

Two New Jerusalems

God's promise in Isaiah 65:17–25 begins with the statement, "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come to mind" (KJV). The promise is repeated in Isaiah 66:22–24.

For some conservative evangelicals, this passage has been applied to the eschatological new heavens and new earth, especially because it is echoed by Revelation 21.¹ For some other Christians, Isaiah 66:23 has become a favorite biblical text in defense of the Sabbath, often used in evangelistic sermons to highlight the perpetuity of the Sabbath, as it states, "from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD" (KJV).

There is, however, a problem in applying these texts to the eschatological new heavens and new earth. Paul warned the Colossians, "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come" (Col. 2:16, 17, NKJV).² Paul clearly implies that ceremonial laws are not binding anymore after the death of Jesus. So why observe a "new moon" now and thereafter?

What kind of "new heavens and new earth" does the prophet Isaiah describe, and how should we reconcile them with the "new heaven and new earth" of Revelation 21:1–5?

Principles of prophetic interpretation

Bible students differ between classical prophecy and apocalyptic prophecy as far as their fulfillment (whether reward or punishment) is concerned. Fulfillment of classical prophecy is generally conditional, while apocalyptic prophecy is unconditional.³ Students also need to be aware of the role of ancient Israel in biblical prophecy⁴ and the eventual transfer of the privileges and responsibilities of ancient Israel to the church (spiritual Israel).⁵

Based on the above principle, interpreters recognize the following about the prophetic promises:

(1) The promise in Isaiah 65; 66 was made for physical Israel after the Babylonian exile. The passage should be placed in its context: Isaiah's prophetic ministry in the eighth to seventh century (ca. 745–686 BC) and his prophecies on Babylonian captivity and return.

(2) The conditional fulfillment of the promise (depending on Israel's obedience).

(3) In case of Israel's failure, the prophecy points forward to the new heavens and new earth after the millennium.

(4) Exclusive local setting descriptions for the first New Jerusalem should not be transported/transferred into the postmillennial, eschatological New Jerusalem.

Threat and promise

Isaiah's ministry took place during the height of Assyrian supremacy. Chapters 1–39 are mainly set against the backdrop of the Assyrians' interference with Israel and Judah. In 722 BC, the Assyrians defeated Israel and carried captive the ten northern tribes (2 Kings 17). Now, the Assyrians were moving toward Judah, defeating Lachish, and from there, sieging Jerusalem (701 BC). But God's intervention prompted the withdrawal of Sennacherib to Nineveh (Isa. 37:36–38).

Likely having heard of Hezekiah's survival of the Assyrian threat and his miraculous healing from his deadly illness, his Babylonian ally Merodach-Baladan sent an envoy from Babylon to congratulate him. Overtaken by pride and vanity, Hezekiah showed them the riches and treasures of Jerusalem, which the Babylonians later would come to take, together with Jewish captives to Babylon (Isaiah 39).

God repeatedly warned that He would destroy His people if they did not repent. But with the impending doom that would befall them, Isaiah 40–66 brings a message of comfort, deliverance, and a promise of new heavens and earth after the Babylonian exile. Therefore, we can assume that the Jews were repeatedly living under spiritual crises and threats from the Assyrians and Babylonians. In such a time, they needed hope, comfort, and deliverance. And God provided them

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supernatural deliverance. He equally promised that they would live in the “new heavens and new earth” after their return from the Babylonian exile.

The first New Jerusalem

Belief and expectation of a “New Jerusalem” were common in New Testament times. The concept is found in several Second Temple Jewish works of literature, such as in the Pseudepigrapha (for instance, 1 Enoch 90:29–38). Among the Dead Sea literature, at least five scrolls from three different caves near Qumran bear the title “New Jerusalem.”⁶

The “new heavens and new earth” passage is introduced by “I [God] will create [*bara*]” (three times in Isaiah 65:17, 18, NIV). All three occurrences of the verb *bara* are participles, indicating what God will continually do in the future. God will bring new things into existence. His “intention is to transform reality in different spheres of life: human personal and family life, human society, and the natural world.”⁷ “New heavens and a new earth” is an idiomatic expression describing a miraculous transformation,⁸ of new conditions of life, for God’s people after the Babylonian exile.

What would the first New Jerusalem look like?

God would create the first New Jerusalem, an echo of the potential fulfillment of the covenant stipulation for blessings, not cursing, found in Deuteronomy 28; 29. Wolf and lamb would feed together (Isa. 65:25). The redeemed would build houses and inhabit them (v. 21). They would rejoice (vv. 17, 18).

There would be no infant mortality nor miscarriages. The youngest age at death would be at one hundred (v. 20). While the faithful would live very long lives (vv. 20–22), premature death would be a curse for sinners (v. 20). Children would be born (v. 23). There would be a temple at the center of the city, where some Gentiles would be appointed and serve as priests (Isa. 66:21). All flesh would come to worship on the new moon and on Sabbath (v. 23).⁹ Alongside God’s people, others who eat swine’s flesh would be consumed (v. 17). The book of Isaiah ends with a statement that the corpses of the wicked would be displayed outside Jerusalem and viewed by worshipers (v. 24).

There is no doubt that Isaiah 65 and 66 describe the potential New Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. Jiří Moskala affirms,

“God’s kingdom will be manifested in Israel, the knowledge about the true God will grow, and the acceptance of the Messiah will secure it even further. In view is the growing establishment of God’s values until [He] will bring the eschatological ‘new heavens and a new earth’ (the establishment of God’s justice on earth by the Messiah is likewise a gradual reality—the kingdom of grace is followed by the kingdom of glory until even nature will be universally transformed to reflect the Edenic sinless conditions).”¹⁰

If the promises of the first New Jerusalem were fulfilled, it would still have remained incomplete and imperfect. As imperfect as it would be, human language and experience would have rated the fulfillment of those promises as “best.” But was it fulfilled at all?

