Revelation's New Jerusalem in Late Antiquity

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NATHAN BETZ,
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Abbreviations

ANF	*The Ante-Nicene Fathers.* Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 1885–1887. 10 vols. Repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis
CCSG	Corpus Christianorum: Series Graeca
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina
CPG	*Clavis Patrum Graecorum.* Edited by Maurice Geerard. 5 vols. Turnhout: Brepols, 1974–1987
CPL	*Clavis Patrum Latinorum.* Edited by Eligius Dekkers. 2nd ed.
CSCO	*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium.* Edited by Jean-Baptiste Chabot et al. Paris, 1903
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
FC	Fathers of the Church
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
NPNF	*A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.* 2 series (14 vols. each). Edited by Philip Schaff et al. 1887–1994. Repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
PG	Patrologia Graeca [= *Patrologiae Cursus Completus:* Series Graeca]. Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–1886
PL	Patrologia Latina [= *Patrologiae Cursus Completus:* Series Latina]. Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 217 vols. Paris, 1844–1864
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

General Introduction: The New Jerusalem – More Than the World to Come

One of the most iconic paintings in Belgian art history is the *Mystic Lamb*, also called the *Ghent Altarpiece*, a religious polyptych by brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck that was probably completed around 1432. The central panel shows the adoration of the *Agnus Dei* situated in Heavenly Jerusalem. Depicted as a beautiful Gothic city, the latter is seen amidst wondrous natural beauty, angels overhung with jewels, and elongated processions of saints, martyrs, confessors, judges, kings, knights, and pilgrims on their way to the heavenly city.

By this introduction, we do not intend to engage in product placement and advertise our patrimony – though Belgium does reward its visitors richly. Rather, we merely wish to point out that this masterpiece of European art expresses a profoundly human question about life after death, which in Christianity has frequently developed into a fascination with the New Jerusalem that is described in the last book of the New Testament. It is a colorful image in which theology, liturgy, and architecture are intimately intertwined, an idea that was prepared throughout the whole of the Bible and Judeo-Christian culture, and a concept that enjoyed a rich reception history in the first centuries of Christianity. The latter – its early Christian reception – is the subject of the present volume.

While the New Jerusalem has not always or even mainly been interpreted as an image of the afterlife – something that will become increasingly evident throughout this volume – it is along eschatological lines that the image has often been imagined throughout history and until today. Humanity has never ceased to construe images of life after death, especially within what one might today call "religious" contexts. Late antique Christianity is no exception, and it has been a fertile breeding ground for reflections about the life to come and of our journey towards it. How should the otherworld – both the world above and the world below, both "heaven" and "hell" – be understood? Likewise, Christians of the first millennium grappled with intricate questions about body, soul, and resurrection. These questions and their answers found expression both in literary and pictorial artistry, not least in the imaginative representations of an enticing heavenly abode and a dreadful underworld. Drawing on pagan and Jewish forbears, the result of the late antique Christian creativity was a multitude of images, portrayals, pictures, metaphors, and stories that together shaped how the

ancients conceived of the afterlife.[1] The early church's hope for eschatological redemption – and the fear of eternal punishment with which it was always accompanied – proved too great to be subsumed under a single image. Two examples may illustrate this multifarious creativity.

The first, a well-known example, originates from the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity (Passio Perpetuae)*. In her first vision, Perpetua sees a great ladder that reaches into heaven. Upon climbing it, she arrives in an expansive paradise-like garden. At the center of the garden a man with white hair is seated surrounded by a multitude clothed in white robes. Seeing her, the man welcomes Perpetua and offers her a piece of cheese. Perpetua receives it with open hands and eats it as all those present say "Amen." At this point, she awakes from her vision.[2] Later in the text, we read of a vision that Saturus, one of Perpetua's companions, receives. In continuity with Perpetua's vision, Saturus describes the martyrs' postmortem fate, for again, the martyrs are brought to a spacious garden in the middle of which a white-haired man is seated. The description of how Saturus and Perpetua are welcomed and integrated into this heavenly community is much more elaborate and detailed. Remarkably, at the entrance of the garden they encounter a bishop, Optatus, and a learned presbyter, Aspasius, who ask them to intervene and heal a breach that had occurred between them. Here one may read between the lines a reflection on the position of martyrs and confessors in the community and their role over against bishops and presbyters, proof of how this-wordly concerns could find themselves squarely in the middle of narrations of the world to come.[3]

