

“Heavens, New (And Earth, New)”
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1. Eschatological Idea:

The formal conception of new heavens and a new earth occurs in Isaiah 65:17, 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1 (where “heaven,” singular). The idea in substance is also found in Isaiah 51:16; Matthew 19:28; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Hebrews 12:26-28. In each case the reference is eschatological, indeed the adjective “new” seems to have acquired in this and other connections a semi-technical eschatological sense. It must be remembered that the Old Testament has no single word for “universe,” and that the phrase “heaven and earth” serves to supply the deficiency. The promise of a new heavens and a new earth is therefore equivalent to a promise of world renewal.

2. Earliest Conceptions:

Cosmic verses National Type:

It is a debated question how old in the history of revelation this promise is. Isaiah is the prophet with whom the idea first occurs in explicit form, and that in passages which many critics would assign to the post-exilic period (the so-called Trito-Isaiah). In general, until recently, the trend of criticism has been to represent the universalistic-cosmic type of eschatology as developed out of the particularistic-national type by a gradual process of widening of the horizon of prophecy, a view which would put the emergence of the former at a comparatively late date. More recently, however, Gressmann (*Der Ursprung der israelitisch-judischen Eschatologie*, 1905) and others have endeavored to

show that often even prophecies belonging to the latter type embody material and employ means of expression which presuppose acquaintance with the idea of a world-catastrophe at the end. On this view the world-eschatology would have, from ancient times, existed alongside of the more narrowly confined outlook, and would be even older than the latter. These writers further assume that the cosmic eschatology was not indigenous among the Hebrews, but of oriental (Babylonian) origin, a theory which they apply not only to the more developed system of the later apocalyptic writings, but also to its preformations in the Old Testament. The cosmic eschatology is not believed to have been the distinctive property of the great ethical prophets, but rather a commonly current mythological belief to which the prophets refer without formally endorsing it.

3. Different from Mythological Theory:

Its central thought is said to have been the belief that the end of the world-process must correspond to the beginning, that consequently the original condition of things, when heaven and earth were new, must repeat itself at some future point, and the state of paradise with its concomitants return, a belief supposed to have rested on certain astronomical observations.

4. Antiquity of Cosmical Conception

While this theory in the form presented is unproven and unacceptable, it deserves credit for having focused attention on certain phenomena in the Old Testament which clearly show that Messianic prophecy, and particularly the world-embracing scope which it assumes in some predictions, is far older than modern criticism had been willing to concede. The Old Testament from the beginning has an eschatology and puts the eschatological promise on the broadest racial basis (Genesis 3). It does not first ascend from Israel to the new humanity, but at the very outset takes its point of departure in the race and from this descends to the election of Israel, always keeping the Universalistic goal in clear view. Also in the earliest accounts, already elements of a cosmical universalism find their place side by side with those of a racial kind, as when Nature is represented as sharing in the consequences of the fall of man.

5. The Cosmical Dependent on the Ethico-Religious:

As regards the antiquity of the universalistic and cosmical eschatology, therefore, the conclusions of these writers may be registered as a gain, while on the two other points of the pagan origin and the unethical character of the expectation involved, dissent from them should be expressed. According to the Old Testament, the whole idea of world-renewal is of strictly super-natural origin, and in it the cosmical follows the ethical hope. The cosmical eschatology is simply the correlate of the fundamental Biblical principle that the issues of the world-process depend on the ethico-religious developments in the history of man (compare 2 Peter 3:13).

