

THE NEW JERUSALEM

There are those who look down upon the allegorizing of scripture, as if it takes a lower view of scripture, and gives less credence to its inspiration. Such persons often use such sayings as “*God says what He means, and means what He says,*” to promote a literal view, as if a literal reading is the highest truth.

It must be said that there are parts of the scripture that are indeed literal, and parts that are allegorical, parabolical, symbolic and so forth. It is a strange irony that so many of Christ’s parables are taken literally, while literal statements of Paul and others (especially with regards to the salvation of all men) are then explained away as figures of speech, often by those very persons who hold a literal interpretation in such high regard. Perhaps strangest of all, is that the highly metaphorical book of Revelation has given rise to so many literal interpretations, so that we await hailstones from heaven, marks on the forehead and hand, and a golden city coming out of the sky. It is this last symbol, the New Jerusalem, that I wish to examine in this writing, taking the various elements of the narrative and comparing literal and allegorical interpretations.

WHY SYMBOLS?

It is important to note some of the reasons symbols are used in the first place. Firstly, they can often give a perspective on a subject that a drawn out, detailed explanation cannot. For instance, when we hear about the Word being a seed, and see all of the parabolic symbols relating to harvest, it gives us a distinct insight into the process of God’s plan in Christ.

Perhaps more importantly, symbols are used to instruct us about spiritual realities that we cannot yet comprehend fully. There are things “not lawful to utter” about the realm of Spirit, and natural man typically assumes heavenly things to be much like earthly things, except with a sweet, saintly glow. But we are dealing with a higher plane of reality that might well differ more from this earthly experience, than this earthly experience itself differs from babies yet in the darkness of the womb. Even John said:

Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. (1 John 3:2)

And Paul also bears witness to this:

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. (1 Corinthian 13:12)

So then, it is important to acknowledge that, even though we have the Spirit, which searches the deep things of God, and we are being gradually led into all truth, there are mysteries still beyond our full grasp, and symbols are an appropriate way of communicating truths about these things. For this reason, it is also dangerous to adhere strictly to literalism in clearly symbolic passages, as we may find ourselves looking at “heavenly realities” that do not differ much from those of the earth. This also means that

there may be a heavenly fulfillment of a “city” even above those outlined in this writing that we cannot fully comprehend at present either. So then, it is important to be aware of the massive discrepancy in our understanding of this visible, temporal realm, compared to the eternal, invisible realm of spirit.

With all of the above in mind, let us examine the passage pertaining to the heavenly city of God, the New Jerusalem.

NEW JERUSALEM – THE BRIDE OF THE LAMB

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. (Revelation 21:1-2)

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”
¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. (Revelation 21:9-10)

In this introduction of the New Jerusalem, we immediately see a problem with the literal interpretation of the city – namely, that the city is described as the bride and wife of the lamb, Jesus Christ. Needless to say, the bride of Christ is not a literal brick-and-mortar city, but the *ekklesia*, the church. Ephesians 5 deals with this truth extensively, starting with verses 22 and 23:

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. (Ephesians 5:22-23)

In Revelation itself we also have the bride referenced in other places, such as chapter 19 where she makes herself ready:

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. (Revelation 19:7)

...and in chapter 22, where she says “come!” together with the Spirit:

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life. (Revelation 22:7)

Can a literal city make itself ready for anything? Can a literal city say “come”? No, we are rather dealing with a symbol for the true bride of Christ:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, ²⁶ that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot

or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:25-27)

On a more minor note, the city comes down from heaven. Now then, heaven is not geographically located somewhere in our atmosphere, so that a city could be lowered from it, but is rather the realm of spirit, and is described as above us owing to being on a higher plane of reality. So a city would not literally be lowered down out of heaven.

THE GATES AND FOUNDATIONS

It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹² It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. ¹³ There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. ¹⁴ The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (Revelation 21:11-14)

As we continue, we find that the city shines with the glory of God. Is God going to have a literal city shine with His glory, perhaps in the manner that His *shekinah* glory hovered over the Ark of the Covenant? No, but His glory is seen upon His people:

**“Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.**

**² See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the LORD rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.**

**³ Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (Isaiah 60:1-3)**

Beginning with the description of the gates, we also start to see the association of the number twelve with the holy city, which number is clearly understood to symbolize the people of God, from the twelve sons of Jacob, to the twelve tribes they became, to the twelve apostles of Christ. These apostles are described as being written upon the foundation of the city. Again, this is in no way literal, as we see in a different place:

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Revelation 21:19-22)

Not only does this passage from Ephesians show the true meaning of the foundation, with the apostles and prophets upon Christ Himself being the cornerstone

and ultimate foundation, but also the true meaning of the city of God, which is we ourselves as a dwelling place for God in the Spirit!

THE PRECIOUS STONES, GOLDEN STREETS, AND TEMPLE

The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones: the first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald,²⁰ the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst.²¹ The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass. (Revelation 21:19-21)

With a literal interpretation, this city wall's foundations were somehow adorned with literal, earthly gemstones before being lowered out of heaven, and we shall walk upon literal, golden streets. But what does Paul say to Corinth about precious stones and foundations?

