



## Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association

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### THE NEW JERUSALEM —Literal or Spiritual?

When John the apostle, exiled on the Island of Patmos, saw the New Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven, he was amazed, no doubt, to see *his very own name* written on one of the twelve foundations! “And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and *in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb*” (Rev. 21:14).

It was a glorious sight for him to behold. All Bible students are familiar with the lovely description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and 22. But, among Christians, two basic interpretations of this portion have emerged.

One view—which we will call the LITERAL view—is that John’s description is to be understood literally. When he says gold streets, he means just that. When he says the gates are of pearl, he means just that. When he says the city has a river that runs through it, he means just that. This view has a wide appeal.

If John was describing a literal city, it would—admittedly—have some very nice features. Unlike many cities that have a polluted water supply, this city would have good drinking water, pure and clean. Instead of dusty streets (as were common when Revelation was written), this city would have *paved* streets—paved with gold! A unique tree would provide a very healthy food for people.

The size of this city would be tremendous. It would be laid out in a square with 1,500 miles on each side. Strangely, though, its height would also be 1,500 miles. The wall around it would be 216 feet high. Within the twelve foundations of the wall would be very fine and expensive jewels.

Now a city with clean water, streets of gold, and dazzling jewels would certainly be nice. We have no objection to these things. *But was this the point John was making?* Because so much of Revelation is written in SYMBOLIC language, might not this passage have a greater and deeper meaning? This brings us to the other view, and the one that we believe to be correct.

The other view concerning the “New Jerusalem”—which we will call the SPIRITUAL view—is that John used the description of a city and its various parts (including dimensions)

*symbolically*—to illustrate spiritual truth. Understood in this sense, his description provides a symbolic picture of the church, the body of believers, the bride of Christ.

Our reason for believing this way is quite simple: We read that an angel said to John: “Come, I will show you the BRIDE, the Lamb’s wife.” And then what happened? “He carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me THAT GREAT CITY THE HOLY JERUSALEM” (Rev. 21:9, 10).

The city *is* the bride of Christ, the CHURCH. Notice Ephesians 5:25-27: “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up to death for her, in order to make her holy, cleansing her with the baptismal water by the word, that He might present the church to Himself a glorious BRIDE, without spot or wrinkle or any other defect—holy and unblemished” (Weymouth Version). The word “her” is correct (see the context, also Moffatt, Williams, New American Standard, Phillips, NIV, Goodspeed, etc., cf. 2 Cor. 11:2).

What would we think if a man said he wanted us to meet his bride, and then showed us some walls, gates, and buildings? Obviously, such could not be his bride—not in a literal sense. So is it here. Literal walls, gates, and buildings—*non-living things*—could not be the BRIDE of the *living* Christ. But if we understand this “city” in a *spiritual* sense, it can well describe a composite “bride” made up of *people*—those who know Jesus Christ as Lord!

The church, the body of believers, has been called a “temple” (Eph. 2:21), a “house” (Heb. 3:6), a “pillar” (1 Tim. 3:15), “sheep” (Heb. 13:20), “salt” (Matt. 5:13), “branches” (John 15:5), “bread” (1 Cor. 10:17), etc. None take these terms in their literal sense. So here, likening the church to a “city” with buildings, walls, and street does not require a literal meaning either.

The city is described as “having the GLORY of God: and her LIGHT was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal...the LAMB IS THE LIGHT THEREOF” (Rev. 21:11, 23). Does the church, the body of believers, have “the glory of God”? Certainly. “And the glory which you gave me,” Jesus said, “I have given them” (John 17:22). It is “a glorious church” (Eph. 5:27). Christians have received “the light of the glorious gospel of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4)

and are “children of light” (Eph. 5:8), his “marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

The WALL of the city is “great and high” (Rev. 21:12). Walls, especially important for protection in ancient times, can well symbolize God’s protection for his people against the enemies of the church. Even in Old Testament passages, walls and gates were given spiritual meanings: “And you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise...the Lord shall be unto you an everlasting light, and your God your glory” (Isa. 60:18, 19).

“And the wall of the city had TWELVE FOUNDATIONS, and *in them the names of the twelve apostles* of the Lamb” (Rev. 21:14). What did the twelve foundations symbolize? The church is built upon the teachings of Christ that he committed to the twelve apostles. These twelve men took the gospel to the world. They were the founders. The church “is built upon the FOUNDATION OF THE APOSTLES and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief corner stone” (Eph. 2:20).