The second example is taken from the *Vision of Dorotheus*, a fourth-century poem in dactylic hexameters that is preserved in the first folios of Bodmer Papyrus 29.[4] Dorotheus receives his heavenly vision while sitting in the imperi-

[1] From the wealth of scholarship on this topic, of fundamental importance still are the articles in the *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 17 (1996): Carsten Colpe, Ernst Dassmann, Joseph Engemann, Paul Habermehl, Karl Hoheisel, "Jenseits (Jenseitsvorstellungen)," 246–407; Colpe et al., "Jenseitsfahrt I (Himmelfahrt)," 407–66; Colpe, "Jenseitsfahrt II (Unterwelts- oder Höllenfahrt)," 466–89; Colpe and Habermehl, "Jenseitsreise (Reise durch das Jenseits)," 490–543. See further Ra'anan S. Boustan, Annette Yoshiko Reed, ed., *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Tobias Nicklas, Joseph Verheyden, Erik M. M. Eynikel, Florentino Garcia Martinez, ed., *Other Worlds and Their Relation to This World: Early Jewish and Ancient Christian Traditions*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 143 (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Walter Ameling, ed., *Topographie des Jenseits. Studien zur Geschichte des Todes in Kaiserzeit und Spätantike*, Altertumswissenschaftliches Kolloquium 21 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011).

[2] *Passio Perpetuae* 4. Jacqueline Amat, ed., *Passion de Perpétue et de Félicité suivi des Actes*, Sources Chrétiennes 417 (Paris: Cerf, 1996), 112–17.

[3] *Passio Perpetuae* 11–13. Amat, *Passion* (cf. note 2), 142–53.

[4] A. H. M. Kessels and Pieter Willem van der Horst, "The Vision of Dorotheus (Pap. Bodmer 29): Edited with Introduction, Translation and Notes," *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987): 313–59. The most recent contribution (with updated bibliography) is Joseph Verheyden, "When Heaven

al palace. In his vision he is transported to God's celestial palace, which in this text is presented as an imperial court. Dorotheus is invited to join the ranks of the angels and become the gatekeeper of the palace – a post for which he receives new attire befitting his honorable new position. Growing overconfident, he leaves his place at the gate to explore what is inside the palace. As punishment for this transgression, Christ subjects him to whipping. Dorotheus now bleeding profusely, Christ and the angel Gabriel stop flogging him and, on their intercession, God agrees that Dorotheus should be allowed to return to his place at the gate. His blood is washed away and after his baptism he embraces Andreas (from *andreia* – courage) as his new name. Having taken up his former position at the gate, he fares well and wins the admiration of many. Once again, however, he grows overconfident and asks God for a more important position. The request is denied and the vision ends.

At least two interpretations of this text – and not mutually exclusive ones – present themselves. On a more individual level, it may be read as a poem written by a troubled soul who, enduring an existential crisis, is projecting his fears of what may go wrong into the afterlife.[5] One may connect these fears with the dangers of persecution and the challenge to remain loyal to the Christian faith, though this is not a necessary connection.[6] On the level of the text's discourse – its setting within the imperial palace, Dorotheus' role as gatekeeper, and so forth – it may also be interpreted as a sign of how successfully the Roman government exercised control over its inhabitants – even in their dreams and visions – or, reversely, as a sign of how Christians saw themselves within the new imperial ideology.[7]

Whichever interpretation one favors, just like the text of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, the *Vision of Dorotheus* illustrates how images of heaven, of the afterlife, are often inspired by and serve the interests of individuals or groups in the here and now. *Jenseits* and *Diesseits* are communicating vessels. In looking at the

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Turns into Hell: The Vision of Dorotheus and the Strange World of Human Imagination," in Ameling, *Topographie des Jenseits* (cf. note 1), 123–41.

[5] Joseph Verheyden, "When Heaven Turns into Hell" (cf. note 4), 140, formulates it as follows: "Rather than being persecution literature or hagiography, this is a very personal account of an existential crisis and how it was finally overcome. … This is the highly imaginative account of a man who at one point of his life, whether for a particular reason or led by a particular event, comes to realize in a most dramatic way that all he has done was wrong, that his 'stay in heaven', which he naturally anticipated to happen one day, was not assured at all, and that God and Christ personally will take care that he gets what he deserves. It is the account of a nightmare …."

[6] Kessels and van der Horst, "The Vision of Dorotheus" (cf. note 4), 316 defends it; Verheyden, "When Heaven Turns into Hell" (cf. note 4), 139–40 points to many difficulties against this interpretation, most notably that God, Christ, and Gabriel, in afflicting Dorotheus, are in fact working *against* him.

