

THE HOLY CITY

"I John saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."—Revelation 21:2

JOHN'S vision of the Holy City completes a long chain of prophetic testimony concerning the kingdom of God, in which reestablished divine control over the affairs of men is symbolized by a "city". In Hebrews 11:10 the Apostle Paul tells us that Abraham looked for a city "whose builder and maker is God." Throughout the Book of Psalms, as well as elsewhere in the Old Testament, much is said about this city of God. As an inspiration to followers of Jesus, Paul wrote, "Ye are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem."—Heb. 12:22

The Apostle John records in considerable detail what he saw in his vision of this promised city of God. In two of the recorded items we have irrefutable proof that it is a symbolic, not a literal city. One of these is its size. He explained that the "length and the breadth and the height of it are equal." (Rev. 21:16) The measurement, he said, is "twelve thousand furlongs."

Twelve thousand furlongs are said to equal fifteen hundred miles. A city fifteen hundred

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miles square could be located on any one of several of the earth's continents, but when the apostle tells us that the height is equal to the length and breadth, we realize that he is not discussing a literal city. We have no doubt that GOD does not want us to think that the New Jerusalem will be a literal city, which will tower fifteen hundred miles above the earth!

Then there is the angel's identification of this city as "the bride, the Lamb's wife." (Rev. 21:9,10) Obviously the bride of Christ is not a city of literal buildings, with a wall, etc. The bride of Christ is a beautiful picture of the true church, those of whom the apostle wrote, saying, "I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ."—II Cor. 11:2

Another City Mentioned

The Holy City will not be the first "city" to rule over the nations of the earth. Rather, the angel who gave John the vision had previously shown him another city, which also was said to be a woman—not a legitimate bride, however, but a harlot. (Rev. 17:1,2,4,5,18) This woman's name was Babylon, and the angel explained concerning her that she was "that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth."

By almost common consent of students of the Bible, this harlot woman, who also is identified as "that great city," was the apostate church. Her harlotry consisted

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of her illicit union with the kings of earth in the church-state counterfeit of Christ's kingdom—Christendom, whose reign spanned the centuries of the Dark Ages. The true church of Christ throughout the Gospel Age has been a “chaste virgin”, espoused to Christ, and waiting for the return of her Lord that she might be united with him in marriage, and reign with him in the genuine kingdom of promise.

The church which became apostate did not wait for her heavenly Bridegroom. Instead, she fell from her purity, as had been foretold, and joined hands with the kings of the earth. (II Thess. 2:3) Her union with civil governments constituted a counterfeit of Christ's kingdom, and it was this false system of iniquity which the prophecies described as Antichrist, or the Man of Sin. The angel showed John, in vision, this woman described as the great city, also revealing her overthrow and destruction. He described the fall of the city to be like that of a great millstone cast into the sea [the discontented and demanding masses of mankind], and which “shall be found no more at all.” (Rev. 18:21) This is exactly what we see happening before our very eyes! There is a constant and growing demand for the people to have input into what is taught by religion. There is an increasing effort by the common man to bring religion down to the level of everyday life and make it relevant and fitting for the standards of today, rather

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than to be subject to the lofty and faraway dictates of a hierarchy.

It is following these events that the “marriage of the Lamb” is depicted, and the bride, the Lamb’s wife, is then shown to constitute another city which yet will rule over the nations of the earth. (Rev. 19:7; 21:9,24) It seems evident, therefore, that just as the great city is the false kingdom of God, so the Holy City which takes its place is the true kingdom of God. It will be the medium through which genuine divine control over the affairs of men will operate.

