illuminated it and its lamp is the Lamb.** The purpose clause, beginning with "in order that" (Greek: *hina*), does not indicate that the sun and the moon no longer exist.

One purpose of their creation was to provide light for the earth, both day and night (Gen 1:15-16). That particular purpose for their existence is no longer needed, they are now overshadowed as a source of light by the glory of God, reminiscent of the Shekinah glory in the tabernacle and temple (cf. John 8:12; 9:5; Phil 2:15). This is the first of two passages in Revelation that address the illumination of the city and its people. Here the focus is on the city and its structures. In Revelation 22:5 the focus is on illuminating the “servants of God and the Lamb” (cf. Rev 22:3). Revelation 22:5 adds an additional detail, there will be no more night in the New Jerusalem at all, since the sun and the moon have from the beginning been means of marking off day and night (Gen 1:14). For that reason, 22:5 does not mention the moon, but only notes that there is no need of lamp or sun to illumine the inhabitants of the city.

The language of this verse is almost certainly an allusion to Isaiah 60:19-20. The NIV translates that passage as follows: “The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end.” There are at least five major verbal parallels between Revelation 21:23 and Isaiah 60:19-20: sun (LXX: *ho hēlios*; Rev: *tou hēliou*), moon (LXX and Rev: *selēnēs*), God (LXX: *ho theos*; Rev: *tou theou*), glory (LXX: *hē doxa*; Rev: *doxa*), light (LXX: *phōs*; Rev: *ephōtisen*). This is about as strong as verbal parallels in Revelation get. In addition to the verbal parallels to Isaiah 60:19-20, there is the strong thematic parallel of no need for light from the heavenly bodies because God’s glory will provide that light. One could also argue that since the fall of Babylon/return from Exile motif runs from the drying up of the Euphrates (Rev 16:12) to the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:9-27), and this is central in the Old Testament prophets, there is also a strong structural parallel here.

This combination of words, themes, and structures is unique to Revelation 21:23 and Isaiah 60:19-20 in the Bible. It is virtually certain, therefore, that John has the Isaiah passage in mind as he wrote. The major question regarding an allusion to Isaiah 60:19-20 is the absence in Isaiah of the language of need: “The city has no need” (Greek: *hē polis ou chreian echei*) of the sun or the moon. Neither the Hebrew nor the LXX of Isaiah 60:19-20 mention need. But the expression is found in the *Targum of Isaiah* 60:19 (an early Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew--see Aune, *Revelation*, 1168-1169), so John may be reflecting that tradition. There is also a possible allusion to Isaiah 24:23: “Then the moon will be confounded and the sun ashamed, for the LORD of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and his glory will be before his elders” (ESV). There are three main words in common (only in the Hebrew) in a thematic context of eschatological Jerusalem.

There are two other differences between Revelation 21:23 and Isaiah 60:19-20, both found in the last clause, “. . . its lamp is the Lamb” (Greek: *ho luchnos autēs to arnion*). Aune (*Revelation*, 1170) suggests that this is a possible allusion to Psalm 132:17: “I have prepared a lamp for my anointed one” (NRSV). Such an allusion provides a messianic overtone to the use of “Lamb” in the book of Revelation. As “the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Rev 1:1), this book exhibits a Christian reading of the prophets, transforming the things of Israel in a spiritual, worldwide way (see a fuller explanation of this in my book *The Deep Things of God*, pages 166-171). “God” and the Lamb together illuminate the city. In the New Testament, Jesus is included

in the one God of Judaism (1 Cor 8:4-6). See Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified*, pages 1-60. So Revelation naturally equates the eschatological work of God the Father and Jesus Christ in the New Jerusalem vision.

Isaiah 60 is set in the context of a second return to Jerusalem after the exile to Babylon. When the glory of the Lord shines on the Jerusalem/Zion (Isa 60:1-2, cf. 59:20) rebuilt by the partially returned exiles, many among the nations (Isa 60:12) would come out of darkness to that light, bringing with them the rest of the Jewish exiles in Babylon (Isa 60:3-4, 9). The nations who come would bring tribute, beautifying the restored temple (Isa 60:7, 9-10, 13), and would accept Yahweh as their ruler and serve Him (Isa 60:10-12). Isaiah envisions a greater return of Jews to Jerusalem in the aftermath of the Babylonian exile. The vision is couched in the geographical context of Judah and Babylon after the exile. The temple remains at the center of God's interactions with His people. Distinctions between Jews and Gentiles are also central to the picture. But in Revelation, the people of God are spiritual and worldwide (Rev 5:9-10) and Jerusalem far transcends the ethnic and geographical limitations of Isaiah's vision. Some of the ethnic and local language is retained in Revelation, but the setting is very different. The city itself replaces the temple. Isaiah's picture of the inclusion of the nations forms the basis of the verses that follow as well (Rev 21:24-26), but in Revelation it is a Christ-centered, worldwide picture.

**Rev 21:24-26-- And the nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. And her gates will never ever be shut by day, for there will be no night there. (The kings of the earth) will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into her.** The Textus Receptus (first scholarly Greek text at the time of the Reformation) adds "of the saved" (Greek: *tōn sōzomenōn*) to "nations", without clear manuscript evidence. Erasmus seems to have taken this explanatory note from the commentary of Andreas, and others after him copied that reading into the Textus Receptus. By this means the reading got into the King James Version (and also the NKJV). If it were original, it would clarify the identity of the nations here. They would represent those among the "Gentiles" who embrace the gospel and join the people of God at the End. While this reading may reflect John's intention in this passage, it does not reflect the best of the manuscript traditions. See Rev 21:24-26 (Identity of the Nations in Revelation).

These verses continue the certain allusion to Isaiah 60 that was central to verse 23. These verses are particularly paraphrasing Isaiah 60:3-5 and 11 (ESV): "And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. . . . Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession."