[7] Christopher Kelly, "Empire Building," in Glen Bowersock, Peter Brown, Oleg Grabar, ed., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 170–96, 181–82.

images of the afterlife that late antique Christians held, construed, and expressed, it is interesting to try to see what agendas and whose interests are being served. With this in mind, we now turn towards the theme of this anthology.

The collection of early Christian writings known as the New Testament arguably was the most extensive and, as time went by, authoritative source that provided late antique Christians with many potent and multivalent images of the hereafter. Think of Lazarus resting at Abraham's bosom and the rich man being cast in the torments of Hades (Lk 16:23), or the Father's house with its many abodes or mansions (John 14:2). More threatening is Matthew's depiction of the last judgement: all the nations will be gathered before the Son of Man, who, sitting on a glorious throne, will separate them as a shepherd distinguishes sheep from goats (Matt 25:31–46). Paul writes that he was caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2–4), suggesting that there is more than one heaven and that they are not inaccessible to humans. The *Letter to the Hebrews* speaks of the reward of a promised land, indeed a heavenly country (Heb 11:9, 16). These and many more images from their Holy Writ provided Christians with abundant resources to develop in literary and pictorial artistry a concept of heaven that would become deeply ingrained into the collective memory of Christianity for centuries to come.

Fittingly, the ultimate chapters of the last book of the New Testament offer a most extensive description of what future existence of the righteous might be. Indeed, Rev 21–22 describes in great detail a heavenly city, the New Jerusalem as seen by John the Seer. He saw "a new heaven and a new earth," and he saw "the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev 21:1–2). It is called a dwelling place where God Himself will dwell with his people (21:3). Christ, seated upon a throne (cf. 20:11–14; 22:1), speaks words of consolation and promise but also of threat and punishment (21:5–8). Next, an angel comes forward and shows the Seer the holy city Jerusalem coming down of heaven from God (21:10). The city is described in great detail throughout the remainder of the chapter and the next: its form, its measure, its walls and gates, its river of life and great street, its tree of life. There is no day or night, as the glory of God illumines it. His throne and that of the Lamb are also in the city, and there his servants will worship him and behold his face (21:15–22:6). The pericope ends with the words of admonishment and promise that the angel who had shown the city to the Seer utters to him (22:6–21).

Revelation 21–22 is obviously an extraordinary text, rife with imagery and opening up very different ways of interpretation in addition to the well-known eschatological approaches. One of the most recognizable figures in the Christian tradition, this extravagantly portrayed city of the New Jerusalem was appropriated by Christians throughout the late-antique period to represent an array of meanings and to support various priorities. Thus, Revelation's New Jerusalem has been taken to signify *inter alia* the believer's soul, the universal church,

various ecclesiastical buildings, the present life of virtue, the future messianic reign, the coming reward of the just, and the consummated union of the virtuous with Christ in eternity. Besides Rev 21–22 *stricto sensu*, for a full appraisal of the image of the New Jerusalem, adjacent and related material must be taken into consideration. We think here in particular of accounts of the spiritual Jerusalem that emerge from a rich network of biblical, classical, and apocalyptic texts that ancient authors draw on in connection with the New Jerusalem. Examples of such sources include Paul's "Jerusalem above" pericope (Gal 4:26), the "heavenly Jerusalem" passage of Heb 12:21–22, representations of a renewed Jerusalem in the Psalter and the Prophets, Virgil's *Eclogue* 4, the Sibylline oracles, Plato's ideal city, and so forth. Treatments of the New Jerusalem inspired by non-textual ancient sources should not be forgotten either. The reception of these patristic notions of the New Jerusalem has had a direct, profound, and enduring influence on the idea of the holy city in both the West and East in many contexts and leaves a legacy that continues to shape our culture to this very day, as, once again, the *Ghent Altarpiece* demonstrates.

