

The Apocalypse of John: A Presence of Our Future

John's Apocalypse has inspired, mystified, and encouraged pilgrims with its visions of future events. But Beatrice S. Neall sees a present relevance for spirituality in the ancient book.

by Beatrice S. Neall

ADVENTISTS HAVE ALWAYS CHERISHED THE BOOK of Revelation for its pictures of heaven—the reward of the overcomer. Ellen White's early visions are saturated with the language of John's wonderful book. From childhood she lived in the glory of the "bright and holy land" with its robes and palms and crowns. It was those rays of glory that brightened the gloom of her difficult childhood.

Christians of all ages have naturally viewed the heavenly visions in terms of the future life with Jesus. And they have let the future irradiate the present. But there is an even stronger relationship between the heavenly visions and the earthly life of the believer. A careful reading of the Apocalypse shows that John intended his visions to portray the present life of the victorious Christian. In the midst of tribu-

lation, assailed by the demonic hordes of the abyss, the believer even now stands with the great multitude before the throne, praising God for his great salvation. John, more than any other Gospel writer, caught the significance of Jesus' promise of eternal life now. His Apocalypse builds on his Gospel by painting picture after picture of what it means to experience eternal life now.

To describe this world view in which the future enters the present I prefer to use the term "inaugurated eschatology" rather than "realized eschatology," because John portrays a real consummation of world history. What is literal and real in the future enters the present as a spiritual experience. For example, the saints will reign forever and ever (22:5), but even in exile John shares the kingdom (1:9). The river flows through the holy city (22:1, 2), but the thirsty may drink of it now (v. 17; cf. 7:17). God will dwell with his people face to face (21:3; 22:4), but now Christ enters the

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door to dine with them (3:20). Christ is coming soon with his recompense (22:12), but he comes now to his church (2:5, 16, 25). The holy city will come down from heaven to the new earth (21:2), but it is coming down even now (3:12).

These vivid images create for the Christian picture after picture of the spiritual life with Jesus. While we talk about the means of grace—prayer and Bible study and witnessing—John describes priests in white robes worshipping before the throne, a bride in white linen, and an army of kings riding white horses to battle.

It is this imagery of inaugurated eschatology—heaven now in this life—that provides creative, dynamic, moving pictures of spirituality. In this article I have not begun to exhaust the meaning of each picture. Here is a rich field for study—to determine from the text and from personal experience what the Holy Spirit intended to convey by these images. As we review them one by one, I invite us all to ponder where we fit into each picture, and what impact this perspective could have on our lives.

The Vertical Axis of the Apocalypse

In his book, John pictures the righteous and the wicked as two opposing communities in a vertical relationship to each other. The wicked are consistently called “those who dwell on earth,” while the righteous appear to be called “those who dwell in heaven.” (The

Greek verbs are even more picturesque—those who are *housed* on earth and those who *tent* in heaven.) The first half of the equation is consistent and clear, attested by numerous scholars—earth-dwellers are the enemies of God’s people. Every reference to them is negative—they shed the blood of martyrs (6:10), they are targets of the trumpet woes (8:13), they rejoice at the death of the two witnesses (11:10), they worship the beast and marvel at it (13:8, 12; 17:8), they are deceived by the false prophet (13:14), and become drunk with the

wine of the harlot (17:2). Paul Minear has the interesting view that the earth-dwellers are not ordinary sinners, but apostate Christians, and cites convincing evidence to support his point.¹

Logic demands that if the dwellers on earth are wicked, the righteous must be somewhere else,

maybe in heaven. There are, in fact, two texts that refer to the heaven-dwellers—they are the ones who rejoice when Satan is cast out of heaven (12:12) and those who are blasphemed by the beast (13:6). Are these saints or angels? The Greek—“those who tent (or tabernacle) in heaven”—sheds light on the subject. Tents in Scripture apply to human dwellings rather than angelic. The tabernacle was the place where God met with his people (Exodus 36:25). John (the only New Testament writer to use *tent* as a verb) gives it two meanings—God tenting in humanity (John 1:14; Revelation 21:2, 3), or humanity tenting in God (God “spreads” his tent over them [Revelation 7:15], Jesus himself being the new temple [John 2:19-22, Revelation 21:22]). It is clear from the Johannine writings that the verb “to tabernacle” has to do with God and his people

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dwelling together. It seems best, then, to understand the expression "those who tent in heaven" as applying to the saints.