#### **Rev 21:24-26 (Excursus on Israel and the Nations in the OT)—**

In the Old Testament prophets there is a tension, in scholarly terms, between

universalism and particularism. Many prophetic texts see the end in particular terms, in other words, everything at the End centers around the fate of Israel. The mighty future intervention of God into history would transform Israel as a nation (Mic 4:1-5). The remnant of the Exile is restored to Jerusalem and becomes a strong nation again under God's rule (Mic 4:6-8). The temple in Jerusalem is recognized as the chief center of worship and "many nations" (Mic 4:2) would come to Jerusalem to learn Torah (Mic 4:3) and to walk in the ways of Yahweh (Mic 4:2). Micah's End is not the radical End of the Book of Revelation. Instead, it comes within history and within the world as the prophets knew it (see also Isa 2:2-5; 33:17-22; and 49:14-26). The enemy nations continue to exist, they just don't threaten anymore (Mic 4:3-5). In some of these texts, the Davidic monarchy is restored in a new Jerusalem (Mic 4:8; Isa 11:1-16; Zech 9:9,10). Other prophetic texts, however, can describe the Return without the kingship component (Ezek 40-48; Joel 2, 3; Isa 24-27). In these texts God takes over directly, in person.

But other prophetic texts envision a major role for the "nations" (the same word in Hebrew and Greek as "Gentiles"-- Heb: *gōyim*; LXX: *ethnē*) in God's eschatological plan. The prophetic view of the End balances the special and unique role of Israel at the End with the awareness that somehow God's plan for the future included all nations, even such enemy powers as Egypt and Assyria (Isa 19:23-25). At the very time when God intervened to transform Israel's history, He would also do a mighty work among the Gentile nations. Some texts suggest that the nations come to Jerusalem, but not necessarily on an equal basis, they would come to pay tribute (Isa 18:7; 49:22-26; 60:1-22; 61:5-6). But other texts suggest that the nations would participate fully and equally in the worship of Yahweh and in the blessings that would come along with Israel's eschatology (Psa 22:27-28; 138:4-6; Isa 2:2-4; 19:23-25; 56:6-8; LXX of Amos 9:12; Mic 4:1-4, etc.). The difference in the nations' role can perhaps be harmonized as reflecting a progression. In the Old Testament scenario, the nations are more and more integrated with eschatological Israel over time. This balance between the special role of Israel and God's care for all nations is rooted in the blessing of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). In the prophets, Israel has a special role to play in God's plan for the End, but ultimately the nations will also come to serve Him.

The process by which Israel comes to dominate the nations is a spiritual one. This is laid out in Zech 8:20-23 (NIV): "And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty and to entreat him. This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, "Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you."'" For the nations to find God, they must go to the land of Israel. Israel retains spiritual primacy in this text. But did the prophets envision that it would always be so? Would there ever be a time when some or all of the gentile nations would attain spiritual equality with Jerusalem? There is a unique and fascinating text in Isa 19:23-25 (NIV): "In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance."

Although the Hebrew of Isaiah 19:23-25 is not as clear as we might like, this text seems to foretell a day when Egypt and Assyria would share in the mission of Abraham to bless the other nations. All three nations become holy places, where pilgrims come to celebrate the feasts of Yahweh. The description in Isaiah 19 is not the end of the world, as it is portrayed in Revelation, it is rather the renewal of the world, in the context of its history and its geography. Time and place go on as before, but God's intervention has changed everything. Israel is restored, the kingship is restored, and paradise has expanded beyond the borders of Israel. The whole earth has become blessed. This picture in the Old Testament prophets is echoed in the Judaism of John's day, including the evidence found at Qumran (the "Dead Sea Scrolls"—see Aune, *Revelation*, 1173). But it is not a picture of absolute universalism. Some among the nations do not join in this spiritual revival. The end result is a great war that results in the exclusion of many among the nations from the final paradise envisioned by the prophets. "For the nation or kingdom that will not serve you will perish." Isa 60:12, NIV. "Egypt shall become a desolation and Edom a desolate wilderness, for the violence done to the people of Judah, because they have shed innocent blood in their land. But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations" (Joel 3:19-20, ESV; Heb Joel 4:19-20). The particularism and universalism of the prophets, therefore, remains in tension to the end.

#### **Rev 21:24—**

**And the nations will walk by its light. . . .** This clause builds on the Hebrew of Isaiah 60:3. The nations (Greek: *ta ethnē*) in Revelation earlier drank the wine of Babylon (Rev 14:8; 18:4) and were deceived by Satan (Rev 18:23; 20:3, 8). The word "walk" (Greek: *peripatēsousin*) reflects the metaphorical sense of the Hebrew *chalkū*, which implies conduct or lifestyle (cf. 2 Cor 5:7, Eph 4:17; 1 Thess 4:1, contrast 2 Pet 2:10). The Greek translation of Isaiah 60:3 instead uses a word for "coming" (LXX: *poreusontai*), so this is one of those places in Revelation where John seems to be working from the Hebrew rather than from the Septuagint or some other Old Testament text tradition. Whoever these nations in Revelation are, their lifestyle now draws its direction from the light reflected by the city. Since the light of the city comes from the glory of God (Rev 21:23), they are walking in God's light (truth as opposed to their former deception). The concept of "light" (Greek: *phōtos*) is often associated with the Word of God (Psa 119:105 [Heb: 118:105]) or the Torah (Prov 6:23) in Judaism (cf. Wisdom of Solomon 18:4; Sirach 32:16; 45:17; 2 Baruch 17:4; 4 Ezra 14:20-21). The nations are no longer behaving like those "outside the city" (Rev 21:27; 22:15). They are in harmony with the saints who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus (Rev 14:12).

**. . . the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.** The "kings of the earth" (Greek: *hoi basileis tēs gēs*) seem to be synonymous with "the nations" (Greek: *ta ethnē*) here, and this is confirmed by Revelation 18:3. Nations and kings are often paired together in the Old Testament (i.e. Gen 17:6; 1 Kings 4:34 [LXX: 1 Kings 5:14]; Psa 102:15 [LXX: Psa 101:16]; Isa 41:2). In all, the phrase "kings of the earth" occurs eight times in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 1:5 they are presently subject to the rule of Jesus Christ (Rev 1:5). In Revelation 6:15-17 the kings of the earth are among those who are hiding in the caves and the rocks of the mountains from the wrath of the Lamb. In 16:14 they gather for the final battle against the

Lamb at the direction of the three frogs. In Revelation 17:2, 18 and 18:3 they represent the political powers of the world in illicit alliance with Babylon, the worldwide alliance of religion at the End. In Revelation 19:19 they join with the beast in opposing the Second Coming itself. So reference to the kings of the earth in positive terms is unique in Revelation here. This may be a way of suggesting that the New Jerusalem is not the only inhabited part of the new earth, it is the center and capital of God's earthly kingdom. It is portrayed as an imperial city, receiving tribute from the rest of the empire (cf. Isa 45:14; 60:10-11).

