

Does the new heavens and the new earth in Rev. 21:2 refer to the church?

By Bob Young

I received the question that I have used as a title from a brother in Latin America. The short answer is "yes;" the more difficult question is "when?"

The terminology of Rev. 21:2 has a biblical context.

Isaiah 65:17, See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.

Isaiah 66:22, As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me," declares the Lord, "so will your name and descendants endure.

2 Peter 3:13, But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

Revelation 3:12, The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name.

Revelation 21:1, Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

Revelation 21:2, I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

With the exception of the passage in 2 Peter, the phrase appears only in apocalyptic literature. We should expect to read 2 Peter more literally; we can expect to read Isaiah and Revelation more symbolically.

- The two Isaiah passages, in the context of Isaiah, are Messianic and refer first to the coming kingdom, that is, to the coming of the church.
- The passage in 2 Peter was written to the church and say that the church anticipating something yet future, a new reality where righteousness dwells. The most obvious reference is to the end of the world.
- Revelation 3:12 is important for the present tense that says the coming of the "new Jerusalem" is already occurring. Jesus writes to persecuted churches to give assurance.
- Revelation 21:1-2 are in the context of a vision, or more accurately, the context of a series of visions. Visions do not necessarily present chronological truths. In a vision, two questions are paramount: what is seen in the vision? what does it mean?

Here is a brief study of the Revelation passage.

After the description of the destruction of Rome in Chapters 17-18, the book of Revelation concludes with a series of visions. The book began with a prologue, a description of the churches in the letters, and a series of visions. The book concludes with a series of visions, a description of the churches in a vision, and an epilogue (reverse order). The visions at the end of the book are clearly set apart by the phrase "I saw" or a parallel construction: 19:1, (19:6?), 19:11, (19:17?), (19:19?), 20:1, (20:4?), 20:11, 21:1. The citations in parentheses indicate a question whether the previous vision continues or a new vision is introduced. I like the possibility that there are seven visions. The passage beginning in 21:1 is apparently parallel to Chapters 2-3.

Citing internal references, the question of timing is "after the destruction of Rome," that is, following Chapters 17-18. The events of 20:1-3 follow the destruction of Rome – Satan is bound with regard to deceiving the nations as he had done through Rome. The 1000 years (figurative, not literal) of Satan's binding begin after the destruction of Rome (about AD 470). If the years were literal, the 1000 years would have ended around AD 1500. The biblical text says that after the 1000 years Satan is set free and allowed again to deceive the nations "a short time" (20:3). During this "short time," Satan threatens God's people, after which he is judged (in a separate vision beginning in 20:11).

An important question is whether the vision of 20:11 presents a separate judgment of Satan (following the model that will be used for all people), or whether the vision described literally refers to the end of the

world. Observe the details. The vision scene is in heaven at the throne of God; earth and sky flee (20:11) because they have no place in God's presence. That a judgment scene is presented in a vision does not mean that it has occurred. We are reading of visions, not reality. What do the visions mean?

When earth and sky flee from God's presence (20:11, parallel to 21:1), God's presence among his people is described as new. The description of 21:2 reminds us of the church but the passage is an illustration – "prepared as a bride...." Nonetheless, the connection with the church seems certain based on the vision in 19:6-10. Applying 21:1-2 to the church is consistent with the Isaiah 65-66 passage.

Is this the church on earth? Or, is the reference to the church in heaven after the end of the world? I cannot answer these questions dogmatically. We must try to understand the picture John is communicating in the vision. I want to answer "yes" to both questions! Compare Rev. 21:4 with Isa. 25:8 where Isaiah apocalyptically describes the Messianic kingdom. The careful Bible student can find many other biblical passages that refer to the church, passages that are approximately parallel to the description in Rev. 21:1-5.

A second reason I like the idea of a reference to the church on earth is based on 22:2 (the nations are still being healed) and the idea that the things written must take place soon (22:6). The nations walk by the light of the new Jerusalem, nothing impure can enter it, the kings of the earth are bringing splendor to it, and the glory and honor of the nations is being brought into it (21:24-27). This sounds more like the church on earth than the heavenly church in eternity.