

Israel's New Heaven and Earth

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“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” Revelation 21:1

Whatever is not rooted in Israel’s Old Covenant history has no place in New Covenant fulfillment. Jesus put it like this, “Salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22). Eschatology, then, can be properly understood only from this perspective. Subsequently, this also holds true for Israel’s promised “new heaven and earth” (Isaiah 65:17ff; 66:22).

This promise does not refer to the passing of the material planet or the end of the so-called “church age” that supposedly spans 2,000 or more years. It is integrally connected to the passing of the Old Covenant economy.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews referred to this transformation as the shaking of heaven and earth, which signified the removing of the temporal Old Covenant world that was created at Mount Sinai (Hebrews 12:26-27). This passage draws from the Messianic prophecy of Haggai 2:6-7, “For thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts.’” The greater glory of God’s house mentioned by the prophet anticipates the temple or house built by Christ (Hebrews 3:1-6; Ephesians 2:19-22).

The destruction of Jerusalem and the earthly temple in A.D. 70 provides the context for the passing of the old heaven and earth. In this historical setting, the author of the Book of Hebrews declared, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Hebrews 12:22-24). He sums up the new creation in terms of the coming of the kingdom of God in power by writing, “since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28).

Connected to this, Jesus told his disciples, “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near...Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near...So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Luke 21:20-33).

In this article, we will look at five identifying characteristics of the new heaven and earth as the New Covenant creation.

The Promise Made to Israel

First, the promise of a new heaven and earth was made to Israel. Isaiah is known as the prophet of the good news who envisioned Israel’s restoration under the reign of the Messiah. He wrote concerning the coming “new things” and the passing “former things” (Isaiah 42:9). Additionally, Isaiah 43:18-19 states, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing.” Paul clearly draws from Isaiah when he wrote, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Likewise, John’s words reverberate with Isaiah’s prophecy of the new creation, “for the first things have passed away. And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new’”

(Revelation 21:4-5).

The Book of Isaiah closes with Israel's future blessedness in the Messianic "age to come" depicted as a new haven and earth. "For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your descendants and your name remain" (Isa. 66:22).

Significantly, God made this promise to Israel, not to the Gentiles. Only by keeping his promise to Israel, though, could God make the Gentiles to be "partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel" (Ephesians 3:6). Peter drew from his Jewish, Old Covenant background when he wrote, "But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home" (2 Peter 3:13). Notice the broader context of this passage. Scoffers were denying that the old heaven and earth (the old order) would pass away since it was still standing when Peter wrote his epistles. But Peter knew that "the end of all things is at hand" (1 Peter 4:7). Also, he understood the imminence of "the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed" (1 Peter 1:9-13). Therefore, he wrote to his *original audience*, encouraging *them* in the first century, "while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish" (2 Peter 3:14). They could not be found in this manner by holding to the "former things" of the Old Covenant creation since these things were ready to pass away (Hebrews 8:13).

The Parousia of Christ

Second, the coming of the new heaven and earth is tied to the presence/arrival (Parousia) of Christ (1 Peter 1:13, 2 Peter 3:13; Luke 17:30ff). Christ's Parousia or revelation causes the old world to flee, never to "be remembered or come to mind" (Isa. 65:17). We find this Old Testament prophecy being fulfilled in the New Testament in the Book of Revelation.

After envisioning the fall of Babylon (Jerusalem, the city where Christ was crucified), John wrote, "Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them" (Revelation 20:11). Notice that John said it fled from before the face of the one on the throne. Both the *throne* and the *face* of Christ have eschatological significance (Matthew 25:31-32). Seeing a person's face denotes the presence or arrival of that person. The Book of Revelation depicts the old heaven and earth's inability to remain in the presence of Christ at his arrival. The "white throne" is a symbol of power and authority, particularly the exercising of judgment. John is not describing the judgment or passing of the material planet, but the passing of the Old Covenant world. In a similar context, Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Matthew 24:35; cf. 5:17-18).

That which God created through Christ and the power of his word—the New Covenant world—is invincible. It cannot be shaken and stands firm and steadfast. By design, Old Covenant Israel's heaven and earth consisted of temporary things. They were shaken and removed in the A.D. 70 Parousia of Christ. In keeping with John's vision, there was found no place for them. God not only promised Israel a new heaven and earth, he promised that "the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind" (Isa. 65:17). To anticipate a literal reformation of the space-time universe at a supposed future coming of Christ on a literal cloud misses the first-century covenantal transformational character of both the Parousia and the new heaven and earth.

