The New and/or Heavenly Jerusalem

Joseph Stiassny, nds

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Introduction

The formal meaning of Jerusalem is of importance only to the Sanitation Department of the Municipality. For all of us - Jews, Moslems, Christians - Jerusalem is a metaphor, a symbol, an image, an icon, creating a feeling of presence - not presence in but presence to - a bond of solidarity, a sense of belonging.

Religions is never mere metaphysics, nor simply ethics. One cannot discard religious symbols after their content has been translated into abstract notions. Once upon a time - so I have been told - there was a German theologian who claimed that the New Testament should be "entmythologisiert", meaning demythologized, relieved of all symbolic elements. However it my be, the ancients knew better and we moderns take a diametrically opposite approach: the symbol is a guide to spiritual wisdom, a means, our only means, to see the invisible. The very name of Jerusalem transports the mystic and inspires the poet:

> Great is the memory of Jerusalem
> Giving unalloyed felicity to the mind;
> No tongue can tell, no letter express
> The easy we seek with the soul, not with the eyes.

This paper attempts to give an account of the image of Heavenly Jerusalem in the New Testament. Before entering upon the subject, I wish to give a short description of Heaven as pictured by the Jewish tradition and present some remarks on the implications of portraying cities as female figures.

The idea of two Jerusalems, one below and one above, the earthly and the heavenly, belongs to traditional Jewish lore. The temple and city of Jerusalem were regarded as copies of eternal dans heavenly archetypes. The existence of the heavenly Jerusalem was inferred from Ps 122,3: "Jerusalem built as a city which is bound firmly together," where the MT *hubberah* was read *haberah,* meaning Jerusalem, built like a city, having her counterpart. R. Meir (c.AD

140) said that, of the seven heavens, the fourth was called *zevul*, "in which are Jerusalem and the temple, and an altar is set up at which Michael the great prince stands and offers sacrifice" (TB Hagiga 12b). In the *Apocapypse of Baruch,* written shortly after the catastrophe of 70, we read:

> Do you think that this is the city of which I said: On the palms of my hands I have carved you? It is not this building that is in your midst now; it is that which will be revealed, with me, that was already prepared (muhan) from the moment that I decided to create Paradise.
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> I showed it to Adam, to my servant Abraham, and again to Moses on Mount Sinai... Behold now it is preserved with me like Paradise is.

"Heaven is the heaven of the Lord and he gave the earth to the sons of man" (Ps 115, 16). Once, heaven was close to humanity and it was considered relatively easy to reach the Lord whose throne was established in the upper regions, but not too far up. After the exile, more emphasis was laid on God's transcendence, and the Great Glory was seen as inaccessible in this heavenly abode. In order to describe the distance between humanity and God, heaven was divided into a series of compartments, varying in number from two to seven. *The Testament of Levi*, chap. 2 and 3 (2nd c.BC) names three heavens:

> The lowest in dark for this reason: It sees all the injustices of humankind and contains fire, snow and ice, ready for the Day determined by God's righteous judgment. In it are all those spirits sent to punish humankind. In the second are the armies arrayed for the day of judgment to work vengeance on the spirit of error and of Beliar. Above them are the Holy Ones (the angels). In the uppermost heaven of all dwells the Great Glory in the Holy of Holies superior to all holiness.

In TB Hagigah 12b, we read: "R. Judah said: There are two firmaments, for it is said: Behold unto the Lord thy God belongeth heaven, and the heaven of heavens. Resh Lakish said: There are seven, namely, Wilo, Raqia, Shehakim, Zebul, Ma'on, Machon, Araboth."

The seven heavens are encompassed in the OGDOAD. This mysterious number eight is not to be considered as seven-plus-one, but to express totality and absolute perfection: the Plerome. Valentinus, who lived in the middle of the 2nd century, gives seven names to the last aeon: Mother, Ogdoad, Wisdom, Earth, Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit and Kiriak.

Having mentioned the 7+1 displayed in the spatio-cosmological realm, we have to address ourselves to the 7+1 sign as it relates to history and eschatology.