This is the first time in the book of Revelation that "glory" (Greek: *tēn doxan*) is applied to an earthly entity. Before this verse "glory" is always an attribute of God (Rev 15:8; 21:11, 23) or something that is directed to God or Christ (Rev 1:6; 4:9, 11; 5:12, 13; 7:12; 11:13; 14:7; 16:9; 19:1). The one exception is 18:1, where glory radiates from the angel of great authority. The kings of the earth here, and the nations in 21:26, therefore, have taken on a quality that normally applies in Revelation to God alone. See also comments on 21:26. While the kings of the earth are hostile to God previously in Revelation, they are throughout subject to the rule of Christ (Rev 1:5). See Rev 21:24-26 (The Identity of the Nations in Revelation) for a discussion of whether the nations of Revelation are the nations of the saved only or reflect a post-lake of fire conversion of the nations (universalism).

This verse seems to introduce what David Aune (*Revelation*, 1171) calls a "striking inconsistency" in the New Jerusalem vision between this verse and Revelation 20:7-9 and 21:1, which imply that the old order of things, including the nations, has already "passed away" (Rev 21:1; Greek: *apēlthon*). The idea of open gates with people moving in and out implies a situation where the New Jerusalem has already landed on the earth. On the other hand, the standpoint of the vision is at a moment when the New Jerusalem is still in the process of "coming down" (Greek: *katabainousan*) out of heaven. See comments on Rev 21:10-11. In this verse the nations and the kings of the earth still exist, and Jerusalem is at the center of eschatological activity just as it was in the Old Testament prophets. But one thing is very different. It is no longer Israel (the sacred) over against the nations (the secular), the two are in friendly relationship with one another. In a sense, as noted by Tonstad (*Revelation*, 315), "The secular and the sacred now occupy the same sphere." One reason for the "striking inconsistency" is the interplay between the literal, local language of the Old Testament and the spiritual, worldwide reality of the New Testament setting.

Aune (*Revelation*, 1171-1172) goes on to suggest that John may have been influenced by the kind of scenario we find in the pseudepigraphical *Sibylline Oracles*, book 3, 657-731. There the final events of history happen in four stages. 1) The "kings of the peoples" launch an assault against "the land" and the temple, seeking to destroy it (3 *Sib. Or.*, 657-668, cf. Rev 20:7-9a). 2) God defends Jerusalem and annihilates the attackers in great detail, including fiery swords, brimstone and hail that fall from heaven (3 *Sib. Or.*, 669-701, cf. Rev 20:9b-10). 3) Then the "sons of the great God" will live peacefully around the temple under God's direct rule. They will be free from war and protected by a "wall of blazing fire" round about them (3 *Sib. Or.*, 702-709, Rev 21:9-21). Then "all the islands and cities" will become jealous at the way God helps His people and will join with them in worship directed toward the temple (3 *Sib. Or.*, 710-732, cf. Rev 21:24-25). The order of the events in *Sibylline Oracles* is the same as the literary

order in Revelation 20-21. But a major difference is that the *Oracles* retain the geographical and ethnic elements of the Old Testament picture, whereas the New Testament retains the ethnic and geographical language but applies them in a spiritual and worldwide way. This has important implications for our understanding of Revelation 21:24-26.

#### **Rev 21:25—**

**And her gates will never ever be shut by day, for there will be no night there.** The translation “never ever” (Greek: *ou mē*) reflects the forcefulness of the double negative in the original language. The compound sentence is a little odd in that the normal reading of “for” (Greek: *gar*) suggests that the reason gates will never close during the day is that there is no night at all in the New Jerusalem. What the sentence actually communicates is that the gates will “never ever” be shut since normally in that culture gates are open during the day and shut at night. The gates of the New Jerusalem will never be shut because the time for shutting them never comes. Open gates are incompatible with a city that is facing hostility and danger from outside. This is part of the “striking inconsistency” in this part of Revelation. According to Revelation 21:10-11, we are viewing the city *before* it comes under threat in Revelation 20:9. Yet the open gates would imply a setting in which the danger of 20:9 is already past. As noted earlier, a clean timeline for Revelation 20:7 – 21:27 is difficult to construct.

The first clause alludes to Isaiah 60:11 which says (ESV), “Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut. . . .” They remain open so the kings of the earth can bring their tribute to Jerusalem (cf. Rev 21:24, 26, cf. 1QM 12:13-14). The second clause alludes to Zechariah 14:7 which says (NRSV), “And there shall be continuous day (it is known to the LORD), not day and not night. . . .” The two prophetic scenarios (Isa 60:11 and Zech 14:7) are combined here in Revelation. By closing the sentence in 21:25b with the adverb “there” (Greek: *ekei*—“there” as opposed to “here”—Greek: *hōde*), John suggests that day and night may continue outside the city, but the glory of God is so great that the night time in the city is no different than the day time. Stefanovic (*Revelation*, 602) suggests that the gates of the New Jerusalem need never be shut for two reasons: 1) There are no enemies anymore, and 2) God’s abiding presence protects the city.

#### **Rev 21:26—**

**(The kings of the earth) will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into her.** This sentence begins with “they will bring” (Greek: *oisousin*). While the nations in verse 24 could possibly be the antecedent of “they”, it is the kings of the earth in verse 24 that “will bring” (Greek: *pherousin*—an irregular derivative of *oisousin*) their glory into the New Jerusalem. “They will bring”, therefore, refers back to the “kings of the earth” in verse 24, hence the translation above. Verse 24 says that the kings of the earth will bring their glory (the term for “honor” [*timē*] is not found in the best manuscripts of verse 24) into the city. The kings of the earth represent the nations (Gentiles) outside of Israel in the prophets. See Rev 21:24-26 (Excursus on Israel and the Nations in the OT).

In this verse it is the glory and honor of the nations that they bring into the city. This clearly ties the two concepts together, as they are in Isaiah 60:3, 11. In the ancient world, “glory

and honor” together represent fame and reputation. The two terms can also be used in reverse order, “honor and glory”, as in Isaiah 55:5, the Theodotion reading of Daniel 5:18 and several New Testament texts. See Aune (*Revelation*, 1173). But In Isaiah 60:4-13, the glory of the nations (Isa 60:13) is material wealth; like gold, wood, frankincense, and domestic animals. In Revelation 21:26 the “glory and honor” probably have a double meaning, spiritual as well as material wealth. This is a sign that the nations referred to here are converted nations, who honor the God of the New Jerusalem. This verse is essentially a restatement of verse 24, creating a mini-chiasm with verse 25 in the middle.

