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Revelation Text 12: Chapter 21

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Create a Learning Site (<https://www.wilrens.org>) is a monthly training letter and blog in the field of biblical studies and teaching.

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Prologue	In the Spirit	In the Spirit				In the Spirit		In the Spirit	Epilogue
	Letters	Seals	Trumpets	Signs	Bowls	Babylon	Judgment	Jerusalem	
Setting									
Scene 1									
Scene 2									
Scene 3									
Scene 4									
Scene 5									
Scene 6									
Church Interlude									
Scene 7									

This is our final unit! Where are we in the book? Not counting the epilogue: this is the end! But it is not the end in the sense that everything stops here. On the contrary, this part of the book describes a continuation, eternity, it describes what comes *after* the end, after God has accomplished his purpose and fully established and made real *his* ideas for human life and for creation.

Different from previous sections, this one does not divide into seven scenes; it shows no clear subdivisions. It seems fitting that this final, ongoing, eternal state is not divided in any way.

7 things are not
things are no more

As an aside: The number seven *is* present. We are told that seven things are not, and seven things are no more.

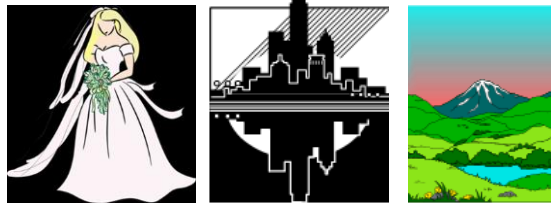
Babylon

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come. I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality ..." And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast (Rev. 17:1-3 ESV)

Jerusalem

Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:9-10 ESV)

The concluding climax of the book is introduced in a way that parallels the introduction to Babylon in chapter 17. We looked at it there, so I simply reuse that slide by way of a reminder. Same elements in both intros.



In this section, God's ultimate purpose is presented in the form of a bride and a city. Why these two symbols (because we are not literally dealing with a bride – or with a city)?

Marriage represents perfect union and here sums up the quality of the relationship between God and his people.



City stands for community. In addition, cities in the ancient world frequently represented kingdoms.

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Kingdoms and empires were not based on or centred around a country like today. It was the *Roman* Empire, not the Italian empire, and it was the *Babylonian* empire. Israel, too, could be summed up in its capital city Jerusalem or as Zion.

In other words, the use of *city* as a symbol has a double significance. First, the city represents a kingdom, *God's* kingdom, and shows that the rule and government over all of creation have been given to God's people, as promised in Daniel 7:27:

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And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High (Dan. 7:27 ESV)



“And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High” (ESV).

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And second, because it is a city, a place where people live together, it also stands for human community and society made perfect – a perfect civilisation, the very opposite of Babylon.

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What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love
him (1 Cor. 2:9 ESV)

We should recognize that the description of this city is highly symbolic. This is not a photographic representation put into words – far from it. The reason is simple: no eye has seen, no human mind imagined what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor. 2:9). The fullness of what God has in mind cannot be fully grasped in human words; it can only be expressed in symbolic language, using picture and metaphors.



"MERELY" SYMBOLIC??

An important caution: simply because something is symbolic does not mean it is less real. In fact, it may be the opposite. Sometimes students ask me about statements in Scripture whether we should interpret this or that literally or whether it is “merely” symbolic. We should leave out that qualifier. If something is symbolic, it is symbolic; it is not “merely” symbolic. It still refers to something very real but in a non-straightforward and nonliteral way.

Take the cross, for instance. It is a simple shape, not greatly significant as a mere form, that represents the sacrificial death of Jesus by means of gruesome execution on our behalf. Now, what is more real and important: the form of the cross or Christ’s substitutionary death – the visible and tangible symbol or the invisible reality it points to?

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It is similar with the city in Revelation 21. Its description is highly symbolic, including its identification as a city. But it is nevertheless a truthful portrayal of the future state of the community of God's people and of life in the age to come.