But let each one take heed how he builds on it.¹¹ For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.¹² Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,¹³ each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.¹⁴ If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward.¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.¹⁶ Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?¹⁷ If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are. (1 Corinthians 3:10-17)

Here we see that the foundation that is built on is Christ Himself, and that He can metaphorically be built upon with precious stones, among other worthy and unworthy things. Does anyone take this passage from 1 Corinthians literally? Is anyone expecting to literally build on Christ with gold, silver, rubies, wood, hay or straw? But rather we see that the New Jerusalem is the people of God who have built with precious things upon that precious foundation. Lest there be any doubt, this passage again directly states that the saints *are* the temple of God!

When we come to gold in scripture, it is used as a symbol of the divine nature of God. So these golden streets are not going to be literal heavenly boulevards, but rather a symbol for walking in the divine nature.

We move on to see that there is no temple in the city, because God and His Christ are the temple.

But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.²³ The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it,^[1] for the glory^[k] of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. (Revelation 21:22-27)

If this is a literal, we must ask ourselves how God and the Lamb can be a literal temple? If the city is literal, then the temple is literal, but how can this be so? But rather we have previously seen further above that *we are* the temple of God, so one might say that this entire picture and metaphor of the temple is that of God indwelling His people through Christ.

Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, ⁵ you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4-5)

So then, this temple is no more literal than the saints each being a literal living stone in a literal house.

THE THRONE, THE RIVER, AND THE TREE

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. ² In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. ³ And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. ⁴ They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. ⁵ There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:1-5)

At the beginning of chapter twenty-two we have the above passage, which concerns a river coming from the throne of God, and the tree of life “on either side” of this river. First of all, let us deal with the river, which is said to be the water of life. This should immediately put us in mind of Christ’s words to the Samaritan woman at the well:

Jesus answered and said to her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.”¹¹

The woman said to Him, “Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? ¹² Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?”

¹³ Jesus answered and said to her, “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.” (John 4:10-14)

So we see that this water of life is indeed metaphorical for the Life of God, and just like the Samaritan woman, who wondered how Jesus would draw this “water” from the literal well, Christians have been wondering at the same water flowing from the throne in this New Jerusalem, adhering to the letter of the word and missing the spirit thereof.

And what of the throne? I would add that, just as all of these other elements of New Jerusalem are symbolic, so is the throne.

‘Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the Lord, Or what is the place of My rest? (Acts 7:49)

Does anybody believe that Heaven is one large cosmic seat, that God uses as a throne? Do His feet literally rest upon the earth? Of course not! A throne denotes authority, power and governance. So shall the people of God be completely ruled, empowered and governed by God.

Let me put this another way. What makes a throne – the chair itself, or the person who sits upon it? Is it not the person who sits upon it? If I sit upon a chair in my house, it does not make it a royal throne. Whereas a king could designate a bar stool as a throne, should he choose. So we see that *even literal thrones are symbols, rather than being endued with any intrinsic value or power of their own!*

And now, in verse two, we come to the tree:

In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Again we see the number twelve, with its connection to the people of God. We also encounter something difficult for literalists – a tree that is in the middle of the street, but on either side of the river! How could such a thing be literally? A singular tree on both sides of a river? And in the middle of something, but on either side of something else? Most of all, how can nations be healed by literal leaves? Are we going to see India, Brazil and Canada sending deportations to collect their allotted bushels of healing leaves each month?

I believe this, again, only makes sense metaphorically. The tree that bears fruit is the people of God, the body of Christ, which is the corporate expression of the man Jesus. This man is foreshadowed in the very first Psalm...

**Blessed is the man
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
² But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
³ He shall be like a tree
Planted by the rivers of water,
That brings forth its fruit in its season,
Whose leaf also shall not wither;
And whatever he does shall prosper. (Psalm 1:1-3)**

...even as the blessedness of the New Jerusalem is foreshadowed in the last line of the last Psalm:

Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD! (Psalm 150:6)

This tree of life is in the middle of the street, so it is central to our walk. But the river of life – the Life of God – flows through the tree, as God is the source of all. So the water of life gives life to the tree, and the tree produces fruit and leaves, and the nations are healed thereby. What a picture of blessedness and glory!

Moving on in the passage, we come to the following:

They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. ⁵ There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:4-5)

Now, is there anyone that believes that the name of God shall literally be inscribed on literal foreheads? Surely it must be readily apparent that this is a picture of a people who have the *perfect mind of Christ*. A people who have been conformed to the nature of God, and think His thoughts. It is for this reason that they “need no lamp nor light of the sun,” because they no longer need light (understanding) that comes from man (lamp) or the natural realm (sun) but they have the true light of divine revelation and understanding (The Lord God gives them light).

THE NEW JERUSALEM IN REALITY

So then, let me permit to tell you of a people, a people who walk in the divine nature of God, who have built on the foundation of Jesus Christ and His apostles carefully and preciously, who have become a conduit of healing to the nations, a holy temple to the Lord, and indeed, the very tabernacle of God, as He dwells within them and through them without measure by the Spirit. These people have no glory of their own, but as members of the body of Jesus Christ, share in His glory, and live for His honor. The source of all of this blessedness is the Father, from which all of this life comes, and the water of His presence flows out until it reaches the furthest ends of creation.

This is the New Jerusalem!

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, ²³ to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22-24)

Amen!