### **Rev 21:24-26 (Excursus on The Identity of the Nations in Revelation)—**

The identity of “the nations” (Greek: *ta ethnē*) in Revelation has been the subject of debate among scholars of this book. Until this point in the book “the nations” have been either hostile powers or relatively neutral. As hostile powers, the nations are described as subjects of Babylon and the beast (Rev 11:18; 13:7), allies of Babylon (Rev 16:19; 17:15; 18:3, 23), or deceived by Satan (Rev 20:3, 8). The nations in Revelation are relatively neutral in four different ways. They are one of the categories of people to which God’s message is preached (Rev 10:11; 14:6), from which the people of God have been drawn (Rev 5:9; 7:9), and from which enemies of God’s people come (Rev 11:9). They are also powers over which Christ and His people will one day rule (Rev 2:26; 12:5; 19:15). The overwhelming picture in the latter half of the book, however, is one of hostility. The only exceptions to the above are Revelation 15:3-4 and 21:24-26. At some point in the picture of Revelation, “the nations”, as a category, are no longer hostile, but are included with God and with His people in the New Jerusalem.

So the question arises, are the nations of 15:3-4 and 21:24-26 the nations “of the saved” (those redeemed out from “the nations”, as in Rev 5:9) or are they the hostile nations themselves, who have all been saved in the end (the universalist position). Most commentators through the centuries have assumed the former position, not always from a careful examination of the evidence. But some historical theologians think that the predominant position of the early church fathers (such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa) was universalism. This assertion is heavily disputed by other historical theologians, the argument often depending on how one understands the fathers’ use of the Greek term *apokatastasis* (meaning something like “restoration”), and who might be the object of such a restoration. In any case, I am not aware that any of the church fathers who have been thought to embrace universalism did so on the basis of Revelation.

To understand the role of “the nations” in the book of Revelation, it is indispensable to begin with the role of the nations in the Old Testament prophets, from Isaiah through Malachi. See Rev 21:24-26 (Excursus on Israel and the Nations in the OT) for an initial summary of this. But in this Excursus, I want to focus on a crucial point, the way the writers of the New Testament transform the Old Testament prophetic picture in the light of Jesus Christ. To begin with, in both Hebrew and Greek, the word for “the nations” and for “Gentiles” is the same word (Heb: *gōyim*; LXX: *ethnē*). In the Old Testament context, “the nations” were people groups outside Israel. They were someone else than Israel. They were somewhere else than Israel. The distinction between Israel and the nations was defined in ethnic and geographical terms.

“Gentiles” were different races of people and they all lived outside the land of Israel. While the “all” was never true in the absolute sense (think of the “mixed multitude” that left Egypt with the Israelites—Exod 12:37-38), the ethnic and geographical distinctions were a handy way of thinking about the identity of both Israel and the nations in Old Testament times.

In the New Testament, however, the identities of Israel and the nations are redefined. Instead of an ethnic and geographical distinction between them, the New Testament handles these categories in a spiritual and worldwide way. In the New Testament, Jesus has become Israel with twelve disciples patterned after the twelve tribes (Matt 19:28). The cross is seen as a new Exodus (Matt 2:13-15; Luke 9:30-31). Like Israel (Isa 49:3-6), Jesus has become a light to the nations/Gentiles (Luke 2:29-32). Just as the descendants of Jacob (the twelve tribes) become literal Israel, so the followers of Jesus are also counted as Israel. In the New Testament, therefore, Israel is defined as those who follow Jesus. They too become a “light to the nations/Gentiles” (Acts 13:46-47). Thus, in the New Testament, Israel is redefined as those who follow Jesus. The ethnic and geographical meaning of Israel has become the spiritual and worldwide church made up of the followers of Jesus.

Just as Israel is redefined in the New Testament, so too are the nations. They are now made up of anyone who does not follow Jesus. Israel and the nations are no longer defined ethnically (in racial categories), they are now defined spiritually in relation to Christ. Similarly, the nations are no longer defined geographically (in terms of location), they are anyone, anywhere, who does not follow Jesus. This distinction is most clearly seen in Acts 4:27. Peter and John were preaching in the temple complex and, as a result, were arrested by the temple police and the Sadducees (Acts 4:1-3). At the hearing the next day, Peter started preaching again (Acts 4:5-12). This confounded the council and they decided to let them go (Acts 4:13-21). When the rest of the disciples heard that they had been released, they immediately turned to prayer (Acts 4:22-24). In that prayer they compared the priestly council (made up of ethnic Jews) to the raging nations gathering against Jerusalem in Psalm 2 (Acts 4:25-26).

In the prayer of the disciples (Acts 4:24-30), after the release of Peter and John, the decisive verse for our purpose is Acts 4:27 (ESV): “. . . for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel. . . .” After quoting Psalm 2, an Old Testament prophecy of a future gathering of “the nations” against Jerusalem, they redefine Israel as Jesus Himself. And “the nations” of Psalm 2 include Herod, Pontius Pilate, the “Gentiles” (Greek: *ethnesin*—same word as “nations”), and the peoples of Israel. The “nations” in Acts 4 are made up of all those who oppose Jesus, including both Jews and Gentiles. The nations are no longer people who are someone else (ethnic distinction) and somewhere else (geographical distinction), they are made up of those who oppose Jesus, both inside and outside literal Jerusalem. This redefinition of both Israel and the Gentiles is continued in the book of Revelation. While the geography of the ancient Near East is incorporated into the eschatological picture of Revelation, it is redefined in spiritual, worldwide terms (see, for example, the redefinition of the Euphrates River in Revelation 17:15, and Babylon in 17:1-3 and 18:9-19). Israel is identified with the church (followers of the Lamb) and with those among the nations who embrace the gospel (Rev 5:9; 7:9, cf. Isa 60:12). This picture continues both the

universalism and the particularism of the Old Testament prophets. We will now explore the implications of Revelation's picture of the nations for their identity in Revelation 21:24-26.