Other verses in Revelation show that John thinks of the saints as heaven-dwellers. The woman of Revelation 12:1 appears in heaven, though she is very much on earth fleeing to the wilderness from the dragon. Revelation 18:20 suggests that "heaven" is the same as the saints, apostles, and prophets. It seems, then, that John is consistent in dividing the world into two communities, earth-dwellers who oppose God, and heaven-dwellers who serve him.

What did John mean by this imagery? I see one possible implication—"those who are housed on earth" belong to the secular world. On the other hand, "those who tent (or tabernacle) in heaven" are priests (see Revelation 1:6; 5:10) since only priests enter the tabernacle. They belong to the sacred world.

The Horizontal Axis of the Apocalypse

There is also a horizontal axis of Revelation, for John visualizes two communities living side by side—one in the holy city and one outside. At times one invades the other. This is possible because the holy city comes down from God out of heaven (3:12), making it vulnerable to attack by the heathen. In chapter 11 John is told to measure the inner shrine of the temple and those who worship there, while the court and city are overrun by the heathen. (See Daniel 8:13, where the little horn tramples the sanctuary and saints.)

In Revelation 14, the heavenly community stand with the Lamb on Mount Zion (vv. 1-5) while the opposing forces are crushed in the winepress "outside the city" (v. 20, NIV). This implies that the saints with the Lamb are "inside the city." Chapter 20 develops this imagery by depicting the camp of the saints, the holy city, under attack by the hordes of Gog and Magog

(v. 8). And again, in the epilogue of the book, John's concept of two communities dwelling side by side becomes clear: the white-robed saints enter the city while the fornicators and murderers are outside (22:14, 15).

John thus pictures two opposing communities—heaven-dwellers and earth-dwellers, insiders and outsiders. Here is the germ of his inaugurated eschatology—the saints in this life are already a part of the heavenly realm.

Routes to Heaven

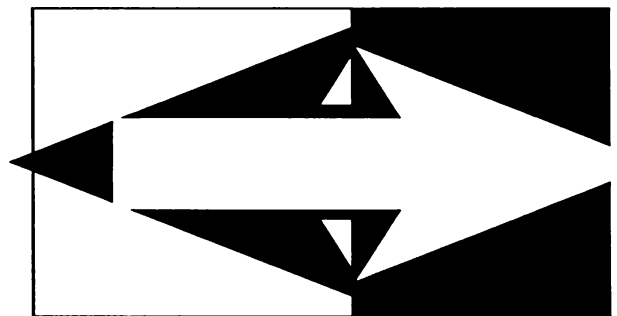
John repeatedly depicts vast assemblages of people who by some unexplained process were transported to heaven. How did they get there? I can think of five possibilities:

1. By translation without seeing death, as Enoch and Elijah.

2. By bodily assumption after death, as Moses, Christ, and the "blessed virgin."

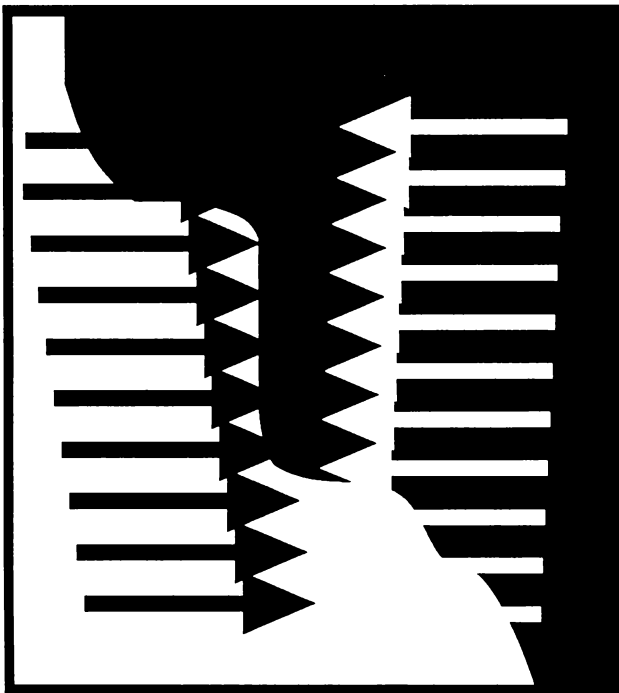
3. By the ascent of the soul to heaven after the body dies. This is the basis for the widespread view that the saints in heaven are martyrs, even when John does not identify them as such.