The New Jerusalem

One of the Old Testament prophecies of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, is that of Isaiah 65:17-19. In this promise, the typical use of the idea of a city is combined with that of the “heavens” and “earth”. God promised to create “new heavens and a new earth,” and then added, “but be ye glad and rejoice forever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy.” It is obvious from these words that Jerusalem and the new heavens and new earth are symbols of one and the same thing, which GOD here promised to create.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that they are merely illustrative. We know of the many symbols which are used to depict the church while still on earth and in the flesh: wheat, sheep, branches, stones, virgins,

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servants, ambassadors, etc. It seems strange, therefore, that the many pictures used by God to illustrate the glory of the church when united with Christ and reigning with him, should be misunderstood by anyone to be literal, as though there is to literally be a city, or to literally be a new heaven or a new earth.

When we realize that these terms were used by God merely to convey certain concepts to our minds relative to the great glory of the Christ, and the manner in which the kingdom of God will function in the earth, then we can understand why they are often combined to give us a more comprehensive understanding of all that is implied. No single illustration can possibly convey the complete truth concerning God's program for blessing all the families of the earth.

The ancient city of Jerusalem was the governmental center of Israel. It was from Mt. Zion in Jerusalem that God ruled his people through the king whose palace was positioned atop that mountain. To the Israelites this particular city conveyed the same idea as today is associated with Washington, London, or Moscow. When we speak of these cities in connection with world affairs we do not have reference so much to the geographic locations as we do to the authority which emanates from these official centers of government. The lesson of the city symbolism, then, is clear. This picture alone

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does not reveal the whole truth concerning God's kingdom. In Isaiah's prophecy, cited above, as well as in the vision shown to John and recorded in Revelation 21, it is combined with the typical use of the idea of a new heaven and a new earth. (vs. 21) The relationship of the literal heavens to the literal earth as it affects life upon this planet, serves to illustrate important points concerning the operation of Christ's kingdom among men.

All life upon the earth is subject to the influence of the heavens. Without our sun, earth would be devoid of all life. The movements of the heavenly bodies control earth's seasons, climatic conditions, tides, etc. In the symbology of the Bible, God uses this relationship to illustrate the fact that the divine kingdom will consist of two phases: The heavenly and the earthly, the spiritual and the human. Our Lord Jesus and his church, which he chooses during this Gospel Age, will constitute the spiritual phase. The Ancient Worthies chosen during the preceding ages—the Patriarchial and Jewish Ages—the last one of whom was John the Baptist, will be the nucleus of the new earth. (Matt. 11:11; Luke 16:16; Neb. 11:39,40) This nucleus will enlarge as mankind lines up with the laws of the new kingdom, until it embraces the entire human race—all the families of the earth.

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Above All Principalities

In the first chapter of Ephesians, Paul tells about the exaltation of Jesus to a position high above “all principality, and power.” (vs. 19-23) Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott uses the words “every Authority, and Government.” The Apostle also reveals that the hope of the church is to be exalted with Christ, and that by virtue of this divine arrangement for the church we are even now seated with Christ in the “heavenlies.” (Eph. 1:3 and 2:6) As you will note in Ephesians 2:6, the word “places” is in italics, indicating that it was added by the translators to clarify the sense of the verse.

However the word is not found in the Greek text. In Ephesians 6:12 the expression “high places” is a translation of the same Greek word translated “heavenly” in Ephesians 1:3. The Apostle Paul shows that the wicked spiritual rulers of this world who occupy these high places are in opposition to those who are being prepared to be the spiritual rulers with Christ of the world to come.

Psalm 45:16, Matthew 8:11, and Luke 13:28,29, explain the position to be occupied by the Ancient Worthies in God’s kingdom. These, as we have seen, will be the new earth—that is to say, the channel through which the laws emanating from the spiritual Christ will reach and govern the people. We can see why it requires the combined symbolisms of the new heavens and new earth, and the Holy City to convey to our

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minds a more complete idea of the Messianic kingdom arrangement.