The exegetical cue for this number-typology was the passage of Ps 90,4 that speaks of a thousand years as but a day in God's sight (cf 2 Pet 3,8). The seven days on the creation narrative of Genesis 1 were taken to represent seven thousand years - the first six of them signifying the history of the world, the seventh or Sabbath representing the millennium that preceded the final judgment. The eighth day or the OGDOAD, which begins a new week, opens the endless day (*lo yom welo laila)* of the age to come. This tradition goes back to Heb 3,7; 4,13 and Rev 20, 2-7; it is related by Papias, by Justin (Dial. 80) and stated in its most succinct form in *The Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas*, at the end of the 1st century (ch 15):

> "He rested on the seventh day. This means: when his son comes he will destroy the time of the wicked one and judge the impious; and he will change the sun and the moon and the stars. And then He will truly rest on the seventh day...
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> Furthermore he says to them: Your new moons and sabbaths I cannot bear. See what it means: the present sabbaths are not acceptable to me, but what I have made, namely that on which I have given rest to all things and will make the beginning of an eighth day, that is the beginning of another world. Wherefore we also celebrate with gladness the 8th day, on which also Jesus rose from the dead and being made manifest ascendent into heaven.

Peter Abelard perfectly understood the connection between Jerusalem and the Sabbath day. In the hymn he composed for the Vespers of Saturday, he first speaks of the true city of Jerusalem (Vera Jerusalem est illa civitas) and then of the unending joy of the blessed who celebrate the Sabbath: *perpes laetitia sabbatizantium* (translated by Hele Waddel as "the souls on holiday").

One of the most fascinating phenomena is the metaphoric assimilation of cities to Women. The range of references is of inexhaustible richness: the maiden, the virgin, the bride, the spouse - bearing fruit or barren; the mother - nurturing or devouring; the step-mother, the matron and, of course, the young seductress, the femme fatale and the old harlot.

Jerusalem, city of the Great King (Ps 48) is considered to be God's bride or spouse. The vocabulary is always emotional. *Bat-Zion* should be translated not as "daughter of Zion" but as "Zion the maiden" or, better still, as "Zion the beloved". *Betulat bat-Zion, Zion* the little virgin. When this metaphor is used for foreign or hostile cities, it has a sarcastic, taunting or unequivocally belligerent connotation.

The Greek word *metropolis* means mother-city, and Rabi Johanan voices his hope that Jerusalem will one day become the *Metropolin* of all cities. Towards people who scorn Jerusalem, we read the challenge: "Before you examine the misconduct of Jerusalem, go and take a look at the misconduct of your mother. A final observation: a feminine noun. Jerusalem the city is in the same semantic-typological field as *malkut,* Kingdom, *basileia; kenesset Israel and Kenessiath Elohim; synagoga, the assembly of Israel; and ecclesia,* the church, and the Divine Presence, *the Shekhina.*

Galatians and Philippians

When we approach Galatians, our perspective has to be readjusted. By now, the position of Paul has become the doctrine of the Church and , for good or ill, we are all Pauline Christians. But, and this *but* is very important, when Paul wrote to the Galatians he was still in a sort of ecclesiastical limbo. His claim to have been directly commissioned by the risen Christ, independently of the mother church of Jerusalem, could be and was interpreted as indifference to established authority while his adversaries could easily claim theirs was the authentic voice of Jerusalem.

Paul, a man with deep-seated anxiety, looked all his life for what we call today "authentic existence". In Christ, in his conversion experience, he had found meaning; and now his whole energy was devoted to proclaiming the exemplar nature of his call from life under the Law to the new life in Christ.

Our passage is to be read in the larger context of Pauline thought. For Paul, the old dispensation is not passing away: rather, it has passed away once you are in Christ, the new Adam. What you had been, Jew or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, male or female has no importance since you are now a new creature. In the eyes of God, your ethnic, social and sexual status is immaterial. In the new reality created by the Christ-event, those who are in Christ have abandoned the old aeon and now share the blessings of the new. This was the conviction of Paul, and he certainly had the courage of this convictions. To compromise was out of the question when the meaning of this life and mission were challenged.

For Paul, everything is built on a two-fold opposition. Polarization dominates Paul's presentation: a thing is either good or bad - there is no neutral zone.

Concepts are treated as if they were objects, and he makes no distinction between metaphor and reality. When facing an adversary, he does not observe the Queensberry Rules: he hits below the belt.

The controversy of Paul in Galatians is not with non-Christian Jews but with fellow Christians who, according to the Apostle, do not discern the significance of the Cross and Resurrection. They relativize Christ, placing Him within the limits of the old dispensation; whereas for Paul, it is Christ who relativizes and put into proper perspective the old order. The argument is about the implications of Christians freedom for Gentile Christians: a freedom from slavery and bondage and, at the same time, freedom to serve under Christ: "For you are called to freedom, brethren; only, do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants (*douleuo*) of one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word: You shall love our neighbor as yourself" (Gal 5:13-14). This imperative is followed by a lengthy statement of what it means to "walk in the spirit" (Gal 5:16-6:10).

