

ABSTRACT

“Physical Eschatology: On the Nature of ‘the New Heavens and the New Earth’”— For centuries, Christian believers have endured hardships and persecution with the hope of an eschatological transformation of life as we know it. While on this Earth we experience pain, suffering and death, the Bible speaks of a future transformation of physical reality, “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1). However, how should Christians interpret this expression? Is it a physical description of the new universe? Or is it a reference to a change in political, social or spiritual conditions of society as a whole? How does this expression appear in the Old Testament and how is it used by New Testament writers? This article focuses on these questions and points to the intertextual elements between both Testaments while searching for a coherent interpretation of that emblematic expression.

Keywords: physical eschatology, new heaven and new earth, prophecy, Revelation 21, intertextuality

RESUMEN

“Escatología física: Sobre la naturaleza de ‘los nuevos cielos y la nueva tierra’”— Por siglos, los creyentes cristianos han soportado dificultades y persecución con la esperanza de una transformación escatológica de la vida tal como la conocemos. Aunque en este planeta experimentamos dolor, sufrimiento y muerte, la Biblia habla de una futura transformación de la realidad física, “un cielo nuevo y una tierra nueva” (Ap 21:1). Sin embargo, ¿cómo deben los cristianos interpretar esta expresión? ¿Es una descripción física del nuevo universo? ¿O es una referencia a un cambio en las condiciones políticas, sociales o espirituales de la sociedad en su conjunto? ¿Cómo aparece esta expresión en el Antiguo Testamento y cómo es utilizada por los escritores del Nuevo Testamento? Este artículo se enfoca en estas preguntas y apunta a los elementos intertextuales entre ambos testamentos mientras busca una interpretación coherente de esa expresión emblemática.

Palabras clave: escatología física, nuevos cielos y nueva tierra, profecía, Apocalipsis 21, intertextualidad

PHYSICAL ESCHATOLOGY: ON THE NATURE OF “THE NEW HEAVENS AND THE NEW EARTH”

Glauber S. Araújo

Introduction

Apocalyptic literature has been with us for millennia. Every era produced quantities of literary material that reflected humanity’s deepest fears and hopes, feeding the reader’s imagination with predictions of the end of their political/social reality or even the cosmos as a whole.¹ More recently, especially after the Second World War, the invention of nuclear weapons and the space race, apocalyptic obsession dominated popular culture through doomsday literature, movies, television shows and videogames with stories of nuclear warfare, impact events, extraterrestrial attacks, pandemics or divine judgment.

Interestingly enough, in recent years a new discourse adopted the apocalyptic motif and became one of the leading sources of eschatological predictions and scenarios. Whether in academic journals, television shows or book publications, scientists have, for the past decades, become the new prophets of doom. Because of the rise in CO₂ emissions, environmentalists are alarmed by its effects on ocean chemistry, the rise of atmosphere temperature and consequent melting of polar caps, permafrost and glaciers. It also has become increasingly evident that human pollution is threatening the extinction of thousands of animal and plant species, potentially altering the future of our biosphere and biodiversity.²

On a larger scale, astronomers and cosmologists have also tried to set up cosmological projections of our solar system’s and, ultimately, the universe’s future. “Physical eschatology,” as it is often called,

1. For an overview of the history of apocalyptic literature, see Bernard J. McGinn, John J. Collins, and Stephen J. Stein, eds., *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism* (New York: Continuum, 2003); Kelly J. Murphy and Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler, eds., *Apocalypses in Context: Apocalyptic Currents Through History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016); Colin McAllister, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

2. See G. Thomas Farmer, *Modern Climate Change Science: An Overview of Today’s Climate Change Science* (New York: Springer, 2015); Ottmar Edenhofer et. al., *Climate Change 2014 Mitigation of Climate Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

is the study of natural laws and phenomena with the intention of predicting the future of “astrophysical objects, including the universe itself.”³ And from what it seems, the future of our planet may end in blasting heat. According to cosmologist Paul Davies,⁴ in about four or five billion years our sun will start to expand its circumference as it depletes its last reserves of hydrogen fuel, engulfing first Mercury, Venus and then Earth. Alarmed by these possibilities, some have suggested the idea of colonizing other habitable planets in our galaxy while there is still time.⁵

When we go to the Bible, some of its predictions about the future of our planet seem to point to a similar direction. Take 2 Pet 3:10 and 12, for instance: “The heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. . . . The heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat.”⁶ A partial, selective look at Peter’s prophecy may lead to the conclusion that the future holds indeed a bleak prospect. However, a surprising shift of expectations occurs in Peter’s concluding remarks: “Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (v. 13). This turn of events is not particular of Peter’s eschatology, but appears in John’s Apocalypse also: “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (Rev 21:1).