6. The End Correspondent to the Beginning:

But the end correspondent to the beginning is likewise a true Scriptural principle, which theory in question has helped to reemphasize, although there is this difference that Scripture does not look forward to a repetition of the same process, but to a restoration of the primeval harmony on a higher plane such as precludes all further disturbance. In the passages above cited, there are clear reminiscences of the account of creation (Isaiah 51:16, "that I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundations of the earth"; Isaiah 65:17, "I create new heavens and a new earth"; 2 Peter 3:13 compared with 2 Peter 3:4-6; Revelation 21:1 compared with the imagery of paradise throughout

the chapter). Besides this, where the thought of the renewal of earth is met with in older prophecy, this is depicted in colors of the state of paradise (Isaiah 11:6-9; Hosea 2:18-21). The “regeneration” (*palingenesia*) of Matthew 19:28 also points back to the first genesis of the world. The “inhabited earth to come” (*oikoumene mellousa*) of Hebrews 2:5 occurs at the opening of a context throughout which the account of Genesis 1-3 evidently stood before the writer’s mind.

7. The Cosmical Heavens:

Hebrews 12:26-29:

In the combination “new heavens and a new earth,” the term “heavens” must therefore be taken in the sense imposed upon it by the story of creation, where “heavens” designates not the celestial habitation of God, but the cosmical heavens, the region of the supernal waters, sun moon and stars. The Bible nowhere suggests that there is anything abnormal or requiring renewal in God’s dwelling-place (Hebrews 9:23 is of a different import). In Revelation 21, where “the new heaven and the new earth” appear, it is at the same time stated that the new Jerusalem comes down from God out of heaven (compare 21:1, 2, 10). In Hebrews 12:26-28 also the implication is that only the lower heavens are subject to renewal. The “shaking” that accompanies the new covenant and corresponds to the shaking of the law-giving at Sinai, is a shaking of “not the earth only, but also the heaven.” This shaking, in its reference to heaven as well as to earth, signifies a removal of the things shaken. But from the things thus shaken and removed (including heaven), the writer distinguishes “those things which are not shaken,” which are destined to remain, and these are identified with the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God, however, according to the general trend of the teaching of the epistle, has its center in the heavenly world. The words “that have been made,” in 12:27, do not assign their created character as the reason why heaven and earth can be shaken, an exegesis which would involve us in the difficulty that among that which remains there is something uncreated besides God; the true construction and correct paraphrase are: “as of things that were made with the thought in the mind of God that those things which cannot be shaken may remain,” i.e. already at creation God contemplated an unchangeable universe as the ultimate, higher state of things.

8. Palingenesis:

Matthew 19:28:

In Matthew 19:28 the term *palingenesia* marks the world-renewing as the renewal of an abnormal state of things. The Scripture teaching, therefore, is that around the center of God’s heaven, which is not subject to deterioration or renewal, a new cosmical heaven and a new earth will be established to be the dwelling-place of the eschatological humanity. The light in which the promise thus appears reminds us that the renewed kosmos, earth as well as cosmical heavens, is destined to play a permanent (not merely provisional, on the principle of chiliasm) part in the future life of the people of God. This is in entire harmony with the prevailing Biblical representation, not only in the Old Testament but likewise in the New Testament (compare Matthew 5:5; Hebrews 2:5), although in the Fourth Gospel and in the Pauline Epistles the emphasis is to such an extent thrown on the heaven-centered character of the future life that the role to be played in it by the renewed earth recedes into the background. Revelation, on the other hand, recognizes this element in its imagery of “the new Jerusalem” coming down from God out of heaven upon earth.

9. A Purified Universe:

That the new heavens and the new earth are represented as the result of a “creation” does not

necessarily involve a production *ex nihilo*. The terms employed in 2 Peter 3:6-13 seem rather to imply that the renewal will out of the old produce a purified universe, whence also the catastrophe is compared to that of the Deluge. As then the old world perished by water and the present world arose out of the flood, so in the end-crisis “the heavens shall be dissolved by fire and the elements melt with fervent heat,” to give rise to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells. The term *palingenesia* (Matthew 19:28) points to renewal, not to creation *de novo*. The Talmud also teaches that the world will pass through a process of purification, although at the same time it seems to break up the continuity between this and the coming world by the fantastic assumption that the new heavens and the new earth of Isaiah 65:17 were created at the close of the Hexameron of Genesis 1. This was inferred from the occurrence of the article in Isaiah 66:22, “the new heavens and the new earth.”