Universalism (or universal salvation) is the teaching that every human being will eventually be reconciled to God on the basis of God's unlimited love and mercy. The implications of that view for the book of Revelation is the possibility that the nations of Revelation 21:24-26 have somehow emerged from the lake of fire and reconciled with God and with the saved inside the New Jerusalem. I don't claim to be an expert on general issues related to universalism and its alternatives, but I have come to believe it is necessary to address the issue at this point in a commentary on Revelation. There is some evidence in the book that fits well with a universalistic understanding. From that perspective "the nations" in Revelation are those who are deceived by Babylon (Rev 18:23), who resist the return of Jesus (Rev 19:15), and who are outside the holy city seeking to destroy it in Revelation 20:7-9. They are the lost, the unsaved, in the final context of Revelation. But in Revelation 21:24-26, the nations are again outside the city but are now freely allowed to enter. Those who wanted to attack the city before being thrown into the lake of fire are now allowed to enter freely. How are we to understand this proposed transformation?

If Revelation 21 is after Revelation 20 (in point of time), one could argue that the lake of fire (Rev 20:10, 14-15) must not have destroyed the nations, it must instead have been a place of purifying fire, as some early church fathers seem to have believed. In that case, the "lake of fire" would remain outside the city with the nations in it. The nations of 21:24-26, therefore, must have "washed their robes" while in the lake of fire because that is the point of difference between entering the city and remaining outside (Rev 22:14-15). After washing their robes in the cleansing fire, the nations are allowed to enter the New Jerusalem and apply the leaves of the tree of life, which are for the "healing of the nations" (Rev 22:2). In this manner, over time, all will be saved, both the righteous and the unrighteous of this earth (cf. 1 Tim 2:4).

Thinking further along this line, in Revelation 21:1-3 God renews the heaven and the earth. This seems to be after the judgment of Revelation 20 in point of time. But in Revelation 21:5 God says, "Behold, I **am making** (Greek: *poiō*—present continuous) all things new." In the new earth, the process of making all things new is not a singular event, it an ongoing process. If one connects this verse with the account of "the nations" in 21:24-26, the ongoing process would be the conversion of the nations in the lake of fire. After their conversion, the nations outside the city are now welcome to come in. In this way of reading, the tears (Rev 21:4) are there in the context of the nations being consumed, along with many relatives and friends of the saints. But when they learn that those "lost" ones will yet be redeemed by God, there is no more need for tears.

Perhaps the most persuasive evidence for universalism in Revelation is related to the final proclamation of the gospel in Revelation 14:6-7. The call goes out to "every nation" (Rev 14:6) to fear, glorify, and worship God because the hour of His judgment has come (Rev 14:7). But the nations in general do not heed this call. Instead, in the second angel's message, all the nations drink the wine of Babylon (Rev 14:8) and then reap the consequences described by the third angel (Rev 14:10-11). They do not respond to the call to fear, glorify, and worship God. As a result, they drink the wine of the wrath of God represented in the seven last plagues (Rev

14:10; 15:1; 16:1-21). But at the conclusion of the story is a vision of those who conquered the beast and his mark singing a song of victory on the sea of glass. They glorify God because all nations “will come” (Greek: *exousin*—future indicative) and worship before Him. Reading in this way, after the conclusion of the conflict of chapter 14, there is still a future salvation to sing about. All nations will yet come to worship God. The combination of “nation”, “fear”, “glorify”, and “worship” occurs only twice in Revelation, in the first angel’s message (Rev 14:6-7) and in the song of praise on the sea of glass (Rev 15:2-4). It appears that the nations which rejected the gospel in 14:8 will at some later time worship before God and respond properly to the first angel’s message.

I find the universalist reading of Revelation very perceptive and also very attractive. The idea that all will one day be saved speaks well of God and gives hope that all loved ones will one day be incorporated into a much better world than the present one. It would also be unfair to suggest that this is an easy way out that is more comfortable to hold than either annihilation or eternal torment. In fact, it is a very challenging concept. It means that loving your enemies is more than just good advice for our day and age. It suggests that in eternity we will have to deal with every person we couldn’t stand in this life. Every Jew who spent time in a concentration camp will need to one day face their guards and tormenters and find a way to reconcile and forgive. Every victim of ISIS will have to figure out how to incorporate these former terrorists into God’s vision of their future. Americans and Japanese from World War II, and Russians and Ukrainians from the present conflict, will all have to learn how to live together. Universalism is not as easy on us as it may at first sound.

Having said this, I believe that a universalistic reading of Revelation goes beyond what John himself actually says. If John was a committed universalist, it would have been easy for him to say so in plain and direct Greek, so that everyone would be able to see it. Instead, Revelation is filled with tensions and seeming contradictions that resist easy categorization. For example, one passage tells us that the throne of God is inside a temple (Rev 7:15), another tells us that the throne of God is inside a city that has no temple (21:22). The nations are hostile (19:20; 20:8-9), and they are friendly (15:4; 21:24-26). The bride of the Lamb is the “saints” (19:7-8) and the bride of the Lamb is a city (21:9-10). We wish John would have clarified these tensions in unmistakable Greek. But he does not. How one makes sense of these tensions in Revelation may have more to do with the experience and preferences of the interpreter than it does with the clarity of the text itself. The Book of Revelation was written to churches in Asia Minor a long time ago. As a result, it does not always answer the questions we like to ask of it.

John probably had an opinion on whether universalism, conditionalism (a more pleasant descriptive than annihilationism), or eternal torture is the appropriate end of the cosmic conflict. But he did not choose to make that opinion as explicit as most of us would like, or as clear as many of his readers think (I speak as a scholar here, not as a believer, I do have convictions on the subject, but I’ve learned that not all convictions are exegetically compelling). Why is he not clearer on this topic? Evidently, that was not his central mission in this part of Revelation. God’s revelation has its own priorities. So, universalists, conditionalists, and those who see eternal torment in these texts, are all working from things that are in the text, but John has not chosen to compellingly clarify his position (and that of God) on the matter. While I

respect those who read Revelation from a universalistic perspective, therefore, there are things in the text that give me serious challenges with it still. Let me share some things in Revelation that point me in another direction.