There are, of course, many details connected with these very meaningful symbols. The Bible speaks of the sun, the moon, and the stars which make up the heavens, and which pass away, as well as the new heavens. The Bible also speaks of mountains, trees, the sea, etc., as they relate to the earth symbolism. In the symbol of the Holy City, we have its streets of gold, its wall, its gate bedecked with precious jewels. (Rev. 21:10, 17-21) The gates are named after the twelve tribes of Israel, and the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are in the twelve foundations of the wall. All these details have very definite meanings which relate to God's plan of redemption and salvation for a sin-cursed and dying world. The purpose of this article, however, does not call for an examination of their meanings. We are chiefly concerned now with the fact that the Holy City is the channel of blessing for the world of mankind.

John explains that there is no temple in this city; the Almighty God, and the Lamb, are the temple. (Rev. 21:22) This indicates that the church is not the Holy City independent of Jesus, her Bridegroom, but only because she is united with him. It shows that Jesus, as the representative of God is the very center of the city, the real channel through whom God will fulfill his promises to bless all the families of the earth.

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Meeting Place of God and Man

The ancient temple in Israel was the meeting place between God and the people. This new temple arrangement of the Holy City will be the meeting place between God and all of mankind who conform themselves to the laws of the new kingdom. Revelation 21:24 reads, "The nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it; and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honor into it." Let it be remembered that the church of this age becomes the bride of the Lamb, and is part of this city into which the nations come. This shows that there are many who will be saved and blessed who are not of the church, not part of the city. They enter into the city and receive the blessings it provides, but they are not the city.

Revelation 21:24 reads "The nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it." The expression, "of them which are saved," is not found in the oldest manuscripts. The original text reads, "The nations shall walk in the light" of the city. However the added words, "of them which are saved", do not change the meaning materially. Only those who will obey the laws of the kingdom and who will conform their lives to the things "written in the books" can be truly said to walk in the light of that city. The "unbelieving, the idolators," etc., obviously are those who will walk contrary to the light of that city—contrary to the instructions which will emanate from

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the divine Christ through the “princes in all the earth.”—Rev. 21:8; Ps. 45:16

Only those who, by obedience to the divine law, will prove worthy to have their names written in the Lamb’s Book of Life, will have the privilege of entering into this city.

There is not to be universal salvation, but there is to be a universal opportunity for salvation. The light of that Holy City will be so clear that the way into it will be made plain to all—so plain that a “wayfaring man . . . shall not err therein.”(Isa. 35:8) Only the willfully wicked will be barred from the city.

In conjunction with his vision of the new heavens and earth, and the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, John heard a great voice out of heaven saying, ‘The tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.’” (Rev. 21:3) Here we have another beautiful symbol—that of the ancient Tabernacle. To Israel, the Tabernacle was an emblem of God’s presence with their nation, and in John’s vision it was announced to him that the coming down from God of the Holy City and the creating of new heavens and a new earth, meant that God’s blessing will be with and upon men. It will not be merely with one nation, but with all men—that is, all people—in fulfillment of his promise to bless all the nations of the earth.

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God Shall Wipe Away All Tears!

When our first parents transgressed God's law, he withdrew his favor from them. They were sentenced to death, and death has reigned in the earth ever since. "In his [Jehovah's] favour is life," the Prophet David declared. (Ps. 30:5) Hence, when through the establishment of the long-promised Messianic kingdom, divine favour is again manifested toward the human race, the final result will be what John described, saying, "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."—Rev. 21:4

The Apostle Paul, describing the reign of Christ, tells us that he must reign until all enemies are destroyed, the last enemy to be destroyed being death. (I Cor. 15:26) It is because the reign of Christ will destroy death that there shall be no more death. Again we are assured that the Holy City is an apt symbol, and yet merely a symbol, of that kingdom. In Isaiah 25:6-8, we have another prophecy of the destruction of death. Here it is declared that God will "swallow up death in victory." This prophecy also reveals that the work of destroying death is the work of the kingdom—the kingdom being typified, in this instance, by a mountain in which GOD makes a feast of fat things. Compare Daniel 2:34-36, 44,45.