How is this so? Is the world coming to an end or not? A closer look at John’s description of the new heaven and the new earth shows that future reality, rather than arriving at a severe and gloomy ending, bounces into a blissful, eternal, and prosperous eternity. This surprising turn of events raises many questions.

How should we understand the expression “a new heaven and a new earth”? Did Peter and John use it in a literal or symbolic sense? If symbolic, what do they mean? If literal, how will this transforma-

3. Milan M. Cirkovic, “Stranger Things: Multiverse, String Cosmology, Physical Eschatology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Modern Cosmology*, ed. Helge Kragh and Malcolm S. Longair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 486.

4. Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon & Schuster), 200. Cf. John Maddox, “The Future History of the Solar System,” *Nature*, December 15, 1994, 611.

5. Julia Zorthian, “Stephen Hawking Says Humans Have 100 Years to Move to Another Planet,” *Time*, May 4, 2017, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://time.com/4767595/stephen-hawking-100-years-new-planet/>.

6. All Bible citations will be taken from the NKJV.

tion take place? Will our biosphere gradually evolve into a utopian paradise? If so, which factors will contribute in the process and how should we interpret present cosmological projections of the future state of our universe? Are cosmologists missing something? Or should we expect an event completely unprecedented in the history of the cosmos? If so, how should we understand this in light of current scientific understanding of the laws of physics and natural phenomena?

In order to answer these intriguing questions, we must first take a look at the biblical text so to find what was the intent of the authors as they wrote down these words. Were they referring to physical or spiritual realities? Are they pointing to a future spiritual or social renewal? Or should we expect a transformation of matter itself?

This task can only be completed if we analyze the literary context where these expressions are found and how they are used by their writers. NT scholars are unanimous in affirming that John and Peter drank heavily from OT sources while composing their descriptions of the future, more specifically from Isa 65-66.⁷ Therefore, we need first to study the meaning of the expression “new heaven and new earth” in Isaiah in order to understand its usage in the NT.

“New Heavens and New Earth” in Isaiah 65-66

In Isa 65–66, the author reaches the climax of the book’s prophecies by describing God’s new creation: “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Isa 65:17). In this new heavens and new earth, life will be long and prosperous (v. 20-22), animals will live peacefully and will not fear death (v. 25) and the capital of the nation will nurture prosperity once again (66:12-13) and all nations will come to worship the Lord in his temple (v. 23). As Jiří Moskala describes it, Isa 65-66 is “a classical prophecy of the restoration of Israel and speaks about the earth’s situation in Israel after the return of the remnant from the Babylonian exile.”⁸ It is evident that the author of Isaiah expected

7. Allan F. Johnson, “Revelation,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 12:592; David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, WBC 52C (Dallas: Word, 1998), 1116; Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 587.

8. Jiří Moskala, “Does Isaiah 65:17–25 Describe the Eschatological New Heavens and the New Earth?” in *Meeting with God on the Mountains: Essays in Honor of Richard M. Davidson*, ed. Jiří Moskala (Berrien Springs, MI: Seventh-day

these prophecies to find their fulfillment after the exile, when the Jews finally returned to their land. This basic summary can be easily identified when we analyze the structure of the text as a whole. For this, we refer to the helpful structure provided by J. Alec Motyer.⁹

A¹ The Lord's call to those who had not previously sought or known him (65:1).

B¹ The Lord's requital on those who have rebelled and followed cults ([65:]2–7).

C¹ A preserved remnant, his servants, who will inherit his land ([65:]8–10).

D¹ Those who forsake the Lord and follow cults are destined for slaughter because he called and they did not answer but chose what did not please him ([65:]11–12).

E. Joys for the Lord's servants in the new creation. The New Jerusalem and its people ([65:]13–25).

D². Those who have chosen their own way and their improper worship. They are under judgment because the Lord called and they did not answer but chose what did not please him (66:1–4).

