

God's Final Temple: New Jerusalem

Introduction

God created the universe and humankind as his temple; God and man were destined to be 'at ease' with each other. This paradisiacal situation changed after mankind went its own way, but through the liturgy of sacrifices, God could still be approached. God provided the ultimate sacrificial Lamb, Jesus Christ, who in himself reconciled God and man. He became the perfect Temple where we can meet with God.



The church, and all those in the church, are also temples of God, because what Jesus Christ is, they are. In the church, that is, in the community of Christians, God can be found. But this is not perfect yet. We still live in the time between the disobedience of mankind, and the restoration of our world to its God-intended status of perfection.

The church and its people belong to that perfect future of God, as we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation', St Paul affirms.¹

Paradise restored: Revelation 21:1-5

21 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. **2** And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. **4** He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

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

The apostle John receives a magnificent vision from God of the Christian hope; one day, God will make all things new. A few important things to note from the passage above.

First, the Christian hope is that one day, heaven and earth will be united fully again, as it was in the beginning. This is not because the earth will be destroyed but because heaven will 'overwhelm' the earth by coming



¹ 2 Corinthians 5:17

‘down’. ‘Throughout the entire Bible, the ultimate destiny of God’s people is an earthly destiny. [It] always places man on a redeemed earth, not in a heavenly realm removed from earthly existence’, according to George Eldon Ladd.²

The idea of a ‘heavenly Jerusalem’ was, by the way, not ‘invented’ by John. He used language that was rather common in Judaism in his days. In the book 2 Baruch (1-2 century AD?) for instance, we read that God made the heavenly Jerusalem before he made Paradise, that Adam saw it before he sinned, that it was shown in a vision to Abraham, that Moses saw it on Mt Sinai, and that it is now present with God.³

The New Jerusalem will come down from God, ‘prepared as a bride adorned for her husband’. Israel, and later the Church, are described in the Bible as the ‘bride’ of God and Christ. The New Jerusalem and the people of God are very intimately connected.



“The heavenly Jerusalem is the multitude of saints who will come with the Lord, even as Zechariah said: ‘Behold, my Lord God will come, and all his saints with him’”, according to Apringius of Beja (6th century).⁴ Martin Kiddle agrees with this view:

It is a city which is a family. The ideal of perfect community, unrealizable on earth because of the curse of sin which vitiated the first creation, is now embodied in the redeemed from all nations.⁵

² George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, 1972, 1987), p. 275.

³ 2 Baruch 4:2-6

⁴ Apringius of Beja, *Tractate on the Apocalypse* 21.2

⁵ Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St John* (London, 1940), pp. 415-416.

The consummation of the Christian hope is supremely social. It is no 'flight of the alone to the Alone' but life in the redeemed community of the people of God. Interestingly, John in Revelation 21:3, says literally, 'the shall be his peoples (plural)'. He changes the quote from the Hebrew Scriptures about Israel being God's people, into a plural. God will be in the midst of all nations.



Thirdly, we see Paradise restored: God dwells with humankind again. they will be his people, and God will be with them as their God.⁶

⁶ 'The New Testament conceives of a heavenly Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God, the true homeland of the saints, and the dwelling place of "the spirits of just men made perfect" (Heb. 12:22; see Gal. 4:26; Phil. 3:20. While this heavenly Jerusalem is represented as the dwelling place of the departed saints, heaven is not their ultimate destiny, but only the temporary abode of the saints between death and the resurrection (Rev. 6:9-11; II Cor. 5:8; Phil 1:23).' George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, 1972, 1987), p. 276.

This community of people and the presence of God is the essential feature of the age to come.

The New Jerusalem is the people of God: Revelation 21:9-16

9 Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” **10** And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, **11** having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. **12** It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— **13** on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. **14** And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.



It seems that we now take a closer look at the New Jerusalem. The view is introduced with words that make explicit that this New Jerusalem is really the Church of God, ‘the bride, the wife of the Lamb’.

Then we learn more about this New Jerusalem, as we read that it ‘has the glory of God’. This is temple language. Just as the words from Rev 21:3, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God”, is also temple language.

The gates have the names of the tribes of Israel written on them, while the apostles are the foundation of the walls. This indicates the unity of the people of God, and underlines that this New Jerusalem really is the people of God, the Church.

The new Jerusalem is a temple: Revelation 21:22-27

22 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. **23** And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. **24** By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, **25** and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. **26** They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. **27** But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

There is no temple in the New Jerusalem, and for that matter, in the New World; a temple is no longer necessary. The Lord God and the Lamb 'is the temple'. If they fill the earth with their presence, mankind has no need for any specific meeting place.

Sun and moon are no longer needed, and lamps are not needed, because God and the Lamb are its light. The glory of God fills the place. The world has become a temple again, as it was in the garden of Eden.



This description of the New Heaven and the New Earth and of the New Jerusalem is metaphorical. The fact that there seem to be nations *outside* the New Jerusalem, means that John's vision shows how the metaphors of the Hebrew Scrip-

tures, about a perfect world with no more war, is finally coming about: The Kingdom of the world has now become the Kingdom of God. Finally, all is well.

Throne of God and the Lamb on this earth: Revelation 22:1-5

22 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb **2** through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. **3** No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. **4** They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. **5** And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Some more temple-details. The river of life is a reference to Ezekiel 47, which is part of the prophet's long description (Ezekiel 40-48) of the expected eschatological New Temple.⁷ This 'river of life' is also an echo of the river mentioned in regard to the Garden of Eden: "A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers."⁸

⁷ Ezekiel 47:1,12 Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar.[...] And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing."