Galatians 4:25-31 could be described as a rabbinic midrash where allegory and typology are harmoniously blended. I would entitle it: *One Father, Two Mothers*. In the *mashal,* Father Abraham is not given any allegorical or typological expansion: for Jew and Christian alike, Abraham is the undisputed father figure: *Abraham Avinu*. It is quite the reserve when it comes to the two mothers. As we saw at the beginning, the mother-figure is ambiguous. Paul takes advantage of this multiple meaning in order to delineate two allegorical-typological continuities, polarized on the two mothers, with his characteristic splitting of good and bad. The well-known adage "like father, like son" is ignored; we have, instead, "like mother, like son." Following a quite disconcerting spatio-geographical and temporal-historical trajectory, Paul ingeniously opposes contemporary Jerusalem to Jerusalem above, the first being the locus not only of the Jewish commonwealth but of Gentile Christians who "Judaize"; and the second, Jerusalem above, of the scatological community whose Gentile members enjoy freedom from Jewish observance. No description is given of the nature of Jerusalem above: Paul took it for granted that everybody understood the meaning of this expression and that no further explanation was called for.

In the polemical part of this Letter to the Philippians (ch.3), Paul attacks Christian missionaries of a Judaizing stamp who, in the name of a higher perfection, seek to impose upon Gentile converts fleshly circumcision. A master of insulting language, the Apostle calls them "dogs, evil-doers and mutilated ones." He, of course, does not claim to have achieved perfection - his well-known modesty prevents him from doing so; yet, he has no doubt whatever that the quest for any perfection that is not the corollary of Christ's Cross leads to a dead end. For the Gentile Christian, there is no reason to be circumcised: in point of fact, it is not a step forward but backward, a return to earthly non values.

Paul concludes with the oft' quoted phrase: "Our *politeuma* is in Heaven," the Greek word being usually hold citizenship. A month ago, I myself wrote that Christians proudly hold citizenship in Jerusalem above or, at least, they already possess the "Green Card" which will dispense them from going through the lengthy process of naturalization upon arrival at their destination. Today, I hesitate to translate *politeuma* as "citizenship"; today, I would rather opt for Jerome's "conversatio": a way of life, of conduct, of behavior, of life-style. Paul opposes two ways of behaving: the one focused on things of the earth, *e pigeia*; and the other is that of the faithful whose life is related to Christ on the heavenly abode. Perhaps we already have a reference here to the perils of dual citizenship and double loyalty are removed. Diognetus found the best formula: "The Christians existence is on earth, but their way of life is heavenly."

The Letter to the Hebrews

Like his hero, Melchizedek, the author of *Hebrews* has no father or mother. Even his name is Known only to God. One thing is crystal clear: we are meeting a thoroughly convinced. Christian who has succeeded in presenting certain aspects of the faith never before touched upon. This he has done in an unparalleled blending of Scripture, Jewish apocalyptic symbolism and late-Platonic thought.

As a "word of exhortation" (13:22), Hebrews seeks to uplift a community of Christians who have grown weary. They have "drooping hands" and "weak knees" and their faith verges on being "lame" (12:12). The author points out the superiority of Jesus to the angels (1: 5-14), to Moses (3:1-6), to the levitical

priesthood. He, Jesus, is the "high priest" who offered himself for sin, and whose offering, once and for all, mediated the forgiveness of sin. For this reason, the Christians the addresses should hold fast to their course and take solace in the hope that their earthly pilgrimage will end in the heavenly city.

The word-view of *Hebrews* is a two-storey universe rather than a scheme of two ages succeeding each other. The hope for the future is not the physical resurrection of the body, not the transformation of the earth, nor the ushering-in of a new age; but, rather, the transition from one sphere of life to another. In fact, the writer to the Hebrews ties together two kinds of eschatology: on the one hand, the theory of two ages (the present age and the age to come); and, on the other, the Platonic cosmology of two worlds (the heavenly world of reality and the earthly world of copy and shadow). The heavenly altar and the heavenly city, as reality, stand in opposition to the earthly altar and the earthly city, these having only a shadowy form of existence.