C². The glorious future of those who tremble at the Lord's word, the miracle children of Zion, the Lord's servants ([66:]5–14).

B². Judgment on those who follow cults ([66:]15–17).

A². The Lord's call to those who have not previously heard ([66:]18–21).

Conclusion: Jerusalem, pilgrimage centre for the whole world ([66:]22–24).

Interpreting this passage is a difficult task, and we don't presume to end the controversy in this article. Daniel K. Bediako categorizes the different interpretations of this passage into three groups. The first one views this passage as a post-exilic composition, thus reflecting the hopes of its author of a grandiose act of God in the likes of the creation act recorded in Gen 1-2. The second views this text as a

Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2016), 197.

9. J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 522-523.

pre-exilic composition, but having a local and political fulfilment in the restoration of the city of Jerusalem. The geographical and animal descriptions could have had their fulfilment after the exile, but since that did not happen, these promises should be transferred to the spiritual Israel. The third group interprets these texts as apocalyptic in nature, being finally fulfilled during Christ’s second coming.¹⁰

It is our understanding that this passage has a double application. On one side, some instances in the text clearly seem to be alluding to the geographical and political restoration of the Jewish nation, having Jerusalem as its capital. Isa 65:18-20 affirms that God will “create Jerusalem” and “rejoice in Jerusalem.” It describes men living more than a hundred years, while those who die earlier are considered cursed. It also mentions sinners and describes the walk of the victorious while the corpses of the sinners lie rotting on the land (66:24). This hardly matches the eschatological promises of eternal life and absence of sin that Christians have so long awaited (John 3:15; Rom 6:22, 23; Titus 1:2). What Isa 65 seems to be referring to is a return of the Jewish nation to the old prosperous days. It mentions the restoration of the capital (vv. 18-19), habitual cycles of life (procreation, infancy, working, aging, death), the animal kingdom continues to exist (v. 25) and local geographical sites are once again visited (v. 25). Isa 65-66 should be read considering the historical context of suffering, war, death, exploitations and captivity that would follow up.¹¹ For these reasons, some believe that what is being promised here is not a new cosmos with a completely different lithosphere, biodiversity, or reality. The merism “a new heaven and a new earth” should rather be understood as a metaphor for the restoration of the land of Israel and of the Jewish nation—a new social order.¹² Even the awkward reference to “the wolf and the lamb” feeding together, and the lion eating “straw like the ox,” are direct quotations from Isa 11:6-7, part of a chapter which also explicitly mention the restoration of Israel:

10. Daniel K. Bediako, “Isaiah’s ‘New Heavens and New Earth’ (Isa 65:17; 66:22),” *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 11, no. 1 (2008), 2-4.

11. John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, rev. ed. WBC 25 (Nashville: Nelson, 2005), 924-926.

12. Ulrich F. Berges, *The Book of Isaiah: Its Composition and Final Form* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 475-476.

It shall come to pass in that day
That the LORD shall set His hand again the second time
 To recover the remnant of His people who are left,
 From Assyria and Egypt,
 From Pathros and Cush,
 From Elam and Shinar,
 From Hamath and the islands of the sea.

He will set up a banner for the nations,
 And will assemble the outcasts of Israel,
 And gather together the dispersed of Judah
 From the four corners of the earth.
 (vv. 11-12)

But many Bible interpreters are not satisfied with this conclusion, myself included. When we take other aspects into consideration, ambiguities in Isa 65–66 clearly seem to be preparing the people for changes in cosmic proportions. For instance, Isa 65:17 uses the same wording found in Gen 1:1, when God was about to create the world. Scholars find here a reference to “a complete redoing of Gen 1:1 after the destruction of this present sinful world.”¹³ Moskala adds that “God’s intervention on behalf of his people goes beyond [the] Pentateuchal blessings because God’s promise to create a new heavens and new earth is language that was not used in Leviticus or Deuteronomy.”¹⁴ It is as if the restoration of Jerusalem is a miniature of God’s final cosmic intent. In a certain sense, Isaiah is focusing his interest on Israel while having a cosmic transformation looming in the background.

For the Jewish people, these prophecies had a powerful message: The Creator of *heavens* and *earth* has the ability to do something *new*.¹⁵ “That power which was displayed at the original creation is again to be displayed in a new work of creation.”¹⁶ Other aspects that heighten the impact of this cosmological transformation are found in reference to the aging process (Isa 65:20), which reminds the reader of

13. Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40-66*, The NAC 15B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 718.