First of all, a universal salvation perspective on “the nations” in Revelation works best if 21:24-27 is after 20:7-15 chronologically. The nations entering into the New Jerusalem are the same nations that formerly attacked the city (Rev 20:7-9) and were “consumed” (Greek: *katephage*—“eaten down”) by fire from heaven. But exegesis of Revelation 21 shows that the New Jerusalem vision is actually prior to Revelation 20:7-15, John is viewing the city before it lands on the earth (Rev 21:2, 10). Revelation 21:1-8 is a duodirectional passage, pointing back to Revelation 20 and forward to 21:9-27. But duodirectional passages (like 3:21, 11:18 and 12:17) tend to be a mixture of things before and after them in point of time. For example, Revelation 11:18 comes at the climax of God’s kingdom, but looks forward to many things that precede that point in time. See comments on Rev 11:18-19 (Introduction). The account in 21:24-27 is jarring in the context of 21:9-23, but a universalistic reading of it is jarring as well.

If Revelation 21:27 actually stated that the nations enter the city out of the lake of fire, it would lend more credence to the universal perspective, but the text does not actually say that. While the lake of fire IS mentioned in 21:8, none of the exclusion texts (Rev 21:8, 27; 22:15) actually makes reference to “the nations” (Greek: *ta ethne*). Placing the nations of 21:24-26 in the lake of fire, and equating them with the excluded ones, are assumptions, not direct assertions in the text. In line with that, Revelation 20:9 does not say that the nations were thrown into the lake of fire in the first place, they are simply “consumed” by fire from heaven. See comments on Rev 20:9. There is a certain logic in equating the nations with the excluded ones and placing them in the lake of fire, and John could have done that, but does not actually do so. In 21:24-27 the nations are placed in direct contrast with those in the lake of fire. It is more likely that he saw the nations in 21:24-26 as the nations of the saved.

A further observation concerns the Book of Life. The phrase appears three times in Revelation 20-21. In Revelation 20:12, the heavenly judgment involves the opening of many books, which seem to contain the records of human deeds, by which the dead (Greek: *hoi nekroi*) were judged (Greek: *ekrithēsan*—aorist indicative). An additional book was opened, the Book of Life. The basis of judgment is on what is written in the books. There is no indication in 20:12 that the future deeds of the “dead” were considered. The judgment of the dead is entirely based on what has happened before. The role of the Book of Life in the final judgment is clarified in Revelation 20:15. Those whose names are written in the Book of Life do NOT go into the lake of fire. Anyone whose name is not written in the Book of Life IS cast into the lake of fire. The examination of the books of judgment of 20:12-13 is completed before any of these “dead” are cast into the lake of fire. And the lake of fire is the second death. Since the names in the Book of Life were written before the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8; 17:8), the idea that there is a change in the contents of the Book of Life after the judgment seems to be excluded. The final judgment of Revelation 20:12-15 IS in fact the final judgment. There is no hint in Revelation 20 or 21, therefore, that there is any future for those who are cast into the lake of fire.

In Revelation 21:27, no one (Greek: *ou mē*) enters into the city (Greek: *eis autēn*) unless

their names are written in the Book of Life, so the criterion for entry has not changed from 20:15 to 21:27. 21:27 comes immediately after 21:26, where the nations bring their glory “into her” (Greek: *eis autēn*—Rev 21:24, 26). As noted previously, Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 rule out adding names to the Book of Life after the judgment. It seems to me (and to the majority of readers of Revelation throughout Christian history) that the best understanding of “the nations” entering the city in 21:24-26 is that they are the nations “of the saved”, not the hostile nations of chapters 19-20. This conclusion is also compatible with the time frame of 21:9-27, which is **before** the destruction of the nations in 20:9. This is only challenging for the conditionalist position if one takes the New Jerusalem narrative with utmost literalness. In that case, how could the gates be closed to the nations in 20:9 yet open to the nations in 21:24-26? But if the text is not taken with utmost literalness it is still expressing an important truth. The inhabitants of the New Jerusalem will include individuals from every nation, tribe, language and people. All those open in this life to the leading of the Spirit will find a place in the New Jerusalem. In my view, those hardened in opposition to the gospel in this life will not be entering the city.

Another evidence that leads me away from a universalistic reading of Revelation is the Old Testament background to the New Jerusalem vision. The New Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21 is strongly based on Isaiah 60 in general and Isaiah 60:19-20 in particular. See comments on Rev 21:23 for more detail. There are multiple verbal, thematic and structural parallels connecting the texts. When the glory of the Lord shines on Jerusalem/Zion after the Exile to Babylon, (Isa 60:1-2, cf. 59:20) nations (Isa 60:3—LXX: *ethnē*) will come out of darkness to that light, bringing with them the rest of the Jewish exiles in Babylon (Isa 60:3-4, 9). This coming to Jerusalem of nations is not distinct from the return of Jews to Jerusalem. It includes “your” (Zion’s) “sons and daughters” (Isa 60:4). The two entries happen at the same time. And the nations that come are those who accept Yahweh as their ruler and serve Him (Isa 60:10-12). They do not include the nations who do not worship and serve Yahweh. In 60:12 it is said that unrepentant nations will “perish” (Heb: *yō’vidū*; LXX: *apolountai*) and be “laid waste” (Heb: *yederāvū*; LXX: *erēmōthēsontai*). Isaiah 60 does not actually depict a universal salvation of the nations and John would have known that when he alluded to it.

As noted earlier, in a universalist reading of Revelation, the nations of 21:24-26 must have “washed their robes” while in the lake of fire because that is the point of difference between entering the city and remaining outside (Rev 22:14-15). In this manner, over time, all will be saved, both the righteous and the unrighteous of this earth (cf. 1 Tim 2:4). In this reading, the washing of robes is an ongoing process (based on the present participle of “washing” [Greek: *plunontes*) that continues after the Millennium. But there are two pieces of evidence that point in a different direction. First of all, “robes” (Greek: *tas stolas*) occur in two earlier places in Revelation. In Revelation 6:11, the bestowing of clean robes occurs before the Second Coming of Jesus (Rev 6:15-17). In Revelation 7:9-14, the washing of robes is associated with the great tribulation, which is also prior to the Second Coming. The washing of robes happens in relation to the past actions of the saints, it is a historical act. Supporting this is the fact that Revelation 22:14 is part of the Epilogue (Rev 22:6-21), which includes several appeals to the reader. Readers must wash their robes now in preparation for the day when entry into

the New Jerusalem becomes possible.