“And the foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all manner of precious stones” (Rev. 21:19, 20). Twelve stones are mentioned which correspond with the twelve stones in the breastplate of the high priest described in the book of Exodus (Exod. 28:17-20). The symbolism here seems to be rooted in this passage, as seen by the following:

In Revelation, 12 stones are mentioned; in Exodus there are 12 stones. In Revelation the names of the 12 apostles are in the foundations; in Exodus the 12 stones have the names of the 12 tribes. In Revelation the streets are gold; in Exodus the breastplate is decorated with gold. In Revelation the city is foursquare; in Exodus the breastplate of the high priest is four-square.

Perhaps there is an application here to the priesthood of every believer. In Christ, all men have access to the presence of God through the gospel. Believers are called “a royal priesthood” and “a kingdom of priests” (1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6). Using precious stones to symbolize the church is not out of place, for God refers to his people as his “jewels” (Mal. 3:17).

We are told that the “city was pure GOLD, like unto clear glass...and the street of the city was pure GOLD, as it were transparent glass” (Rev. 21:18, 21). It is not uncommon for gold to be used as a symbol. Within a setting that is obviously symbolical, Jesus said to buy “gold” (Rev. 3:18). The “golden candlesticks” in Revelation are not literal candlesticks, but symbolize the seven churches (Rev. 1:12, 20).

Paul used gold as a symbol. When men’s works are tested by fire, that which is built of “gold” will stand, but the “wood, hay, and stubble” of our lives will be destroyed (1 Cor. 3:10-15). “Gold,” then, can well represent truth that will stand the test.

The city built of gold can very fittingly symbolize the fact that the church is built with *truth*. Likewise, the “street” (singular) of the city, being pure gold, can symbolize absolute purity. The place upon which the saved walk is holy ground. It is the way of holiness. Indeed, Jesus is the way—no one can come to the Father but by him (John 14:6).

Adam Clarke (1762—1832), commenting on John’s description of the city of gold, said: “This description has been most injudiciously applied to heaven; and in some public discourses, for the comfort and edification of the pious, we hear of heaven with its golden walls, golden pavements, gates of pearl, etc., not considering that NOTHING OF THIS DESCRIPTION WAS EVER INTENDED TO BE LITERALLY UNDERSTOOD.” These words, coming from such a great biblical scholar, are weighty.

“And the twelve gates were twelve pearls...and the GATES of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there” (Rev. 21:21, 25). Gates, of course, symbolize entrance into the city. The number 12 again reminds us of the 12 apostles who made it possible for men to have access into the church through their preaching. The gates are never shut—“in season and out of season,” the gospel continues to be preached and men enter into the city. Since “the Lamb is the light” in this city, there is no night there. The truth of Christ continues to shine and will shine forever.

Gates facing each direction: east, west, north, and south, can speak of the UNIVERSALITY of the gospel. “And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God” (Lk. 13:29).

“And he showed me a pure river of WATER of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb” (Rev. 22:1). What is this water that flows from God? Jesus spoke of it when he told the woman at the well about “living water,” that is, the water of life (John 4:10). In those who would receive it, this water would become “a well of water springing up into everlasting life,” so that from believers would “flow rivers of living water” (John 4:14; 7:37, 38). This water flows from the throne of God, through the city (the church), to the nations.

“On either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the *healing of the nations*” (Rev. 22:2). As the water is called the water of life, so the tree is the tree of life, its purpose being to provide healing for the nations.

There are, no doubt, portions of Revelation 21 and 22 that portray the city in its final, complete, and perfect state. However, there are a number of verses which show it must be a PRESENT REALITY.

The water that flows in the city is available NOW. If not, what could verses like Revelation 22:17 mean: “Whoever will, let him take the water of life freely”? Such is commonly applied to the present offer of salvation. Surely men can drink the water of life *now!*

Some suppose the “New Jerusalem” is only a city of the *future*—that *after* the coming of the Lord, *after* a thousand years, *after* the great white throne judgment, *after* the planet earth is destroyed by fire, and *after* the former things have all passed away, finally the city comes down from heaven. If so, *who* are the sick nations that would then need to eat of the fruit of this tree for healing?

Because in eternity there will be no sickness (spiritually or otherwise), surely the tree for life and healing must be something that is available NOW.

Furthermore, unless the present situation is in view, how can we explain that outside the city walls “are dogs, and sorcerers, and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie” (Rev. 22:14, 15)? Are we to believe this is a picture of eternity—that UNHOLY things will continue just outside the walls of the HOLY city?