14. Moskala, “Isaiah 65:17–25,” 198-199.

15. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 655.

16. Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 3, *Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 513.

prediluvian times; Edenic harmony in nature, with no predation, suffering or destruction (v. 25); and the serpent’s movements on the dust, which, despite its nature remaining unaltered, no longer seems to be an enemy of humankind (v. 25; cf. Is 11:8). These aspects lead the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* to propose that, if Israel were to obey and maintain a covenantal relationship with God, then possibly “the resurrection and state of immortality would have been preceded by a period in which adherence to the laws of God and cooperation with the divine program would have largely banished sickness and premature death.”¹⁷ Paulien agrees, adding that God intended to transform human nature, banish hunger and violence, and thus “intervene mightily within history to transform society, human nature, and the natural world.”¹⁸ Unfortunately, that did not happen.

As some have argued, many of the prophecies of the OT have a double application.

The student of the Bible. . . will listen to the prophet speaking to Israel of old and endeavor to understand what his words meant to the people who originally heard them. But he will listen also for the further import the prophet’s words may have for later times, particularly, our time. Indeed, this secondary application is for us today the more significant. But it is only against the background of the original historical context of the message that its meaning and value for us can be established with certainty.¹⁹

Since Israel did not heed the words of the prophets and did not fulfill the purpose set by God during the restoration of the nation, a secondary application of these verses may be in view. However, this secondary application can only be confirmed depending on the use that NT writers made of it.²⁰ For this reason, we now turn to Peter and John in order to understand how they interpreted and used the prophecies of “new heavens and a new earth.”

17. “Infant of days” [Isa 65:20], *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (SDABC), rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1976-1980), 4:333.

18. Jon K. Paulien, “Will there Be Death in the New Earth?” in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, ed. Gerhard Pfandl (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 226. See *ibid.*, 225.

19. SDABC, 4:37–38.

20. “I create” [Isa 65:17], SDABC, 4:332.

“New Heavens and New Earth” in 2 Peter 3:10-11 and Revelation 21–22

In his second epistle, Peter warns his readers against the influence of scoffers who would question the Christian hope of Christ’s second coming. Although these may claim that nature follows a rigid set of laws and hardly suffers any drastic change, Peter reminds them of the days of the flood and how it took the inhabitants of the world by surprise. He then compares it with the eschatological day of the Lord:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of *persons* ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet 3:10-13).

In his message, Peter predicts that, just as the flood broke the natural continuum and took humanity by surprise, so will the final destruction by fire. While the first natural disaster came by water, the last one will come by fire. This will not be foreseen, but, just as a thief, will take everyone by surprise and will destroy everything that is left on this earth. This will not be the end of it, however. Just as unexpectedly, the old promise of new heavens and a new earth will come to fulfillment, allowing the saved to live in eternal prosperity and righteousness.

In 2 Pet 3:10-12, the physical “new heavens and new earth” are preceded by a physical destruction by fire. Likewise, John’s Apocalypse mentions a destruction by fire before the appearance of the new heavens and a new earth:

And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone. . . . The earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. . . . Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away (Rev 20:9–21:1).

In both NT texts, new creation is preceded by fire that destroys, purifies and purges all creation from sin.²¹ When we compare it with Isa 66:15-17, the link between the three texts becomes increasingly evident. Only when “the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4), when death, sin and the devil no longer exist (Rev 20:9, 10), does God create something utterly new (Isa 65:15-17, 22; 2 Pet 3:10-13; Rev 20:9–21:1).

The link here between 2 Peter, Revelation and Isaiah is quite evident. As David Mathewson argues, even the structure of the description made by John is taken from the OT: “Isa. 65.17–18 provides the threefold structural order for Rev. 21.1–2: (1) new heaven and new earth (Isa. 65.17a/Rev. 21.1a); (2) the former things (Isa. 65.17b/Rev. 21.1b); (3) and the city Jerusalem (Isa. 65:18b/Rev. 21.2).”²² What was once a local and political prediction is expanded by John into a universal, all-encompassing statement.²³ For this reason, Moskala sees the “new heavens and a new earth” of Isaiah as a type of the eschatological new creation.²⁴

But what is the nature of this new creation? What is John referring to when he uses the Greek *καινός* to describe this new reality? “By using the word *kainos*, John is probably emphasizing the fact that the new heavens and earth will be created from the purified elements of the old, and thus be new in quality, different. The new heavens and

21. Mark B. Stephens highlights that, when 2 Pet 3:10 and Rev 21:1 are compared, only the text of 2 Peter “is accompanied by explicit references to cosmic dissolution and incineration.” Mark B. Stephens, *Annihilation or Renewal: The Meaning and Function of New Creation in the Book of Revelation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 230n272. While this may be true, we must remember that in both contexts, destruction by fire is mentioned.