Surprisingly enough, to date a thorough and synthetic survey of the late antique reception of the image of the New Jerusalem of Rev 21–22 and its adjacent imagery, in textual and material culture, does not yet exist. Some decades ago Clementina Mazzucco made some forays in this field,[8] and very recently, two doctoral dissertations have marked noteworthy progress on the topic. Martina Vercesi analyzed the reception of, among other things, the image of the New Jerusalem image in Christian literature from North Africa up to the end of the fourth century,[9] and Nathan Betz provided an exhaustive survey of the same topic in the literature of the first Christian centuries (Latin and Greek) up to the dawn of the Constantinian era.[10] To move more quickly beyond this present state of the art, a symposium was organized (online, due to COVID restrictions) in Leuven on September, 30, 2020. The title of the symposium was "New Jerusalem: Conceptions of Revelation's Holy City in Late Antique Christianity." This book brings together substantially revised versions of a selection of peer-reviewed

[8] Clementina Mazzucco, Egidio Pietrella, "Il rapporto tra la concezione del millennio dei primi autori cristiani e l'Apocalisse di Giovanni," *Augustinianum* 18 (1978): 29–45; Clementina Mazzucco, "La Gerusalemme celeste dell'Apocalisse' nei Padri," in *'La dimora di Dio con gli uomini': Immagini della Gerusalemme celeste dal III al XIV secolo (Ap XXI,3)*, ed. Maria Louisa Gatti Perer (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1983): 49–75.

[9] Martina Vercesi, "'Quale Regnum Exinde Iustorum! Qualis Civitas Nova Hierusalem!': Revelation 19–21 in the Exegesis of the Christian Communities of Roman Africa from the II to the IV Century" (PhD dissertation, University of St Andrews, 2021).

[10] Nathan Betz, "City of Gods: The New Jerusalem of John's Revelation in Early Christianity (through ca. 313)" (PhD dissertation, KU Leuven, 2022). See also, from the same author, "'The city is the people': The New Jerusalem of Rev. 21–22 in Origen and His Predecessors," *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi* 39, no. 2 (2022): 313–46 and "The New Jerusalem: A Metaphor for Deification in the Commentaries on Revelation by Oecumenius and Andrew of Caesarea," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 96, no. 1 (2020): 1–39.

papers delivered on that occasion. Some contributions were not presented at the conference but were offered afterwards; these also underwent peer review.

The fifteen contributions in the present volume reveal different facets of the manifold reception history of the concept of the New Jerusalem: Possible Jewish, Greek, and Roman sources are pointed out. Fascinating corpora such as the *Visio Pauli*, fourth-century female pilgrim narratives, and early medieval Hiberno-Latin documents are unlocked. Specific authors (Origen, Victorinus of Petovium, Eusebius of Caesarea, Ambrosiaster, Jerome, Primasius, Bede, Beatus, etc.) are featured. Larger geographical or language-centered collections of sources such as second-century Greek, early North African, and later texts representing the Oriental Christianity are studied. Non-literary questions are also explored – Where is the New Jerusalem situated? What is there to say of its famous walls and precious stones? How can the divine be experienced in places and images? How is the New Jerusalem and its authoritative interpretations depicted in medieval illuminations? Though contributors were given maximal freedom in developing a smaller or broader topic in the way they thought most fruitful, some obvious foci of interest had been defined to strengthen the coherence of the current anthology. These five foci may be summarized as follows: (1) the various late antique Christian interpretations of the New Jerusalem, (2) the theological, ethical, ecclesiological, and political priorities it has been enlisted to support, (3) the sources upon which these interpretations and appropriations were based, (4) early artistic developments of the image, and (5) the motivations of the actors involved. The geographical and chronological delimitations are those of the Roman Empire during the (very) long Late Antiquity, running from ca. AD 100 to ca. 800, and sometimes even later and further afield. This book does not have the ambition to speak the final word on the subject but aims rather to stimulate further research by offering more steppingstones towards this overall synthesis.

Special acknowledgements are given to the Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek – Vlaanderen (FWO) for its support of the doctoral research project "The New Jerusalem: The History of a Biblical Image in Late Antique Christianity (ca. 150–600)" and to the KU Leuven BOF-funded interdisciplinary research project "Longing for Perfection. Living the Perfect Life in Late Antiquity – A Journey between Ideal and Reality" (nr. 3H170345). We are also grateful to Sarah Mullen for her expert editorial support.