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**"TO THE ONE WHO
CONQUERS, I WILL
GIVE..."**

Remember the promises at the end of each letter at the beginning of the book. This is our reward; this is what God promises to all who persevere and conquer. It is a symbol all right, but it is not "merely" a symbol.



In 21:10, It is significant that John is taken to “a great, high mountain.” In the ancient world, it was not uncommon for a nation to believe that its gods lived on top of a certain mountain; the Greeks, for instance, had Mount Olympus. Sometimes, we find the belief that there was a high mountain at the centre of the earth, from which the world had emerged or that upheld earth and sky.

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ISAIAH 2 EZEKIEL 40 DANIEL 2

The Bible does not share this belief, but it does raise a counterclaim. Already in the OT, Isaiah 2, we read that the location of God's temple, the one place of true worship of the only true God, will in the end become that highest mountain. (This photo, by the way, shows Mount Everest, presently the highest mountain on earth.) For this reason, John is taken to a high mountain to see the city associated with that mountain. (Incidentally, this also parallels Ezekiel 40, Ezekiel's temple vision, and Daniel 2: the stone that overthrows the statue representing four kingdoms of this world grows into a mountain that fills the whole earth.)

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It is also significant that the city comes down “out of heaven from God” (21:2, 10). This is not a mere earthly reality or community. It cannot proceed from, much less be brought forth by the earthly city Jerusalem. Earthly Jerusalem was merely a type of a true and heavenly reality (and when dealing with types, elements that prophetically foreshadow NT realities, it is appropriate to refer to them as “merely” types). The earthly city Jerusalem in the OT points forward to this city from heaven.

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And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God ... It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, ... and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed ... And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (Rev. 21:10-14, ESV)

So... a great, high mountain; a city coming down out of heaven... The city has 12 gates named after the 12 tribes of Israel and the walls of the city have 12 foundations named after the 12 apostles. It is, in other words, the one city and community of both the Old and New Testament people of God: one city, one people.

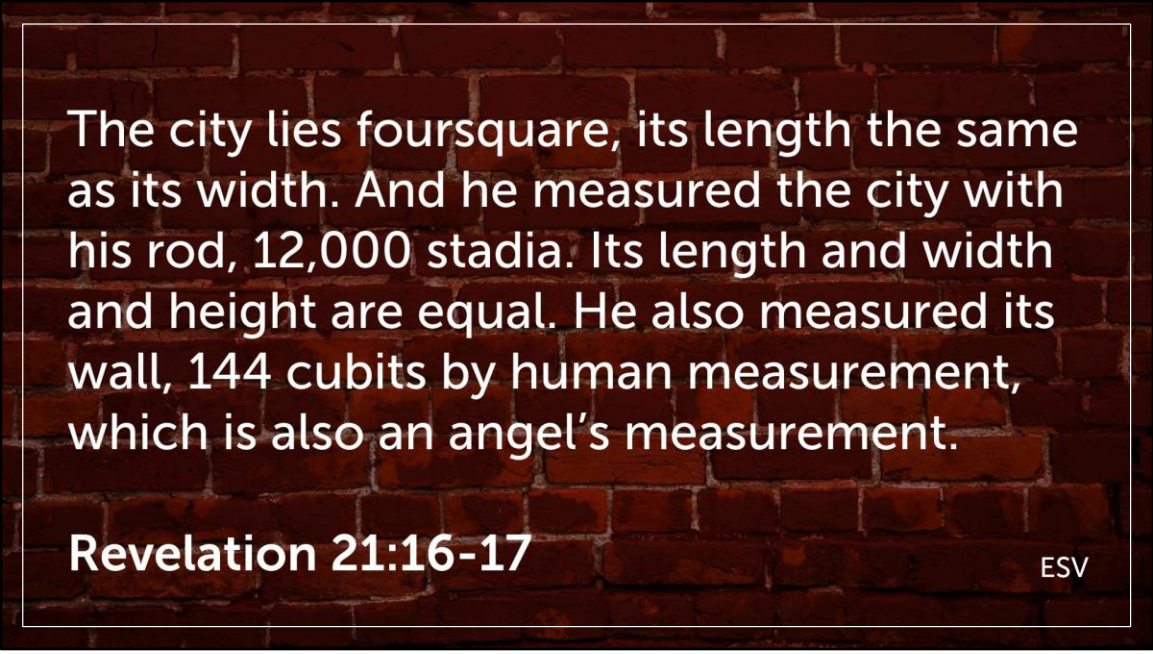
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Each foundation is adorned with its own kind of precious stone. The list in verses 19 and 20 reflects the precious stones that were part of the breastplate of the high priest. This underlines that the city is a priestly community, serving and worshipping God and representing him to creation.