Conditionality of the prophecy

If we accept that “The promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional,”¹¹ then the fate of Jerusalem would be connected to Israel’s acceptance or rejection of the Messiah. The “new heavens and a new earth” of Isaiah 65 and 66 were for the postexilic Jewish nation. But because of their failure and rejection of the Messiah, the nonfulfillment of that prophecy for the Jewish nation is a fact. Nevertheless, the New Testament writers teach, drawing from the Old Testament language, that “new heavens and a new earth” are being prepared for God’s people—a fulfillment of prophecy that will not fail.

From ancient Israel to spiritual Israel

The New Testament teaches about a spiritual Israel. Paul writes, “Those who have faith are children of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7, NIV). The church is the “Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16, NIV). Elsewhere, Peter calls the church a “chosen generation, royal priesthood, holy nation, His own special people” (1 Pet. 2:9, NKJV), who “according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13, NKJV).

Is it possible that two events are mingled in the same Isaiah 65; 66 passage? An analogy may be found elsewhere in the Scripture. For instance, in the Olivet discourse (Matthew 24), Jesus mingled the description of two events (the destruction of Jerusalem and His second coming).¹² The vision of Isaiah may be a mingling of two events as well: (1) New Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile (leading up to Christ’s first coming) and (2) eschatological New Jerusalem, after the Second Coming (John 14:1–3; Rev. 21:1–4).

Typology

Typology as a key for prophetic interpretation is helpful. As Moskala writes, “The typological relationship between these two texts is type—Isa 65 and antitype—Rev 21–22.”¹³ In the same line of thought, it is stated, “Although the Lord’s ‘holy mountain’ would begin with Mount Zion at Jerusalem, it was only a precursor, a symbol, of what God promises to do, ultimately, in a new world with His redeemed people.”¹⁴

What would the eschatological New Jerusalem look like?

Some aspects that were to be potentially fulfilled with ancient Israel will be present in the new heavens and new earth. For it is the same God who will create “a new heaven and a new earth” and says, “I make all things new” (Rev. 21:1, 5, NKJV). The wolf and the lamb shall feed together. The redeemed will build houses and inhabit them, and they will rejoice.

But there will be new things that were not in the first New Jerusalem. The final New Jerusalem, although settling on what was supposed to be the first New Jerusalem, comes down from heaven. Unlike in the first New Jerusalem, there will be no marriage nor birth in the postmillennial new heavens and new earth. There will be no more temple (Rev. 21:21, 22). God assures His people of His visible, physical presence (v. 3). They will live in eternal joy and peace and will be immortal (v. 4).

Are we there yet?

The “best” was promised in the first New Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity, but that best had its flaws, was imperfect, and was never historically materialized/fulfilled. Even if, by human ingenuity, something similar to the promise in the first New Jerusalem is happening in our days, that best will have flaws. The best in this sinful world cannot compare with the final New Jerusalem. And for that to be, there is a need for a complete re-creation. Thus, “we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

“Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless” (2 Pet. 3:13, 14, NKJV).

Perfect peace

Pastors are called to make a sound biblical interpretation (2 Tim. 2:15), especially pertaining

to prophecies. The Bible teaches that there were supposed to be two New Jerusalems. The “new heavens and new earth” that Isaiah 65 and 66 describe is the first New Jerusalem, promised to the Jewish nation after the Babylonian exile. But it was not historically fulfilled because of the failure of the people. Revelation 21:1–5 describes the second New Jerusalem, which will be perfect and in which the redeemed will live in perfect peace and eternally in the presence of God. “Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20, KJV)!



- 1 Jiří Moskala, “Does Isaiah 65:17–25 Describe the Eschatological New Heavens and the New Earth?” *Faculty Publications*, 2016, 187–210, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1204&context=pubs>.
- 2 Because of the eschatological application that the redeemed will worship during new moon in heaven, some contemporary Christians even call for worship during “new moon.”
- 3 Ekkehardt Mueller, “A New Trend in Adventist Eschatology: A Critical Analysis of a Recent Publication,” *Reflections* 44 (2013): 4.
- 4 For a full treatment of this subject, see the important chapter “The Role of Israel in Old Testament Prophecy,” in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1976), 4:25–38.
- 5 Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press), 210.
- 6 These are 2QNew Jerusalem (2Q4), 4QNew Jerusalem^a (4Q554), 4QNew Jerusalem^b (4Q555), 5QNew Jerusalem (5Q15), and 11QNew Jerusalem (11Q18). For the translated texts, see Florentino Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996). For scholarly study of these “New Jerusalem” texts, see Michael Chyutin, “The New Jerusalem: Ideal City,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 1, no. 1 (1994), 71–97. For study on the “New Jerusalem” in the Qumran writings compared with the New Testament, see F. G. Martinez, “New Jerusalem at Qumran and in the New Testament,” in *The Land of Israel in Bible, History, and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 277–289.
- 7 Moskala, “Isaiah 65:17–25,” 192.
- 8 Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, *The Old Testament Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1969), 408.
- 9 The importance of the combination of “Sabbath” and “new moon” as days to worship the Lord in the projected new temple of Ezekiel is reflected in Ezekiel 46:1, 3.
- 10 Moskala, “Isaiah 65:17–25,” 199.
- 11 Ellen G. White, Manuscript 4, 1883.
- 12 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898).
- 13 Moskala, “Isaiah 65:17–25,” 204.
- 14 Roy Gane, “New Heavens and a New Earth,” *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, first quarter 2021, Sunday March 21, 2021, <https://absq.adventist.org/html?code=ADLT1Q21WK13LESN>.

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