22. David Mathewson, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Meaning and Function of the Old Testament in Revelation 21.1–22.5*, LNTS (New York: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 33–34.

23. Moskala, “Isaiah 65:17–25,” 195.

24. “‘New heavens and a new earth’ is an idiomatic, figurative, or hyperbolic expression which means in its context new conditions of life on earth which are described in the verses further in Isa 65:18–25, and points to the restoration of Judah after returning from the Babylonian captivity. It describes the ideal conditions for God’s people in their land of that time expressed in the contemporary language that speaks about longevity (not eternity), prosperity, peace, joy, security, and happiness in family life. Isaiah 65 is a pre-picture or type of the eschatological New Heavens and New Earth! Isaiah 65:17–25 is the *Vorbild* of Revelation 21–22. In Isa 65 we have only a foretaste of the apocalyptic New Heavens and the New Earth, a glimpse of things to come.” Moskala, “Isaiah 65:17–25,” 202.

the new earth are, then, a re-creation, a forming anew of existing elements, and not a creation *ex nihilo*.²⁵ Therefore, John is not describing a total annihilation of the universe, a complete extinction, as it were, nor “a simple improvement.”²⁶ What John sees in vision is a transformation of reality.²⁷ It would seem that the apostle is referring to a reconfiguration of reality, a resurrection of the world from its previous chaotic and dead condition.

The question we should pose at this moment is: Will the “new heavens and earth” have a literal or a spiritual/social fulfillment? In other words, is Peter referring to a physical and cosmological renewal, or is he using this expression as a metaphor for the future changes that will take place within human society, religiously, socially and politically speaking? One way of answering this is looking at the context in which the promise appears. When Peter mentions the new heavens and the new earth, he compares it with the flood. Just as the flood took humanity by surprise, so will this end-time cataclysmic event and the new creation. In other words, if the flood is understood as a literal and global event—which Peter does, if we follow his argument correctly—then the new heaven and the new earth also must be literal.²⁸

Also, NT scholars have found an interesting intertextuality between the last chapters and the first chapters of the Bible.²⁹ In other

25. “New” [Rev 21:1], *SDABC*, 7:889. Stephens notes, however, that continuity between the new and old creation must not be deduced only by the understanding of *καινός*. “Other contextual factors need to be considered in order to accurately assess the semantic force of this adjective.” Stephens, *Annihilation or Renewal*, 228n262.

26. Roberto Badenas, “New Jerusalem—The Holy City,” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 2: Exegetical and General Studies*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 7 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 250.

27. David M. Russell, *The “New Heavens and New Earth”*: Hope for the Creation in Jewish Apocalyptic and the New Testament (Philadelphia: Visionary, 1996), 186-197; William A. Dyrness, *Let the Earth Rejoice: A Biblical Theology of Holistic Mission* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1983), 179; Douglas J. Moo, “Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment,” *JETS* 49, no. 3 (2006): 469.

28. Authors who believe it is a transformation of the universe: Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, NAC 39 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2012), 361-362; G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, HNTC (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 260, 265-266; Pierre Prigent, *L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean*, 2nd ed., CNT (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1988), 324-325; Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 49-50.