The heavenly is definitive and final; everything on earth is but a transitory image. Nevertheless, as Gregory of Nissa affirms: "The person who contemplates the image also achieves knowledge of the original model." The image reflects reality, it is not pure illusion, the two are ontologically connected. Our author would endorse the well-known *bon mot* of Einstein's: "Raffiniert ist der Herrgott, aber boshaft ist er nicht" (God is subtle but he is not malicious). It is because of this continuity that Christ's atoning sacrifice on earth has a cosmic import: by sharing our sufferings and learning the meaning of human obedience, Jesus entered the "holy place" in Heaven and enables the faithful to follow him (10:12). As Fr. Lindars notes, *Hebrews* thinks of heaven as a one-room temple; there is no distinction, like on earth, between the "Holy of Holies" and the rest of the Temple. (10) *Hebrews* knows of a "realized eschatology," but it affects the Son only; he alone has entered the heavenly sanctuary. True enough, the believer, through faith-knowledge, in some measure shares the heavenly it. The community as such belongs to the eschaton, but an individual member may miss the ultimate goal. This is precisely the paradoxical status of the eschatological people in *status viatoris*.There is one interesting difference between Christ and the people of God, namely that Christ's function is related to the Heavenly Temple, while the

people of God is moving towards the Heavenly City. This dissimilarity is striking because the goal of a pilgrimage is expected to be a shrine and not a Town.

The hope of reaching the Heavenly City is the link between the holy men of the Old Testament (this is precisely the term used in *Hebrews*) and the members of the new faith-community. The men-of-faith of old looked towards the homeland *(patris)*in heaven and for the city that God prepared for them. They were strangers and wanderers on earth no less than Christians are. They lived by faith, and here I wish to give my own translation of *Hebrews 11:1:"*Faith gives us the conviction *(elenkhos)* of the reality (*hupostasis*) of things not seen: the object of our hope." The promised future is not at the end of history but in our full participation in the heavenly reality that is eternally present.

In the East, totality is expressed by the figure "things seen and unseen." In the Roman creed we read: "I believe in God, the Father almighty"; the creed Eusebius of Caesarea submitted to the Council of Nicea specifics: "We believe in one God, Father, Almighty, maker of all things, visible and invisible" (*orata Kai aorata, meaning sensible and inteligible).*

The Book of Revelation

Our old friend, Jerome of Bethlehem, an ill-natured individual and, at the same time, unequaled literary genius, remarked a propos of The *Book of Revelation*: "Quanta verba, tanta sacramenta" (so many words, so many mysteries). There are few, even among the most learned, who would not subscribe to this assertion. The *Book of Revelation* says one thing to the unconscious.

None of us can unravel the secrets of this work called, paradoxically, *Revelation;* but all of us are overwhelmed by the wealth of its imagery, and happily muse on the picture as a whole, even if the details remain elusive.

Apocalyptic is a distinctive form of teaching about history and its inevitable end. The seers have the conviction that not only are they living in the last age of history, but tant the last age itself is about to end. *The Revelaion of Johan,* which in many respects differs from the apocalyptic pattern, shares the same out-look. We read in the opening verse. "The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants the things which must take place

soon."

The difficulty of interpretation is compounded by the fact that it is well-nigh possible that the writer of *Revelation* made use of Jewish *Vorlage*, material, and that even this *Vorlage*, was the outcome of a double redaction to overloading their compositions with a prodigious amount of biblical quotation and illusion, and use association within a sequence of images instead of a logical progression of thought. Nevertheless, Shakespeare *dixit*: "Though this be madness, yet there's method in't" (Hamelet, II,2).

In every construction, in some way, patterns relate to each other and to the entire edifice. In other words, every author constructs a universe that is meaningful at least to him. As for the images, they need to be interpreted on the basis of the fund of imagery and associations available to the author in his time.

The Book of Revelation is at the end of Scripture, its last chapter (21:1-22:6) constitutes the final word addressed by the inspired writers to God's people. The Latins used to day: *Finis coronat opus* (the end crowning glory of the whole venture); and they add: *Quod primus fuit in intentione, ultimus est in executione* (what was first intended becomes manifest once the work is achieved). In the spiritual Gospel (Jn 19:30), the moment before his exaltation Christ on the Cross exclaims: *Consummatum est, tam wenishlam*.

Where in the *Epistle to the Hebrews* the ideal *polis* exists already in Heaven and remains there, and is opposed, in a polemical context, to Judaism, the *polis of Revelation* comes down from Heaven and takes the place of the earthly Jerusalem which, one gathers, has already been destroyed. According to the apocalyptic pattern, a new world is always built on the ruins of the old. Moreover, the Adversary (with a capital A), the *inimica potestas*, is not Judaism but the imperial power of Rome, *hé polis hé megalé*, the haughty city which is called *pneumatikôs*, figuratively Babylon, Sodom and Egypt. (11) (In 11:8, the allusion to Jerusalem "where their Lord was crucified" is a gloss.)