As mentioned before, the most persuasive evidence for universalism in Revelation is related to the final proclamation of the gospel in Revelation 14:6-7. The call goes out to “every nation” (Rev 14:6) to fear, glorify, and worship God because the hour of His judgment has come (Rev 14:7). The nations in general do not heed this call (Rev 14:8-11). But at the conclusion of the story is a vision of those who conquered the beast and his mark singing a song of victory on the sea of glass. They glorify God because all nations “will come” (Greek: *exousin*—future indicative) and worship before Him (Rev 15:3-4). A first reading of the text seems to suggest that after the conclusion of the conflict of chapter 14, the enemy nations will yet come to worship God. But on a second reading of the text, one notices that 15:3-4 is not about the nations, it is about the character of God. God has demonstrated to the saved that He is just (fair) and true (reliable, trustworthy). And they rejoice that one day even the hostile nations will acknowledge that fact.

Why does John speak about “the nations” (Greek: *ta ethnē*) at all in Revelation 21:24-26 and other places? One reason may be that the Greek word for nations (*ta ethnē*) is the same word often translated “Gentiles” in the New Testament (Rev 11:2, KJV, NKJV, NIV, NET, cf. Matt 4:15; Mark 10:33; Luke 2:32; Acts 4:27; Rom 1:13, etc.). The term “nations”, therefore, often had a negative connotation among the Jews, and also Jewish Christians. The churches of Revelation were mostly made up of Gentiles (cf. Rev 2:9; 3:9). Gentiles were excluded from the temple in Jerusalem because they were Gentiles. But because of Jesus Christ, Gentiles were included in the church and are assured in Revelation that they will also be included in the New Jerusalem that God has reserved for all the “saints”, both Jew and Gentile. So, the use of “nations” would have sent a strong message to Gentile believers in the churches of Asia Minor.

For me, Revelation 15:3-4 is best understood through a Seventh-day Adventist approach to Revelation 20. At the close of the Millennium, the unsaved are raised from the dead in one final demonstration of the intransigence of sin. All are brought into a full knowledge of the cosmic conflict and of their own part in it. All, including Satan, come to see that God is righteous and trustworthy and offer a public acknowledgment of that conviction. This is the fulfillment of the promise, “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance” (Isa 45:23 ESV, cf. Phil 2:9-11). This moment is described by Ellen White in *The Great Controversy*, 670: “Satan sees that his voluntary rebellion has unfitted him for heaven. He has trained his powers to war against God; the purity peace, and harmony of heaven would be to him supreme torture. His accusations against the mercy and justice of God are now silenced. The reproach which he has endeavored to cast upon Jehovah rests wholly upon himself. And now Satan bows down and confesses the justice of his sentence (quotes Rev 15:4).” But these are not heartfelt confessions and repentance. The characters of Satan and the unsaved remain unchanged. When the moment of full self-awareness passes, the spirit of rebellion once more bursts forth and this rebellion is brought to an end in the “lake of fire”. Does this view go beyond what John actually says in the book of Revelation? It seems so. But I believe the above position best explains the evidence of Scripture.

In this perspective, God desires earnestly that all be saved (2 Pet 3:9). He woos and He waits so that as many as possible might have the chance to come to repentance and so be

saved. But when all (including the lost) are satisfied that God has done all He can to change minds, and yet many are hardened in their opposition and rebellion, the cosmic conflict can be brought to a conclusion. God puts the unrepentant to sleep in a way that has no waking up. On how that likely happens, see comments on Rev 20:9. On that day, God will weep for all that He has lost and so will the saved. But for both saved and unsaved it will be the best possible outcome under the circumstances.

Although I do not understand exactly where N. T. Wright ends up after the following analysis, I think his reflections on human hardening in sin are helpful here: "When human beings give their heartfelt allegiance to and worship that which is not God, they progressively cease to reflect the image of God. One of the primary laws of human life is that you become like what you worship. . . . Those who worship money increasingly define themselves in terms of it and increasingly treat other people as creditors, debtors, partners, or customers rather than as human beings. Those who worship sex define themselves in terms of it . . . and increasingly treat other people as actual or potential sexual objects. Those who worship power define themselves in terms of it and treat other people as either collaborators, competitors, or pawns. These and many other forms of idolatry combine in a thousand ways, all of them damaging to the image-bearing quality of the people concerned and of those whose lives they touch (*Surprised by Hope*, 182)." Such hardened individuals would be miserable in eternity and would endanger the peace and tranquility of God's kingdom. It is in mercy to them and to those they would impact in eternity that they are "put to sleep".

In the end there are three options. 1) A traditional view that those who refuse to turn from idolatry are held forever in conscious torment. 2) It's opposite is the universalist view that God will in the end find a way to save all. 3) The conditionalist view is a middle way between the two extremes, in my view. I find the traditional view is abhorrent in painting a false picture of the character of God, going against Scripture's abundant testimony to the goodness of God. The universalist view, for me, has to ignore or explain away so many Scripture texts that talk about judgment, conditional salvation, and the ultimate consequences of wrong choices. The middle path, it seems to me, respects both sovereignty of God and the freedom of His creatures. I have difficulty getting my head around the idea of people having to deny who they have become in order to fit into a universe they never wanted. I prefer that a God who loves me would allow me to determine my own future and would accept the consequences of that choice. I find it hard to imagine that, given genuine freedom and plenty of time, everyone would end up choosing the same thing. But that's just me, John has left us free to make up our own minds. For me, it makes the most sense that the nations entering into the city in Revelation 21:24-26 are the nations "of the saved", as the King James Version interprets it. While that reading is likely not original, it best reflects what I think John had in mind as he wrote that passage.

**Rev 21:27-- " Absolutely nothing that defiles will enter into her, neither anyone who practices sacrilege or deceit. Only those (will enter) whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. "** This is the second of three exclusions texts in this part of Revelation (Rev 21:8, 27; 22:15). See Rev 21:8 (Excursus on Exclusion from the New Jerusalem) for the larger picture. Of

the three this is the exclusion text that has the least in common with the other two, sharing the concept of sacrilege or abomination (Greek: *bdelugma*) with 21:8 and the concept of lying (Greek: *pseudos*) with the other two. There are a number of features of this text that are unique. First of all, there is the emphatic negation (“absolutely nothing”-- Greek: *ou mē*) at the beginning of the verse. “‘Absolutely nothing’ that defiles will enter into her.” This emphatic negation occurs only one other time in Revelation 21, the gates of the New Jerusalem will “never ever” be shut (Rev 21:25). So, in the vision the city has gates that will “never ever” (Greek: *ou mē*) be shut, yet “anyone or anything” that defiles, lies, or does abomination will absolutely not (Greek: *ou mē*) enter the city. The “into her” (Greek: *eis auton*) is also unique within the exclusion texts, but is in direct contrast with the “into her” (Greek: *eis auton*) at the end of 21:26 (and also 21:24). So the excluded ones who can “never ever” enter the city are in direct contrast with “the nations” (in 21:24, 26) who can enter it. This is further evidence that the nations of 21:24, 26 are the nations “of the saved” rather than the hostile nations of 20:9.