29. Laszlo Gallusz, “Radically New Beginning—Radically New End: Cre-

words, Rev 21–22 mirrors Gen 1–3, leading to the conclusion that God’s ultimate goal is to restore the earth back to its original condition.³⁰ This connection between both texts also presents a surprising condition: if the new heavens and new earth of Rev 21 are interpreted as a literal event, caused by the power of God, without any help from natural processes, so should the creation story of Genesis. In the same way, if Gen 1-3 is understood as mythological, metaphorical or symbolic, so should Rev 21-22.³¹ One event preconditions the nature of the other. Thus, new creation is the sister of creation. The processes and time needed to bring about the last should mirror the first. As Ekkehardt Mueller correctly concludes,

If at the end of the Millennium God is able to create a new heaven and a new earth without time spans of millions or billions of years, but brings them about right after the Millennium, why should he not have used similar techniques right in the beginning? We may not be able to understand precisely how he has done that, and there may be conflicting data or interpretations that do not yet fit the great puzzle, but obviously the NT confirms a literal reading of the creation account, a creation week of 24-hour days, and a short chronology.³²

Another interesting parallel between both texts is that although Genesis describes the creation of heavens and earth, its main focus stays within the garden of Eden. Similarly, although Revelation intends to describe the creation of the new heavens and the new earth, its focus remains within the New Jerusalem. This link between the eschatological New Jerusalem and the protological garden of Eden is difficult to miss once we acknowledge the presence of the same motifs in both creations: tree of life (Gen 2:9; Rev 22:2), absence of death (Gen 2:17; Rev 21:4), absence of curse (Gen 3:14; Rev 22:3), God’s continuous and unmediated presence (Gen 3:8; Rev 22:4), and a river

ation and Eschatology in the New Testament,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society (JATS)* 29, no. 1-2 (2018): 23-25.

30. Jürgen Moltmann even refers to eschatology as “the doctrine of the *resstitutio in integrum*, the return to the pristine beginning.” Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 262.

31. Fernando Carnale, “Adventist Theology and Deep Time/Evolutionary Theory: Are They Compatible?” *JATS* 15, no. 2 (2004): 96.

32. Ekkehardt Mueller, “Creation in the New Testament,” *JATS*, 15, no. 1 (2004): 60.

(Gen 2:10; Rev 22:1). Considering all this, it is our understanding that “a new heaven and a new earth” must be interpreted as referring to a cosmological renewal or resurrection.³³

Despite all of these arguments, many still interpret the “new heavens and new earth” as pure symbolism.³⁴

“There was no more sea”

The first thing that catches John’s attention is not the New Jerusalem, but the absence of the sea. Considering the fact that John most likely saw the sea every single day while he was on the island of Patmos, his curiosity is justified. However, the absence of this element so pervasive on our planet is difficult to interpret. Is it literal or symbolic?³⁵ If it is literal, we have not been able to find an explanation for it. This may be why many Bible scholars opt for a symbolic meaning.³⁶ But if the sea is symbolic, consequently “the heavens and the earth would necessarily be symbolic also,”³⁷ including the New Jerusalem. One option, however, does not need to necessarily cancel the other.

We would like to argue here that it may be the case that the absence of the sea serves as a reminder to the redeemed that they will no longer be afflicted by the slavery of sin. A closer look at the structure of the text helps us to understand this question. John used a chiasmic structure while describing God’s new creation, setting “sea is no more” in parallel with “evil and pain are no more,” as we show below:³⁸

33. For scholars who endorse this description of a cosmological resurrection, see Stephens, *Annihilation or Renewal*, 257; Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 48; Duncan Reid, “Setting Aside the Ladder to Heaven: Revelation 21.1-22.5 from the Perspective of the Earth,” in *Readings from the Perspective of the Earth*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 238; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 192.

34. Johnson believes it to be “moral and spiritual.” Johnson, “Revelation,” 592. Cf. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, NCB (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974), 308; Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 259-317.

35. Although Ranko Stefanovic interprets it as literal, he concedes the possibility of it being metaphorical, indicating the absence of sin and forces hostile to the people of God. See Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 587-588.

36. For a bibliographical study on the different symbolic interpretations of the sea motif in Rev 21:1, see Dave Mathewson, “New Exodus as a Background for ‘The Sea Was No More’ in Revelation 21:1C,” *TJ* 24, no. 2 (2003): 243-246.

37. “No more sea” [Rev 21:1], *SDABC*, 7:889.