4. By the second coming of Christ when the faithful dead are raised and the living translated to heaven. The presence of the righteous in heaven assumes that the coming of Christ has occurred or is being viewed proleptically. The problem here is that many of the visions in question do not mention the Second Coming; rather, the contexts indicate that the tribulation under Antichrist is still in progress.



5. By a figurative experience with God. In this view the saints make a spiritual ascent to heaven while still engaged in the tribulations of earthly life. The idea that the saints reign spiritually with Christ during the tribulations of earth is suggested by the following lines of evidence:

- a. The heaven-dweller and city-dweller motifs, already explained.
- b. The contexts of the heavenly visions, which indicate that the struggle with Antichrist is still in progress and the second coming of Christ has not yet occurred.
- c. A series of present participles that describe the saints as “those who *are coming* out of great tribulation” (not *have come*, 7:14), those who “*are worshiping in the temple*” during the 42 months of trampling by the heathen (11:1, 2); those who “*are following the Lamb*” while the rest of the world worships the beast (14:4, cf. 13:8); and those who “*are conquering*” the beast and its image (not *have conquered*) 15:2, 3. If the present participles are to be taken seriously, it appears that the saints are very much engaged in the conflicts of earth while they appear to be in heaven.



The Throne-Room Scenes

It is in the throne-room scenes that inaugurated eschatology appears most vividly. The initial view of the throne-room (chapters 4 and 5) introduces the *dramatis personae* of the heavenly court—God, the Lamb, elders, and angels. They appear to be celebrating the victory just won by the Lamb at the cross. In their hymns of praise the heavenly choirs mention a great multitude from all tribes and nations who have been ransomed by the Lamb’s blood (5:9). It is this great multitude, also called the 144,000 ransomed ones (14:3), that appears repeatedly in the throne-room scenes and becomes the focus of this study.

Chapter 7 sets the stage for the drama. It is the eve of the great tribulation: the saints are being sealed and the tempest is about to rage. As soon as they are sealed and the four winds are released, John sees them in heaven crying out for salvation (vss. 9, 10). The elder informs John that these are the ones who are coming out of great tribulation (v. 14). They are not yet through with the troubles of this world, but spiritually they are before the throne of God receiving strength for the ordeal they are passing through.

Here I agree with a number of commentators (Beasley-Murray, Caird, Charles, Hoekema, Kiddle, Ladd, Lenski, Summers, Swete, and others) that the two companies of chapter 7, the 144,000 and the great multitude, are the same. There are many reasons to support this conclusion. John hears the saints described as 144,000 sealed from the 12 tribes of Israel (v. 4), but when he looks he sees that they are actually a vast multitude from all nations, which cannot be numbered (v. 9). By describing the saints in two ways, John is stating a theological paradox: God knows the number of his elect, and those who inherit the blessing of Abraham are as numberless as the stars. The fierce winds that threaten the 144,000 are another way of describing the

great tribulation from which the great multitude comes. The number 144,000 in its symmetry, vastness, and perfection is a symbol of the great multitude who cannot be numbered. Israel today means God's people of all nations, and the 12 tribes could represent the many tribes of earth. Being sealed is equivalent to being clothed in white robes. So 144,000 of the 12 tribes of Israel is thus a symbolic way of describing the great multitude from every tribe and tongue and nation.²

But the scholars who accept the identity of the two companies also see them in two stages—the church militant on earth and the church triumphant in heaven, with a time lapse between. The Greek, however, does not allow this. The great multitude are coming out of the great tribulation (v. 14). So, they cannot literally be in heaven—they must be there in spirit. Understood this way, the chapter takes on new poignancy. Their loud cry, “Salvation belongs to God!” (v. 10) is a plea for help. And God responds by spreading his tabernacle over them (v. 15). [This is why they are called “those who tent (or tabernacle) in heaven.”] While under God's tabernacle they are protected from the fierce winds of verse 1 and from the scorching sun of the plagues of the tribulation (v. 16, cf. 16:8). While the earth-dwellers are enduring the tempest, the Lamb is leading his followers to springs of living water, and wiping the tears from their eyes (v. 17). For the heaven-dwellers, tribulation is robbed of its terrors. They stand “before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple” (RSV) (the Holy and Most Holy Places where only the priests may enter).