A third unique feature of this particular exclusion text is the word “enter into” (Greek: *eiselthē*). The typical usage of Greek includes the preposition (Greek: *eis*) in the verb, then repeats it in the following: *eiselthē eis auton* (“enter into her”). While “enter her” is not mentioned in the exclusion text of 22:15, “enter into the city” (Greek: *eiselthōsin eis tēn polin*) is found in 22:14. In 22:14, the criterion for those entering the city is to “wash their robes”, here it is to have one’s name written in the Book of Life of the Lamb. “The nations” and those who wash their robes can enter the open gates of the city. Those outside whose names are not written in the Book of Life are not allowed entry. See Rev 21:24-26 (Excursus on the Identity of The Nations in Revelation) for more on the complexity of the issues related to these concepts. As already noted, mention of names written in the Lamb’s Book of Life is also unique to this particular exclusion text.

This language of entering in and exclusion from entering in the New Jerusalem can be read in a literal sense, but coming at the climax of Revelation, it is more likely a metaphor of salvation. The people of God are often depicted in terms of the Hebrew tabernacle and temple in the New Testament (as in 1 Cor 3:17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:4-10). The language of entering or not being permitted to enter the tabernacle/temple recalls Deuteronomy 23:2-8 (LXX: Deut 23:3-9—*ouk eiseleusetai, eiseleusetai*). Various people groups are depicted there as not being permitted to enter the sanctuary, or, in the case of the Edomites and the Egyptians, they would be permitted to enter only in the third generation. This language also echoes the teaching of Jesus regarding entering the Kingdom of Heaven/God (Greek: *ou mē eiselthēte eis--* Matt 5:20; 18:3, cf. Matt 7:21; 19:23-24; 23:13; Mark 9:47; Acts 14:22). Taken metaphorically, with the New Jerusalem being the equivalent of the tabernacle/temple, entrance into the eschatological kingdom knows no boundaries based on race, nation, or status (it is, after all, “the nations” that are entering here). Entrance or lack of entrance is based on response to the call of God during the time of probation. According to Aune (*Revelation*, 1174), the Temple Scroll (11QTemple 47:3-5) from Qumran extends the cultic purity of the temple to Jerusalem itself.

Revelation 21:27 also adds a category of sinner that is not found in the other two exclusion texts; the ones not allowed to enter the New Jerusalem practice things that “defile”

(Greek: *koinon*). The Greek word *koinos* has the basic meaning of things that are shared collectively, items of mutual interest. As such it is the same root as the major New Testament word *koinonia*, which means fellowship or close relations. It can also mean that which is of little value because it is “common”. None of these meanings make sense in this context. But there is an extended meaning of “common” in contrast to sacred. *Koinos* in the New Testament is most frequently used, therefore, for “ceremonially impure” or “ritually unclean” (Mark 7:2-5; Rom 14:14). As such, it is associated with idolatry in Ezekiel (14:6-11; 20:7; 22:3-4; 23:7, etc.). The term is used for the animals in Peter’s vision of the great sheet (Acts 10:10-14, cf. 10:28; 11:8). In Hebrews 10:29 the term is further extended in association with those who reject the gospel. Legal and ceremonial defilement had spiritual significance in the New Testament (2 Cor 6:16-7:1; Rev 18:2-4). The latter meaning seems the most relevant to the usages in Revelation 21:27.

A parallel word for “unclean” is the Greek word *akathartos*. It is used in Revelation 17:4 for the “unclean acts” (Greek: *akatharta*) of prostitute Babylon. Prominent among the excluded ones of 21:27 are those who colluded with end-time Babylon. Isaiah 52:1 predicts a time when Jerusalem will become “the holy city” (LXX: *polis hē hagia*) and nothing unclean (LXX: *akathartos*) will enter there. Revelation 21:27 builds on a long tradition in ancient Israel and early Judaism. The Jews were careful to exclude unclean things and persons from the precincts of the sanctuary. Since Gentiles were often considered “common” or “unclean” (Acts 10:28) in the Jewish world, the use of this word offers a striking contrast with the nations (Gentiles) who are permitted to enter the city. What will not enter the city is anything or anyone that might rekindle the kind of rebellion that caused the cosmic conflict in the first place. Regarding the role of the Book of Life in this verse see Rev 21:24-26 (Excursus on The Identity of the Nations in Revelation). Those in the city have been “recorded for life” (cf. Isa 4:3, ESV).

### **Rev 21 (Spiritual Lessons)—**

1- The New Jerusalem visions fulfill the promise that the overcomers would live eternally in God's presence (Rev 3:12, 21, cf. 21: 3, 7, 11, 22, and 23; 22:3-4). This encourages the readers of the book to practice the presence of God in preparation for that time.

2- While God is eternal, suffering and sorrow are not eternal (Revelation 21:4).

3- The future that is promised in these visions is certain and secure (Rev 21:5).

4- While readers are unable to grasp this future in full detail, the description is spectacular and overwhelmingly glorious (Rev 21:11-21).

5- There is no cost to this future, it is completely free to all who receive it (Rev 21:6, cf. 22:17).

6- While entrance to the city is free, there are things one can do that will result in exclusion (Rev 21:8, 21:27, and 22:15).

7- Salvation is to some degree universal and available to every nation (Revelation 21:24-26, cf. 22:2).

**Rev 21 (Conclusion)—** Chapter 21 falls into two main parts (Rev 21:1-8, 9-27), both highlighting the New Jerusalem in the process of descending from heaven to earth (Rev 21:2, 9-10). As we have seen, the standpoint of both parts of Revelation 21 is before the destruction of sin and

sinner in Revelation 20, but there are many elements in the chapter that seem to reflect a later time. The first part (21:1-8) announces the new heaven and the new earth. The second part (21:9-27) contains a more detailed description of the New Jerusalem itself. But the second part doesn't end with 21:27. The detailed vision of the New Jerusalem continues through Revelation 22:5. 21:9-27 views the city as if John were approaching from outside. In 22:1-5 John is viewing details inside the city.