Once we realize that the “city” symbolizes the church (which is present, as well as eternal), and that both the present and future aspects of the church are in view, all of the various parts of this passage are brought into harmony.

In his vision, John saw the city coming “down from God out of HEAVEN prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:1). This speaks of the heavenly, spiritual origin of the church. It does not require that we think of this in a geographical or literal sense. Coming down “out of HEAVEN” provides a sharp contrast to the “Beast” which comes up out of the EARTH (Rev. 13:11). A strict literalism does not fit in either case.

That the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, is a present reality to which we can NOW come is quite clear: “You are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn...to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant” (Heb. 12:22-24).

Jerusalem was a literal city, mount Zion was a literal mountain—of course. But understood spiritually, these terms provide a greater, deeper, and more glorious meaning than if taken only in the literal sense.

One can fly to Israel and actually walk around on the *literal* hill called Zion. I have done it. It is only a piece of ground, a geographical location. But understood *spiritually*, “Zion” acquires a greater meaning. It is evident that Peter understood it this way when he quoted the following Old Testament passage about Jesus Christ: “Behold, I lay *in Zion* a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believes on him shall not be confounded” (1 Peter 2:6). If one tries to take such passages in a literal sense, he misses the spiritual meaning altogether.

“And the city is laid out as a square ...he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs [1,500 miles]. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal. And he measured the wall: one hundred and forty-four cubits [216 feet]” (Rev. 21:16, 17). Some have supposed that a literal city must be meant since various measurements are given. However, we must keep in mind that the city is the bride, the Lamb’s wife. Therefore, such dimensions must have a symbolical meaning in relation to the church.

Take the wall, for example. When understood symbolically the wall can

speak of God’s spiritual protection for the church. But literally, what would be the purpose of a wall 216 feet high? If this is a literal city *in heaven*, who are the enemies these walls are designed to keep out? Or, will a new earth in the distant future be so wicked that walls will be needed?

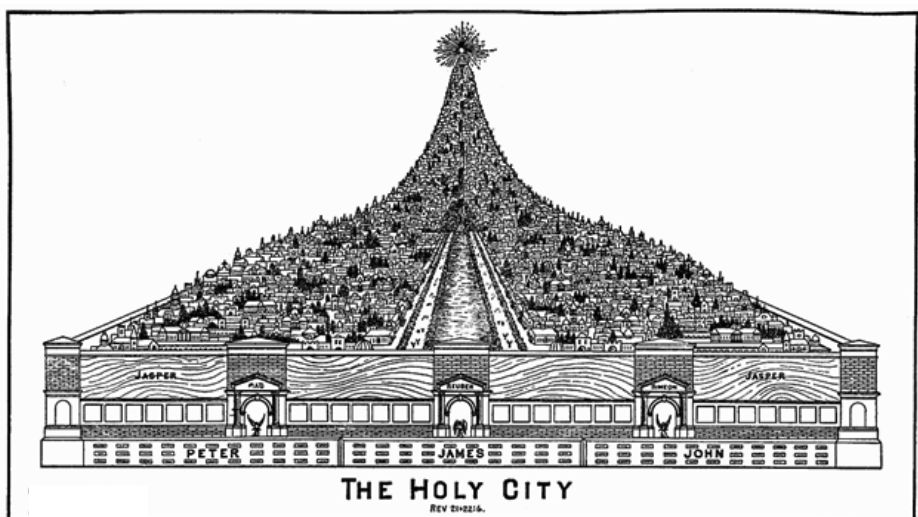
Even in our time, what protection would a wall 216 feet high provide? Would such walls hinder jet planes loaded with bombs? The literal interpretation simply cannot explain any purpose for these walls. But, taken symbolically, the “walls” have meaning and purpose.

If the PEARLS that serve as the gates are the same height as the wall (which would be a logical deduction), they too would be 216 feet high—as high as a 21-story building! Since pearls form within live oysters in the sea, how big would that sea creature need to be to produce a pearl this size? The largest known pearl in the world, the Pearl of Lao Tzu, is 9.45 inches in diameter. Can there be any doubt, then, that the pearls in the wall of the New Jerusalem are symbolical?

Some teach the New Jerusalem is a literal city that will come down and rest on the earth. With each side of the city being 1,500 miles, the land area it would cover would be 2,250,000 square miles. For comparison, the modern state of Israel is a mere 10,425 square miles!