⁸ Genesis 2:10

Then, we read in John's vision of the 'tree of life', also a reference to the Genesis-story. After mankind's disobedience, access to this tree of life was blocked by cherubim:

Then the Lord God said, [...] Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.⁹

In the New Heaven and the New Earth, man has access to the tree of life again, as well as to the waters of life. Most theologians see these as references to the Holy Spirit and to Jesus Christ.

The throne of God and the Lamb is mentioned once again; He himself (they himself? He themselves?) is present and this ensures that there is no longer anything accursed in heaven and on earth. The curse of Genesis 3 has



been reversed; all is well now. Adam and Eve were originally told to 'subdue the earth and have dominion' and they messed up. But in the New Heaven and the New Earth, the servants of God "will reign forever and ever".

And what the saints throughout the centuries have strived for, will become a reality: "They will see [God's face, and his name will be on

⁹ Genesis 3:22-24

their foreheads.” Even the great prophet’s of the people of God, were not able and allowed to see God’s face.¹⁰ We will have that privilege and joy one day.¹¹ This sight of God is what causes the righteous to be forever happy. In the words of St Chrysostom:

There are no words to explain the blessedness which the soul enjoys, the gain which he obtains once his true nature has been restored to him and he is able henceforth to contemplate the Lord.¹²

Before that day

This world will become a temple when heaven joins earth again, as it was in the beginning. But before this moment of the ultimate reconciliation of God with mankind, it is interesting to see how the abode of God is described by John:

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.¹³

John is allowed a view of heaven, and what does he see? First, the throne of God. John proceeds to describe that ‘before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne were as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.’¹⁴ Around the throne, ‘on each side of the throne’ John sees ‘four living creatures [...] each of them with six wings, and day and night they never cease to

¹⁰ Exodus 33:20, 23.

¹¹ Cf 1 Corinthians 3:12; 1 John 3:2

¹² Chrysostom, *Ad Theodorum lapsum*, 1,13

¹³ Revelation 4:1-2

¹⁴ Revelation 4:5-6

say, 'Holy, holy, holy'. These angelic beings remind us of the temple-scene in Isaiah 6, just as the whole description of John is a temple-scene.

The throne of God is like the ark in the holy of holies, and the angels remind us of the cherubim that cover the ark; the seven torches remind us of the candle with seven arms before the holy of holies; the sea of glass is the basin for washing that stood in the temple.¹⁵

John then sees the Lamb, 'standing as if it had been slain'.¹⁶ The Lord Jesus Christ stands there as the reminder of the ultimate sacrifice in the heavenly temple. And just as in the earthly temple incense was sacrificed continually, we read of 'golden bowls full of incense' before the throne of God.¹⁷ We also read of an altar, possibly referring to the same altar for the incense in the temple.¹⁸



So when John had his vision of the heavenly abode of God, it was clear for him; he saw heaven as a temple. Given the fact that Moses was told to construct the tabernacle and its service 'exactly according to the pattern that was shown to [him] on the mountain' where God revealed himself and his laws to Moses.¹⁹

¹⁵ Exodus 30:18

¹⁶ Revelation 5:6

¹⁷ Revelation 5:8

¹⁸ Revelation 6:9

¹⁹ Hebrews 8:5, Exodus 25:40

What Jesus did

The letter to the Hebrews explains how the earthly liturgy of the Temple was just a dim reflection of the real heavenly temple.

11 When Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) **12** he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. **13** For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, **14** how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

15 Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. **16** For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. **17** For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. **18** Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. **19** For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, **20** saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you." **21** And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. **22** Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. **23** Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. **24** For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. **25** Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, **26** for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the

foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.²⁰

The death of Christ was a sacrifice to God; he secured our eternal redemption by coming with his blood before the throne of God in the heavenly holy of holies. In the heavenly temple, the reconciliation between God and man has been eternally secured, once and for all.

It is *this* heavenly temple that descends to earth as the New Jerusalem. Just as presently, heaven can be called a temple, one day the whole earth will be God's temple. But then, we no longer need all the metaphors, all the efforts to explain, all images to indicate. Then the earth no longer needs a temple, because humankind will be able to see God face to face.

Conclusions

We cannot do without metaphors when describing God and his dwelling place. The Hebrew and Christian Holy Scriptures are consistent in using the temple-metaphor for describing God, redemption, and eternity.

Heaven, the abode of God, is like a temple; the temple in Jerusalem was modeled after God's eternal resting place. In heaven we see references to altars, candles, incense, sacrifice, the ark of the covenant, etc.

Eventually, the heavenly temple will descend and fill the earth. We will not build a new earth; the earth will be renewed when the New Jerusalem descends; then heaven and earth will be new.

The perfection of the new earth entails that there is no more evil, and that God is all in all. A temple is no longer needed. There is free access

²⁰ Hebrews 9:11-26

to God for all people. The universe has become a temple again; Paradise has been restored.

This renewal, this reconciliation between God and man is only possible because of the eternal sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who was not only perfectly human, but he also perfectly represented God. That is why he is the perfect expression of the heavenly Temple. By looking at him, we know what God is like.

What to do with all this as Christians today? Firstly, we should unashamedly use sacrificial language when speaking of redemption through Jesus Christ. It is the ABC of biblical language.

Also, we can rejoice in the future: What the universe and mankind once were, they will be again: the perfect temple where God rests. And we will be so changed and perfect, that we will be able to 'face God'.

Then, the 'to be or not to be' issue is how we can be sure we will participate in the coming New World. For that, today we need to be part of the New Jerusalem - the people of God - the church.

Question: If the heavenly temple was reflected in the temple in Jerusalem, how should we in the church reflect that heavenly temple? Should we? If so, how?