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The saints are indeed priests (1:6, 5:10), clothed in priestly white robes (7:13, 14). They “serve him” by their constant praise “day and night” during tribulation.

John again sees the saints during the 42 months when the holy city and the temple court are trampled by the heathen (11:1, 2, cf. Daniel 8:13). During this horrendous time they are shut in with God in the inner shrine of the temple.

As the conflict between good and evil intensifies, John introduces the opposing forces of the last great battle. On the seashore stands a dragon (12:17) while a beast scrambles up from the sea to join him (13:1, 2). These two allies have the whole world on their side—the vast company of earth-dwellers (vv. 3, 4, and 8). Rising high above the seashore is Mount Zion (14:1), site of the holy city (v. 20) with its tabernacle-temple (13:6),³ where the throne of God is located (14:3). Here is where the heaven-dwellers live; they are God's tabernacle since He dwells in them (13:6). For 42 months the beast has made war on them and conquered (v. 7). Now a third ally emerges from the earth to join forces with the dragon and the beast. He galvanized the earth-dwellers by performing miracles and branding them on the forehead and

hand (v. 16). He attacks the heaven-dwellers by economic sanctions and a decree that they should be put to death (vv. 17, 15).

At this time the Lamb's forces appear—144,000 select individuals branded with the Father's name (14:1). While the earth-dwellers are worshipping the beast (v. 12), they follow the Lamb wherever he goes (14:4). While the

earth-dwellers are deceived by the lies of the false prophet (13:14), these have no lie in their mouths (14:5). Surrounded by enemy forces, under a death decree, they sing in thunderous tones a new song of praise and deliverance (vv. 2, 3).

Three angels then appear in the heavens and give the world a final warning. The Son of Man appears on a cloud to reap the earth. The evil forces outside the city are crushed like grapes, and blood flows to the horses' bridles (14:17-19). Here is the initial picture of the final conflict between earth-dwellers and heaven-dwellers.

Next the scene changes to the final outpouring of God's wrath in the seven last plagues. Again John looks for the people of God. He has seen them before the throne, in the temple, and on Mt. Zion. Now they stand on the sea of glass still singing their new song, the song of Moses and the Lamb (15:2, 3). John states that they "are conquering" the beast and its image—they have not yet reached heaven, but are still engaged in the conflicts of earth. (Their song praising God for his judgments [v. 4] would not be appropriate in the future age.) But even though they are in the heat of conflict, spiritually they are standing on the sea of glass, singing the song of Moses and the Lamb as Israel sang and rejoiced by the Red Sea when Pharaoh and his host were destroyed. To

them, as to Israel of old, the plagues mean deliverance.

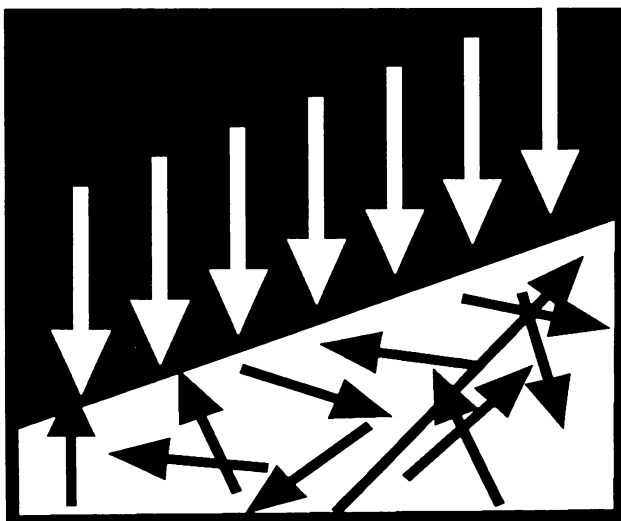
A glimpse of the heaven-dwellers occurs again in chapter 17 where John gives a brief summary of the final battle: The kings "will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and *those with him are called and chosen and faithful*" (v. 14, RSV). The heaven-dwellers have been "with him" through every stage of the conflict.

After the falling of the plagues, the whole kingdom of Satan, under the symbolism of "Babylon," collapses. Ironically, the world in its lament over Babylon calls upon the saints to rejoice:

Rejoice over her, O heaven,
O saints and apostles and prophets,
for God has given judgment for you
against her! (18:20).