The accompanying drawing, from a dispensational book by Clarence Larkin (1850—1924), pictures the New Jerusalem as being built on the slopes of a very steep mountain—a mountain extending upwards 1,500 miles above its base. It is supposed, by some, this huge city will be suspended like a giant chandelier just above the earth. But if the city is to remain suspended in space, why does it have foundations? Why would it need walls?

Those who hold this view apparently do not stop to reason how steep these slopes would have to be, nor do they explain what type of buildings would be built on such cliffs. The elevation of this mountain would be 7,920,000 feet (figuring 5,280 feet to a mile, multiplied by 1,500 miles). Compare this figure to that of the highest mountain in the world, Mount Everest, at a mere 29,028 feet! In other words, this city-mountain would extend upward 273 times higher than Everest.



Consider the *river* that flows down from the throne of God through the city. If it is a literal river—like the Mississippi (only clean and clear)—where does it flow when it gets to the edge? Literal water must flow somewhere! Will it form a gigantic, overwhelming waterfall crashing down upon the earth? Or will huge pumps be installed to re-circulate the water back up to the top so it can again flow out of the throne?

The literal view has presented some strange architectural designs. Some picture this city as a huge cube, a gigantic 1,500 mile high apartment house. Figuring 10 feet to a floor, this would be *792,000 stories high!* Just how desirable would it be to live in an apartment house this big? The famous Empire State Building in New York is 103 stories. So this would be 7,689 times taller!

Of course we do not doubt God's power! *If* such a city is indeed his plan, he can work out all details and solve all problems. But we must return to the clear statement: this "city" is the bride, the church, and therefore not a literal city (as such). Instead, these large dimensions, understood symbolically, can speak of the greatness of God's plan for his church and its ultimate perfection.

The number 12 often enters into the symbolism of the book of Revelation—12 tribes, 12 apostles, 12 stars, 12 angels, 12 gates, 12 foundations, etc. So here, the number 12 is found in the measurements of the city: each side is 12 thousand furlongs and the wall is one hundred and forty-four cubits, which is 12 times 12. This significance is obscured, however, as we substitute feet for cubits and miles for furlongs, the terms we are familiar with today.

The quadrangular form of the city speaks of its perfection and stability, for the square was anciently a figure of perfection. The square or cubical man was a man of unsullied integrity, perfect in all things. Even today, we use the expression a "square" deal, meaning one that is honest and upright. So in the symbolism here, this city is laid out in a square. But to further emphasize this perfection, it is described in three dimensions—the height being equal also!—thus forcefully expressing the concept of absolute perfection and solidity.

We might compare this description with most ordinary cities that spring up in a haphazard manner. A few streets are laid out. As a city grows, houses are built here and there and streets extended. In time, an old part of the city may be torn down to make more parking space. New shopping centers may emerge on the outskirts. Such cities that grow up with little or no overall planning, have no definite shape or pattern. But the city in Revelation is described as having a definite size, measurements, pattern—all of which speaks of a PLAN.

So, the church is no last minute arrangement on the part of God. Redemption is at the very center of a perfect and unailing plan, all of which was worked out in the Divine mind even before the world began (1 Peter 1:19, 20; 2 Tim. 1:9). Surely this "great salvation," and all that is involved in it, is greater by far than a literal city with streets, walls, and gates—no matter how much gold or how many jewels may be used to decorate it.



**Ralph and Arlene Woodrow**

We have no quarrel with any of our brothers and sisters in Christ who feel John's description of a city should be understood in a literal sense. It is true that much of what the Bible says is to be understood literally. But the Bible also presents truth in veiled language. It uses figures of speech. It uses parables. It uses satire. It uses poetry. It uses types and shadows. It uses hyperbole. It uses symbolism.

In biblical passages that use symbolism—with which the book of Revelation is loaded—the literal method most definitely breaks down. What about the "woman" of Chapter 12, clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and with 12 stars in her crown? Would any take this to be a literal woman, clothed with the literal sun, and so tall her legs could reach all the way to the moon? Or what about the red dragon who with a gigantic tail can cast a third of the stars to the earth? If this is a literal dragon, and the stars are literal stars, how huge would this dragon be?

John was told: "Come I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife. And he showed me that city the New Jerusalem." Had this passage said, "Come I will show you *where* the bride will live, and he showed me that city," the literal view could be valid. But, to the contrary, the description of the city is presented as a symbolic description of *the bride herself*. This very fact moves us from a literal interpretation to a *spiritual*—and actually *more glorious*—understanding. —RW

**This article, "The New Jerusalem," is based on Chapter 12 of my 128-page book *HIS TRUTH IS MARCHING ON!***

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