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The River of Life

In the 22nd chapter of Revelation we have still another picture of God's kingdom arrangement for the blessing of all the families of the earth. It is that of the "river of life" which flows "out of the throne of God and of the Lamb." Chapters 20, 21, and 22 of Revelation are all descriptive of the work and blessings of the Millennial Age. In these closing chapters of the Bible our Lord brings to focus many lines of prophetic testimony concerning the kingdom which have been previously introduced in other parts of the Sacred Word. These are not descriptive of different things, but are different descriptions of the same things—namely, the blessings of enlightenment, peace, and life which God has promised for all mankind through the redemptive work of Christ Jesus, and the operation of his kingdom.

The combined symbolism of the throne of God and of the Lamb portrays most beautifully and effectively the precious fact that only through the governmental authority of the kingdom—pictured by the throne—and because of the shed blood of the Lamb, can life be made available for the nations. In the study of this meaningful picture we should remember that the church is with Jesus on the throne. This is his promise: "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne."—Rev. 3:21; Phil. 3:14

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This being true, the river of life does not flow for the benefit of the church. This is further clarified by Revelation 22:17 where the church, as the bride of Christ is represented as inviting mankind to come, “and take of the water of life freely.” So far-reaching and all-inclusive is this invitation that those who accept it are privileged to extend it to others, so that all who are thirsting may come, and “Whosoever will” may partake of the refreshing waters of this river.—vs. 1

To make even more definite the assurance of life for the nations pictured by this river, we are told that on either side of it are the trees of life, bearing twelve manner of fruits, and yielding their fruit every month; and then the information that “the leaves of the tree [Greek, ‘wood’ or ‘trees’, plural] were for the healing of the nations.” (vs. 2) Notice that the leaves of the trees are not for the healing of the church, but for the healing of the nations. Could we ask for a clearer definition of God’s promise of life for others as well as the church of this Gospel Age!

The portrayal of life-giving blessings flowing out to the nations as presented to us in this closing chapter of the Bible is the climax of a golden thread of prophecy and promises, which began in Genesis and run throughout the entire Word of God. Man, because of sin, was driven out of his home in the Garden of Eden, with its rivers and trees of beauty and life. Cherubim with flaming swords prevented

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his return to the tree of life.—Gen. 3:24

God promised that the seed, or progeny, of the woman would bruise the serpent's head. (Gen. 3:15) Later this seed is mentioned in the oath-bound covenant with Abraham to bless all the families of the earth. (Gen. 22:18) In the New Testament this promised seed is explained to be the Christ, Head and body. (Gal. 3:8, 16, 27-29) In Hebrews 2:14 the foretold fatal wounding of the serpent's head is revealed to be the destruction or rendering powerless of Satan by Christ. Revelation 20:1,2, shows Satan bound, and the 10th verse declares his complete destruction!

Both chapter 20 and chapter 21 of Revelation reveal, from various standpoints, the blessings of the kingdom in which the seed of promise is the channel of blessing. Finally, in the 22nd chapter, the all-comprehensiveness of the promised blessings coming to the people is portrayed in a manner to assure us that, at last—because of the shed blood of the Lamb, and the exercise of kingdom authority—the flaming swords are to be taken down, the trees of life made available to the nations, and the invitation extended: "Come, . . . take the water of life freely."

Living and Reigning with Christ

Too much importance cannot be attached to the fact that the church, the bride of Christ, the holy city—those who live and reign with him—are shown in all three of these closing

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chapters of Revelation as separate from the people and nations who receive blessings through them as the seed of promise. Thank God this does not mean the closing of the door of opportunity for the nations to receive life during the Millennial Age. Prominently included in the prophecies of Revelation are promises for the world of mankind in general, which assure us of the blessings which later will come to them—to whosoever will.

Verse 12 beautifully describes the work of the kingdom. In it Jesus is quoted as saying, “Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be.” What will be the reward for the works which they then shall do? Verse 14 answers, “Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.”