Accepting the challenge, the great multitude of saints in heaven cries out in triumph: "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just!" (19:1, 2). This is the same "great multitude" who, at the beginning of the tribulation had cried out, "Salvation belongs to our God!" (7:10). They now add another stanza to their song—he has judged their oppressor, the harlot. As soon as the harlot is removed, the Bride appears clothed in bright linen, fine and pure. The Bride has no doubt made herself ready by separating from the harlot Babylon (18:4, NRSV). The exultant cry goes forth that the marriage of the Lamb has come (19:7).

But the wedding plans are interrupted by a battle scene. The Bridegroom becomes a warrior on a white horse and the Bride an army on white horses. The only vestige of the wedding imagery is the "fine linen, bright and pure" (v. 14, RSV) which the Bride is still wearing. The "armies of heaven" can be identified as saints (not angels) by the white linen that they wear (cf. v. 8). Also, there are only two armies in this battle—the armies of heaven under the King of



kings, and the armies of earth under the beast (v. 19). Here again is a view of the heaven-dwellers in opposition to the earth-dwellers. (As we have noted above, 17:14 has identified the same group as saints.) Of course they are present with Christ as “heaven-dwellers” only in a spiritual sense. In reality they are on earth awaiting deliverance from on high.

Because John has pictured the saints as being with Christ throughout every stage of the final conflict, he does not have a strong picture of the resurrection and translation of the saints at the Second Advent (compare with 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17). He mentions only that they came to life in the first resurrection and reigned with Christ for 1,000 years (20:4, 5). Then, as the first heaven and first earth pass away, all that was figurative becomes literal. The holy city descends from heaven in reality (21:2). God and his people, who have long dwelt together in spirit, now experience face-to-face communion (21:3).

What Does It All Mean?

The heaven-dwellers in John’s Apocalypse are pictured as white-robed priests, a white-robed bride, and a white-robed army. In each of these capacities they overcome the world. The function of the army is to conquer. The saint conquer all of their foes, both internal (as listed in the messages to the seven

churches) and external (describes in the battle scenes). The function of the Bride is to present herself in purity to her husband. But the priestly function is perhaps the most prominent theme.

Jesus revealed to the church of Philadelphia the secret of surviving the hour of trial coming on the world: “Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut”—the door to the throne room (3:10, 8; 4:1, 2, RSV).

Through every crisis, Christian priests may press through the court into the Most Holy Place (*naos*) to the very presence of God and the Lamb (7:9; 11:1, 2). Their priestly white robes washed in the blood of the Lamb entitle them to full acceptance with God (7:14). With prayer and praise they serve God day and night in his temple (v. 15). They overcome fear and despair through shouting God’s praises (vv. 10-12). When parched with drought and broken by sorrow, the hand of God wipes away their tears (v. 17). When confronted with death, they sing in thunderous tones the song of Moses and the Lamb (14:2, 3; 15:3). They cherish faith and hope and courage no matter what horrors ascend from the abyss because God descends with greater power to defeat them. They transcend their troubles instead of being crushed by them because they view the overwhelming evils of earth from the perspective of the throne of the sovereignty of God.

In this powerful imagery, John’s Apocalypse depicts the meaning of spirituality.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Paul Minear, *I Saw a New Earth: An Introduction to the Visions of the Apocalypse* (Washington, D. C.: Corpus Books, 1968), pp. 218-221.

2. Another line of evidence strongly supports the identity of the two groups—John repeatedly describes them in the same way. Both groups follow the Lamb (7:17; 14:4); both attest that God’s ways are true and just (15:3; 19:2); both have a voice “like the sound of many waters” and like thunder (14:2; 19:6, RSV). Both stand before the throne, the elders, and the four living creatures (7:9, 11; 14:1, 3). The promises to Philadelphia

(3:12) are fulfilled to both groups—they never go out of the temple (the great multitude in 7:15), and they have the name of God written on their foreheads (the 144,000 in 14:1). The song of the elder (5:9) assumes their identity—the ransomed ones (144,000 of 14:3) are from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (the great multitude of 7:9).

3. This draws upon the imagery of Daniel 11:45—“Antichrist shall pitch his palatial tents between the sea and the glorious holy mountains” (RSV).