Nathan Betz, Anthony Dupont, Johan Leemans

Part 1

Studies on Specific Authors, Works, and Corpora

Not Just Millennialists

Some Second-Century Greek Interpretations of Revelation's Holy City*

Nathan Betz

Introduction

In this contribution, I set out to correct an enduring misconception. Since the nineteenth century, there has been a persisting impression that chiliasm, or millennialism,[1] was the dominant eschatological outlook of the second-century church. Accordingly, an assumption has prevailed that the New Jerusalem, elaborately described in Rev 21 and 22, was held by most in the second century to be a basically millennial phenomenon – that is to say, it was the earthly city from which Christ, at his return, would reign on earth during his thousand-year kingdom prior to the final judgment and end of all things.[2]

Adolf von Harnack, perhaps the single most influential scholar of early Christianity since the nineteenth century, confirmed and broadly disseminated this opinion. In 1878, he noted in the widely referred-to *Encyclopedia Britannica*

* For their stimulating questions and comments on an early draft of this contribution, I am grateful to the participants in the "New Jerusalem: Conceptions of Revelation's Holy City in Late Antique Christianity" symposium in Leuven (September 30, 2020). I am thankful also to my doctoral supervisors, Johan Leemans and Anthony Dupont, for their insights and challenges that helped improve the present contribution. This work is part of a greater doctoral project that was graciously funded by the Flemish Research Foundation.

[1] By the Latin-derived *millennialism* and its corresponding Greek term *chiliasm,* I mean in this contribution the belief that Christ will one day return to earth to set up a physical kingdom, centered in Jerusalem, which will endure for a thousand years prior to the end of all things. On the definition of millennialism in the context of early Christianity, see Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 1–8.

[2] Clementina Mazzucco has observed the same tendency amongst modern scholars, specifically tracing the impression within the French literature: Clementina Mazzucco, "La Gerusalemme celeste dell' 'Apocalisse' nei Padri," in *'La dimora di Dio con gli uomini': Immagini della Gerusalemme celeste dal III al XIV secolo (Ap XXI,3),* ed. Maria Louisa Gatti Perer (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1983): 49–75, at 49–50. Hill's monograph *Regnum Caelorum* (cf. note 1) has shown carefully and conclusively that Christians in the first two Christian centuries were not monolithically chiliast.

that Justin Martyr's acceptance of the teaching made chiliasm "a necessary part of complete orthodoxy." That Justin, a Hellenic philosopher, would accept this teaching, complete with the restoration of the city of Jerusalem mentioned in John's Revelation, provides what Harnack calls "the strongest proof that these enthusiastic expectations were inseparably bound up with the Christian faith down to the middle of the second century."[3] Harnack's characterization of millennialism and its renewed Jerusalem continued to be printed in *Britannica* deep into the twentieth century. At first sight, the ancient record appears to confirm Harnack's judgment. Origen railed against the chiliastic interpretation of the future Jerusalem in *On First Principles (De principiis),* giving the impression that he is fighting singlehandedly against a dominant eschatological error.[4] Indeed, Robert Louis Wilken, in his well-known work *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought*, goes so far as to state categorically that Origen was the first to launch an alternative to chiliasm.[5] Origen's student Eusebius, too, seems to think that second-century Christianity was in general benighted by chiliastic convictions.[6]

In the following pages, I will demonstrate that for as long as Christians have been writing about the book of Revelation, their thinking on the New Jerusalem has been in important respects far from univocal. From the first part of the second century, evidence points to a variety of early perspectives regarding the identity, significance, and temporal appearance of the New Jerusalem. In reviewing this evidence, I uncover some of the earliest surviving Greek roots of Christian reflection on the biblical figure and call attention to key elements of these interpretations that subsequent Christian traditions would variously repudiate and develop. The resulting picture will, I hope, shake the casual yet persistent impression amongst scholars of early Christianity that the New Jerusalem of Revelation, especially in its second-century interpretations, was viewed dominantly, or even monolithically, through the lens of chiliasm and literalism.[7]

The structure of this contribution is simple. First, I will highlight how two early authorities – Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons – forthrightly discuss the

[3] Adolf von Harnack, "Millennium," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9th ed. (New York, 1878), 16:316.

[4] Origen, *De princ.* 2.11.3. Text and translation: John Behr, ed. and trans., *Origen: On First Principles,* 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[5] Robert Louis Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 64, 65, 70, 78. In an earlier article, however, Wilken writes about Origen's influence with greater circumspection: Robert Louis Wilken, "Early Christian Chiliasm, Jewish Messianism, and the Idea of the Holy Land," *Harvard Theological Review* 79, nos. 1–3 (1986): 298–307.

[6] E. g. Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3, where he identifies Cerinthus as a literalist interpreter of the coming kingdom (3.28) and repeatedly questions the value and provenance of Revelation (e. g. 3.24.18; 3.25.2, 4; see also 7.25.22).

[7] Charles E. Hill, in *Regnum Caelorum* (cf. note 1), has done much the same for early Christian teaching on the millennium in general.

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