

Baker Exegetical Commentary: Revelation

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The Bride and the Holy City (Rev 21:9-22:5)

The bride, depicted as a city, is described at some length in the ensuing verses. We can sketch in the outline as follows:

1. Revelation of the bride—the holy city (21:9-14)
2. The city's measurement and materials (21:15-21a)
3. The Lord and the Lamb as the temple in the city (21:21b-22:5)

The next segment expands on the new creation in 21:1-8, but here an Angel reveals to John the Bride and the Heavenly city. The differences between these verses and 21:1-8 have led scholars to posit distinct sources for these two final visions, but it is difficult to see how any source solutions work out practically since their very complexity makes them quite improbable. The two sections, however, are not as surprising as some might claim since we have seen that John often depicts the same reality (e.g., the final judgment) in a variety of ways. He is fond of recapitulation and a recursive style of writing. The city represents the eschatological future and should not be identified with an already-existing reality. The vision here isn't a literal depiction of the future, but artistic, impressionistic, and symbolic. John never intended readers to think of this as an actual picture of the future. Instead, he appeals to the imagination, calling upon readers to contemplate the beauty and unimaginable loveliness of the world that awaits them. We have a vision that reverberates with echoes of Ezekiel's vision of a new temple (Ezek. 40-48). Some scholars maintain that a literal temple will be built, arguing that the details of the vision are beside the point if the vision is merely symbolic.¹ Still, the apocalyptic vision of the temple indicates that we should not interpret the details in terms of a blueprint for the building. After all, we don't receive enough information in Ezekiel for the temple to be built, indicating that the temple was not meant to be a physical building; the returning exiles did not build the temple according to Ezekiel's pattern. Daniel Block², an Ezekiel scholar, gives other reasons for seeing the temple as figurative: (1) The temple is on a high mountain (Ezek. 40:2), representing reaching up to God; (2) the steps and the terraces all lead to the inner court; (3) the number twenty-five for the steps (cubits) is probably symbolic; (4) the structure is a perfect square (Ezek. 42:15-20); (5) the center of the building is the altar (Ezek. 43:13-17)

¹ A. Robinson. *Temple of Presence: The Fulfillment of Ezekiel 40-48 in Revelation 21:1-22:5*. Pages 18-20 give a concise and helpful survey of those who advance such a view.

² D. Block. *Beyond the River Chebar: Studies in Kingship and Eschatology in the Book of Ezekiel*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013. P187-89

standing for the relationship formed between God and Israel. I add that John often appropriates OT texts in new ways. This is not to say that he uses the texts in illegitimate ways, but it is quite possible that the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy would have startled even Ezekiel. The full meaning of specific OT text may only be clear when they reach total fulfillment.³

In Rev. 21:9-14 we see the city descending from heaven, as in 21:2. The city shines with God's glory and radiates like a sparkling jewel. The wall and the gates of the city are then described comma emphasizing the safety and security of the city and the people in it.⁴ The angels at the twelve gates afford protection, while the inscriptions of the names of the 12 tribes of Israel on the gates and the twelve apostles on the foundations portray the oneness of the people of God, and the apostolic foundation for that unity.

In 21:15-21a city is measured and the foundations of the city are described. The measuring of the city reminds us afresh of Ezekiel 's measuring the dimensions of the temple. Measuring speaks of security and prosperity. The city is God's residence, his dwelling place. In other words, the entire universe is God's temple. The 12,000 stadia of the city, clearly a symbolic number, represents an astonishingly large number, dwarfing any city the world has ever seen and reminding us afresh that the city exceeds our capacity to comprehend. As a perfect cube, it matches the most holy place in the temple. The 144 cubits, which perhaps refers to the thickness of the wall, is a symbolic number (12 x 12), communicating afresh the security of those in the city. The city is amazingly beautiful, with a wall of Jasper and with gold like pure glass. The 12 foundations of the city are composed of dazzling jewels, showing that the loveliness of the city defies description, that no words can capture it. Indeed, the city is so exquisite that each gate is composed of a single pearl.

Other features of the city come to the forefront in 21:21b-22:5; the light and the glory of the city are a particular focus. We see first that the street of the city is gold, like pure glass. Even though the description of the city draws from Ezekiel's vision of a new temple, we are told that there is no temple in the city; God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple. Nor is there any need for the sun or the moon since the city is illumined by the light of God and the Lamb. Such light shines on the path of nations and kings; they bring everything that is wonderful from the old creation into the new world, though it is all transformed. Since the light always shines, since there is no night, the

³ The issue raised here is remarkably complex and can't be adjudicated in this commentary since it depends on one's entire hermeneutical approach. I am presupposing the inspiration of the scriptures, so that we have both a human author and a divine author. I don't think divine authorship circumvents or contradicts the words of the human authors, but the fulfillment may transcend or go beyond what the human author intended without contradicting the letter's intention.

⁴ R. H. Gundry (*The New Jerusalem: People as Place, Not Place for People*, p 260) says the picture is only of a people who are eternally secure and safe, but it is more likely that both the place and the people are secure and that we don't need to pit one against the other.

gates of the city need never be shut, certifying the safety and eternal goodness of the city and its accessibility to all who wish to come. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into the city, but all that is impure and shameful and twisted will be excluded. Only those whose names are in the book of life will inhabit the city. The river of life will flow from the city down the middle of the street, streaming from God's throne and from the Lamb. The tree of life will bear twelve kinds of fruit, and the number twelve is certainly symbolic. No one will ever be sick in the new creation, but the perfect health and wholeness and shalom of the city is communicated by the leaves of the tree of life, which heal all believers from every nation. The curse from the old creation will be ancient history. God and Lamb will sit on the throne and rule in the city, and those who belong to them will gladly serve under their lordship. The greatest joy of all will be seeing God's face, which is the heart's desire of every believer. God's name will be on their foreheads, signifying that the saints belong to the Lord. The theme of light, which began this paragraph, reappears. The darkness of night will be no more, nor will there be any need for lamps or for the sun. The Lord will be the light, and believers will live and reign forever.