We are also told the measurements of the city.

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The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement.

Revelation 21:16-17

ESV

“The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement” (Rev. 21:16-17 ESV).

The city is 12,000 stadia in every direction, including height, and the wall around it is 144 cubits.

12,000 stadia

144 cubits

1 cubit = 45 cm

1 stadium = 185 m

One cubit is approximately 45 cm, so taken literally, this wall would be 65 m high. This is high for a wall. But it is dwarfed by the height of the city. One stadion is 180 m or 607 feet. This makes for 2220 km or 1380 miles. Taken literally, this would make for a city of enormous size. Especially the height is problematic. This takes us way beyond earth's atmosphere. This city sticks out into space!

12,000 stadia

144 cubits

1 cubit = 45 cm

1 stadium = 185 m

144 cubits = 65 m

12,000 stadia = 2220 km

65 m; 2220 km. No doubt, all of this is not intended to be taken literally. It does not provide us with exact information to draw up a plan of this city of the future. We are not dealing with science fiction; it is an apocalyptic revelation.

12,000 stadia
144 cubits

$$144 = 12 \times 12$$

12 12

12 12 12 12

144 equals 12×12 . The city is 12,000 stadia wide, broad, and high. Together with the 12 gates and the 12 foundations, it has the number 12, the number of God's people, written all over it.



12,000
12,000
12,000
12,000
12,000
...
12,000

144,000

We have seen the number 12,000 earlier in the book; it was the number for each tribe in the census in chapter 7, leading to a total of 144,000. Clearly, this city symbolically represents the people of God in its entirety.

The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width ...
12,000 stadia (Rev. 21:16 ESV)

There is even more to this. John started off by describing the form of the city as square, in verse 16. “The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width.” 12,000 stadia.

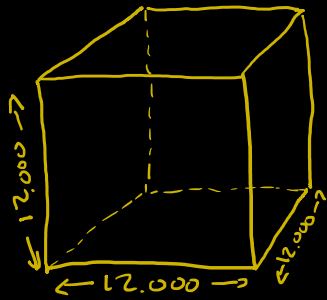
Here is what the Greek historian Herodotus wrote about Babylon in 440 BC:

The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width ...
12,000 stadia (Rev. 21:16 ESV)

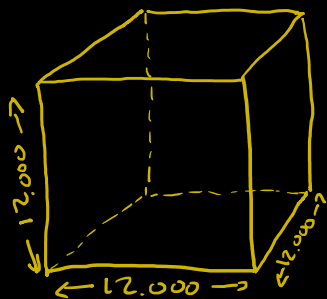
It lies in a great plain, and is in shape a square, each side fifteen miles [literally: 120 stadia] in length; thus sixty miles make the complete circuit of the city. Such is the size of the city of Babylon; and it was planned like no other city of which we know.
(Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.178.2)

It lies in a great plain, and is in shape a square, each side fifteen miles [literally: 120 stadia] in length; thus sixty miles make the complete circuit of the city. Such is the size of the city of Babylon; and it was planned like no other city of which we know. (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.178.2. Translation: Godley, A. D., 1920, *Herodotus, with an English translation by A. D. Godley* (Medford, MA: Harvard University Press)

Not only does this show God's city as of far, far greater size than Babylon; it also shows his city as the true city, not of, but for this world, the perfect and holy realization of Babylon's aspirations and those of all human civilization – but in submission to God, not in human autonomy.