38. Mathewson, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 33. Cf. Dong-Ook Shin,

- A. New heaven and new earth (1a)
- B. First heaven and earth have passed away (1b)
- C. Sea is no more (1c)
- D. New Jerusalem-bride (2)
- D’ Dwelling of God with humanity (3)
- C’ Evil and pain are no more (4a-c)
- B’ Former things have passed away (4d)
- A’ All things are made new (5a)

Once again, considering the fact that John constantly uses the book of Isaiah in order to describe God’s new creation, it is possible that he is here alluding to Isa 51:10-16, which in turn alludes to the exodus motif. Many similarities appear from the comparison between Isa 51:10-16 and Rev 21:1-6, adding strength to this thesis:

Common elements	Isaiah 51:10-16	Revelation 21:1-6
Sea	v. 10	v. 1
Redeemed	v. 10	v. 3
Holy City	vv. 11, 16	v. 2
End of sorrow	v. 11	v. 4
Heavens and earth	vv. 13, 16	v. 1
Be “My People/Their God”	v. 16	v. 3

When both texts are compared, one notices that in Isaiah the drying of the sea is depicted as the removal of an obstacle and the enabling of the redeemed to gain access to the Holy City. Therefore, in Rev 21, the absence of the sea in the new earth may serve as a perpetual sign reminding the redeemed that never more will there be any barriers between them and the Holy City and all of rewards that come with it.³⁹ As Mathewson explains, “the sea metaphorically represents the entire scope of trouble and afflictions suffered by the people of God by virtue of belonging to the old order of things, which now has

“Das Verständnis der Neuschöpfung in der Johannesapokalypse,” *Korean Journal of Christian Studies* 66 (2009): 91.

39. See David Mathewson, “Isaiah in Revelation,” in *Isaiah in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 202; Mathewson, “New Exodus as a Background,” 243-258.

passed away in John's visionary climax."⁴⁰ Just as the drying of the Red Sea opened the way into the promised land, the absence of a sea indicates the free access that the redeemed will now have to the new earth and the New Jerusalem.⁴¹

Conclusion

Both OT and NT refer to a transformation of the cosmos in the last days. As Peter and John describe the future destruction and transformation of the world, they make use of Isaiah's "new heavens and new earth" metaphor and apply it to an eschatological and apocalyptic setting. Although Isaiah's prophecy of a new creation only found partial fulfillment, 2 Peter and Revelation indicate that its complete fulfillment will take place after the millennium, when God will eradicate sin and death and reestablish earth back to its pristine condition. Far from being a social or spiritual transformation, they believed that this transformation will be physical and literal, when nature will finally be "delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:21) and humanity will once again cherish the presence of God without any barriers.

Does this mean that scientists are wrong in their prediction? Not at all! As we have tried to show in this article, the ushering of the new heavens and new earth will not take place under the influence of any known natural causes. The cosmic transformation which John refers to is caused by someone completely outside of the universe: "Then He who sat on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new'" (Rev 21:5). Therefore, physical eschatology is not incompatible with biblical eschatology. It is

40. Mathewson, "New Exodus as a Background," 246; cf. Mathewson, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 64-67.

41. Hugo Cotro rejects the interpretation that the absence of a sea is an allusion to the exodus: "As in Revelation, the sea ceases to be in the eschaton (*Sib. Or.* 8:236; cf. Rev 21:1). This does not per se imply any inherently sinister quality or allusive connection to Exodus and the Red Sea. Instead it appears to relate rather to the Flood as a divine instrument of de-creation, with death included." Hugo A. Cotro, "Up from Sea and Earth: Revelation 13:1, 11 in Context" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2015), 134-135. As for Jonathan Moo, he believes that for John the end of the sea represents the end of God's judgment on "the destroyers of the earth for all judgment will be past and salvation finally and definitively accomplished." Jonathan Moo, "The Sea That Is No More: Rev 21:1 and the Function of Sea Imagery in the Apocalypse of John," *NovT* 51, no. 2 (2009): 167.

at best *projections* of the future course of events rather than actual descriptions. They tell us with approximate accuracy what would take place were no intelligent agents to intervene. Thus, the findings of physical eschatology are in no way incompatible with Christian eschatology, since those findings involve implicit *ceteris paribus* conditions with respect to the actions of intelligent agents, including God.⁴²

Glauber S. Araújo
glauber.araujo@cpb.com.br
Casa Publicadora Brasileira
Tatuí, São Paulo, Brasil

Recibido: 20 de enero de 2021
Aceptado: 10 de agosto de 2021

42. William Lane Craig, “The End of The World,” in *Science and Religion in Dialogue*, ed. Melville Y. Stewart (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 2:705. Emphasis in original.