Before the first creation there was chaos, *tohu wabohu*. Through "creation", the destructive power of the waters is broken, domesticated, made subservient to God. The sea or, rather, the abyss becomes the base which supports the earth and the heavens. When God declares in a prophetic past, "The first things have

passed way" (v.4); "behold, I am making all things new" (V.5), I means that the first heavens and earth are due to dissolve, and the sea on which they are founded will be destroyed. Even 2 Peter 3:10 does not go so far: the heavens will pass away and be consumed by fire, and the earth will be burned up; but at least the sea will not come to harm. The Isaiam "new heavens and new earth" (65:17; 66:22) are opposed to the old heavens and the old earth, just as the new Exodus, the return from exile, is set against the old one, that from Egypt. The author of *Revelation* does not believe in half measures: there is no metamorphosis, no transfiguration but a new creation. The new heavens and the new earth are not, as in Isaiah, a metaphor, nor a cosmic restoration after a conflagration as in Peter; they imply not a *hiddush*, renewal, *but beriah hadasha*, an absolute new beginning.

Revelation can be compared to a Jewish apocalypse from the end of the 1st century, *The Fourth Book of Ezra* (7:30-31):

> And the world shall be turned back to primeval silence for several days, as it was at the first beginnings, so that no one shall be left. And after seven days the world, which is not yet awake, shall be roused, and that which is corruptible shall perish. (12)

What will happen once heaven and earth have passed away and the New Jerusalem is established in a new cosmos? Clearly, John wants us to know that there will be a new age on the new earth, but he is unwilling to volunteer any information about this new existence. All we can do is imitate his wisdom and discretion, and avoid changing the form of apocalypse into utopia.

This is not to say that we do not have the beginning of utopia in *The Book of Revelation*. The heavenly bliss always remains problematic: humankind is eager to have at least a foretaste of the absolute perfection still to be experienced.

Judaism differentiates *haolam haze*, the present world, *yemoth hamassiah*, the messianic period, and *haolam haba*, the word-to-come. The messianic period, inaugurated by the Son of David, will be an earthly age of universal peace and plenty; humanity will be spiritually regenerated, and the words of Zechariah (14:9) will become operative: "On that day the Lord shall be One and his name One."

Millenarism or Chiliasm, as alluded to in chapter 20 of *Revelation,* is the

Christian equivalent of the Jewish Days of the Messiah. During a thousand-year period, Satan will be bound and the risen martyrs reign with Christ. It is not yet the definitive heavenly rest but a period of blessedness never before experienced on earth. In the superabundant richness of the millennial kingdom, each vine will have, according to Papias, an early bishop of Asia Minor, 10,000 branches, and each branch 10,000 twigs with 10,000 clusters of 10,000 grapes each - all crying out to the saints to be picked.

In this description, Jerusalem does not appear: this kind of Millenarism has as horizon Paradise lost and regained. Not so in Montanism, an enthusiastic movement from the second half of the 2nd century. Montanus live in expectation of an all-embracing presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. In one of the Spirit's oracles, a Montanist prophetess was said to have seen Christ dressed as a woman, and heard that the New Jerusalem was about to descent to descend on Pepuza, a locality in Phrygia.

The trajectory leads from the garden of the beginnings to the ultimate city. Surprisingly, we are not invited to travel from the first garden to the last: the last garden is transfigured into a city, and this city is appropriately named Jerusalem.

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1. Cf. Targ. and Midrash Tehilim, ad loc.
2. 2Bar 4:1-7, in Charlesworth, I, p. 622.
3. 3, 1-4, in Charlesworth, I, p. 789.
4. Irenaeus, Adv. Haereses, I.I. 9 ao IV, I.I.
5. Irenaeus, op. cit. V, 33,4
6. Cf. M.H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Paschal Liturgy and the Apocalypse,* pp. 20f.
7. Meg. 6a, Ex. Rab. 26.
8. Ibid., Meg. 255b.
9. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Ch. 5, p. 254.
10. Lindars, B., *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews,* Cambridge, 1991. p. 91.
11. Rev 11:8; 16:19a; 17:18; 18:16ff.
12. Charlesworth, op. cit., p. 357.