Establishing Israel's Name and Seed

Third, the new heaven and earth are identified with Israel in that they would establish the name and seed of Israel. "For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your descendants [seed] and your name remain" (Isa. 66:22). The focus here is not on Israel's physical lineage, "But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called.' That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed." (Romans 9:6-8 NKJV). This passage indicates that the seed promise is fulfilled in Christ, of whom Isaac (the promised son) was a prophetic foreshadow. "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his seed; it does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many; but it says, 'And to your seed,' that is, to one, who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). The seed that is Christ and the new creation in Christ fulfills Isaiah 66:22. "And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs

according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29).

Furthermore, Israel’s name is forever sealed in Christ. The prophet said it would be “a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give” (Isa. 62:2). It is unfortunate that the majority of Christianity has considered itself to be non-Jewish and in many cases even anti-Jewish. This includes dispensational premillennialism which claims an affinity for Jews while looking forward to two-thirds of all Jews being killed in a catastrophic end-time scenario. This is foreign to everything God promised Israel. Christ was Old Covenant Israel’s Messiah. He was their future, and the destiny of all Israel was sealed in him. The faith of Christ and his name stand for the new name of Israel that forever will remain in the new heaven and earth. Perhaps Christian theologians have forgotten that the roots of the gospel of Christ are deeply planted in Israel’s promises. We need not look for another creation of some sort that is “more deeply rooted” in Old Covenant Israel wherein Israel’s name and seed will be preserved because this approach does not exclude Israel; it forever includes Israel.

The New Jerusalem

Fourth, the new heaven and earth provide the framework for the New Jerusalem. This can be seen in Abraham’s vision for Israel’s future. He looked for a heavenly country and city that was nothing less than the New Covenant creation (Hebrews 11:9-16). The promise of God united the land and city. “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress” (Isa. 65:17-19). This promise transcends physical geography as illustrated in Paul’s writings.

Paul’s allegory in Galatians 4:22-26 portrays the integral connection between the New Covenant and the New Jerusalem. In this metaphor, Sarah (the free woman) typifies both the New Covenant and the New Jerusalem. We, then, cannot split the prophecy of Isaiah 65:17-19 into two different, widely separated frameworks of fulfillment.

Paul’s metaphor would make no sense if God were to create the New Jerusalem through the passing of the Old Covenant and several millennia later create the new heaven and earth through the passing of the physical planet. Moreover, to have the full arrival of the New Covenant come thousands of years prior to the completion of the New Jerusalem pulls Paul and Isaiah out of their contextual expectations.

Finally, modern-day theology sees the city, country, and covenant widely separated in time, manner, and nature of fulfillment. However, John in Revelation 21-22 sees them all fully coming at the *same time* and in the *same manner*.

The Basic Design

Fifth, the basic design of the new heaven and earth identifies it with Israel’s new creation in Christ. Peter, commenting on its distinctive purpose, wrote, “in accordance with his promise, we [Peter and his contemporaries] wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Peter 3:13). This sheds considerable light on the world that was incapable of producing righteousness in contrast to the one that fulfills righteousness.

As Paul wrote, “For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law” (Galatians 3:21). The Law and the land of Canaan combined in forming the distinctive marks of *exclusivity* concerning Old Covenant Israel’s world. However Paul contrasted this to the fulfillment of the *inclusive* Abrahamic promise when he wrote, “For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise” (Gal. 3:18).

These passages demonstrate that the world of Old Covenant Israel could not produce “life and righteousness.” The promise that God made to Abraham extended beyond the Mount Sinai creation. Hence, Peter said, “in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Peter 3:13).

We now have some important clues to work with in identifying the New World spoken of by the prophets and apostles. First, it is a world promised to Abraham. Second, Israel's physical land and Old Covenantal world could not fulfill this promise. What, then, follows the Canaan world? What is capable of "bringing in everlasting righteousness" (Daniel 9:24), thereby fulfilling God's promise to Abraham? Paul wrote, "For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith" (Romans 4:13). The phrase, "the righteousness of faith," is not a *clue*; it is the *answer* itself. It points out the world that was promised that fulfills the righteousness of God.

We see in Galatians 3, for example, that the gospel (the New Covenant creation in Christ) is synonymous with the "righteousness of faith." The controversy in apostolic time between the Law and the Gospel was a dispute between two worlds. The question to be decided was: *Which world fulfills the hope of righteousness?*

The issue was finally determined by what happened in the destruction of Jerusalem. Yet many today do not understand the timing or the nature of the *transformation of the worlds*. We see this in the sheer number of writers who believe that Peter and John were writing about a new physical heaven and earth that are yet to come sometime in our future. Somewhere along the way, these advocates have departed from the Old Testament when interpreting the New Testament. Both Old and New Testament scriptures are abandoned when the passing of planet earth is made the prerequisite for the full arrival of the new heaven and earth. Many go this route because they read the futuristic dimension of fulfillment that is clearly found in New Testament passages.

The Eschatological Future

Peter wrote long after Pentecost, "We look for a new heavens and a new earth." Peter looked forward to the new heaven and earth. However, projecting *Peter's* future into *our* future distorts the sense of imminence felt by Peter who wrote, "The end of all things is at hand" (1Peter 4:7).

Perhaps a few interpreters would deny the fulfillment of righteousness in the New Covenant creation, yet long after Pentecost, Paul wrote, "For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness" (Galatians 5:5). Obviously, this eager anticipation felt by Paul and his contemporaries looked forward to a consummated future with respect to the "hope of righteousness by faith." This "not yet" dimension of the promise was linked to the coming A.D. 70 world-changing events, not to something more than twenty centuries in the future. When Paul wrote Romans, the consummation of all things was still in the future. This does not mean, though, that it is in our future.

We find a similar futuristic aspect in Revelation 21:1. The new heaven and earth that would be the fulfillment of Romans 4:13 (the promise to Abraham that he should be the heir of the world through the righteousness of faith) is not beyond the period of time culminating in 70 A.D. Nevertheless, like Peter and Paul, John was assured by the angel that the things he saw were "at hand" and would "shortly come to pass" (Rev 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10, 20).

We see the "not yet" of the Abrahamic promise in Hebrews 10:36 where (in view of the "soon" coming of Christ), the writer exhorted his readers to remain bold. "For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised." The promise in Hebrews is the Abrahamic promise (chapter 6) concerning the New Covenant blessings (chapter 8), which include the heavenly country and city (chapter 11) that are consummated in the passing of the old Mount Sinai creation (chapter 12). The time was so near for the fulfillment of these events that the original readers could "see the day approaching" (10:25).

Peter addressed this same promise in 2Peter 3:13. In this context, the passing of the Old Covenant creation was being denied by the "last days" scoffers. Peter's statement, "We look for a new heavens and earth" points to the "not yet" that would occur in Peter's future, namely in the A.D. 70 consummation of the age. This is the eschatological focus of verse 14, "Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish." It also connects with "receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls" found in 1Peter 1:9. Moreover, as in Hebrews, Peter exhorts

his readers to “gird up the loins of your mind, discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed” (1 Peter 1:13). Peter, like the writer of Hebrews, could sense the proximity of the day. The original readers were “waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God,” and Peter said that “we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Peter 3:12-13). The tone of urgency in both letters denotes that in the first century, “the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers” (1 Peter 4:7).

Paul had the same end (or “not yet”) in view when he wrote that he had counted (and continued to count) all things of the Old Covenant mode of life “loss” in order to “gain Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is through faith in [of] Christ” (Philippians 3:1-9). Paul’s focus was on the world-changing appearing of Christ at the end of the Old Covenant age (Phil. 3:10-21). He was determined to be found in him, which meant to be found in the new creation of the New Covenant that fulfills the “hope of righteousness.” Paul’s need to “continue” to count as loss the things of the Law accents the transitional character of his time. He was in an “already but not yet” situation with respect to attaining the new, heavenly world of resurrection life and righteousness (3:11-12).

Those who see the attaining of the New Covenant World following a prolonged church age instead at the conclusion of the Old Covenant age miss the “mark” toward which Paul was pressing. “I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:14). The high calling of God in Christ Jesus is the heavenly calling (Hebrews 3:1) that pertained to the heavenly house built by Christ (Hebrews 6:6) and the heavenly country and Jerusalem of Abraham’s faith—just as Isaiah spoke of. Paul did not consider himself as having had already fully attained, or as being already perfected prior to the passing of the Old Covenant cosmos. “But when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end” (1 Corinthians 13:10). The partial or incomplete that was done away at the arrival of the perfect consisted of the very things that Paul counted loss in order to win Christ (Phil. 3:3-7).

Summary

The new world wherein righteousness dwells stands in apposition to the world of the Old Covenant. Israel, therefore, is the root of the new heaven and earth and of their New Covenant, whereby the promises of God to Israel’s father Abraham were fulfilled (Romans 15:8). These were Israel’s “spiritual things” of which the Gentiles were made partakers.