Also of interest is the shape of the city. It is described as a perfect cube, even if of humongous size. Where does this come from? There is one place in the Bible where we also read about a space that has the form of a cube. It is the holy of holies in the temple of Solomon:



The inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high, and he overlaid it with pure gold. He also overlaid an altar of cedar. (1 Ki. 6:20 ESV)

1 Ki. 6:20 (ESV): “The inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high, and he overlaid it with pure gold. He also overlaid an altar of cedar.”

No wonder there is no temple in the city: the whole city is itself the temple or rather, the holy of holies, the very place of God’s presence. Since God’s presence fills the holy of holies as well as the city, it can also be said that God himself is its temple, as is explicitly stated in 21:22.

Various qualities are ascribed to this city. Two groups of characteristics predominate in the section.

First, glory, light, radiance, and brightness.

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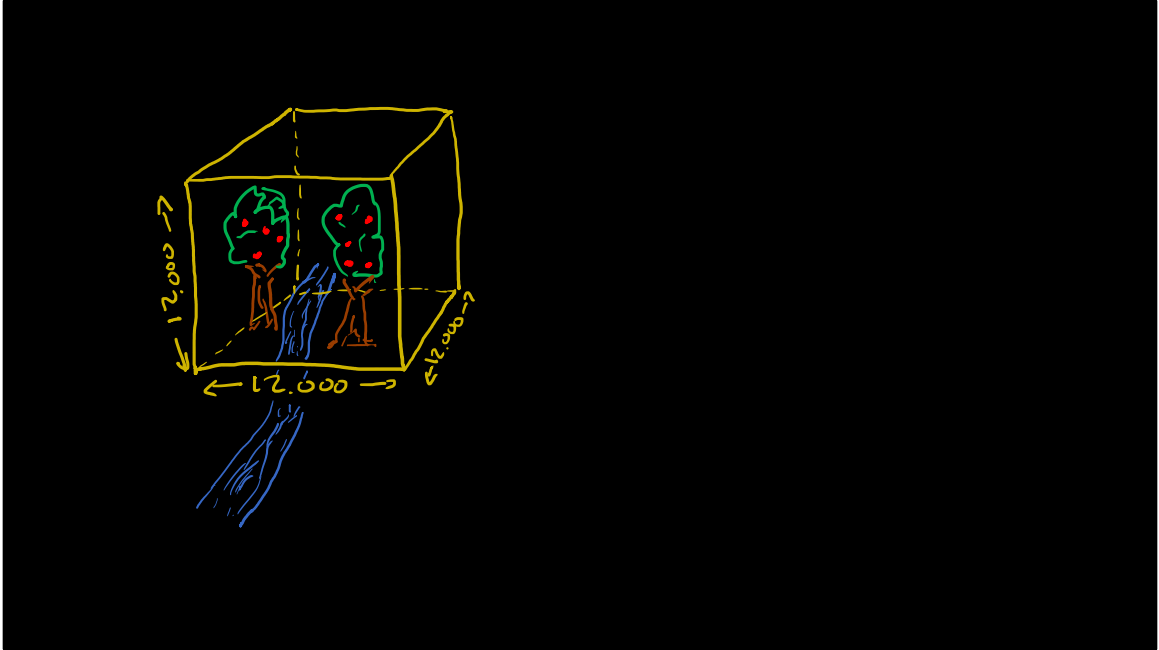
Second, terms associated with purity and clarity, including glass and crystal. Even the gold is transparent.

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In addition, there are those features that speak of unimaginable value, such as precious stones and gold.

Taken together, this speaks of unbelievable beauty, of God's presence (it is after all his glory and his light that illuminates this city), and of purity and holiness (it is after all the bride made perfect).

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There are two more elements of the city that I want to address. They are the river of the water of life flowing from the throne and the tree of life growing there. Literally, it reads: in the middle of the street and of the river, from here and from there, that is, on both sides, the wood of life – it is a forest rather than a single tree. A similar scene, of life-giving water and trees, is described in Ezekiel 47 and must have inspired John's vision at this point.

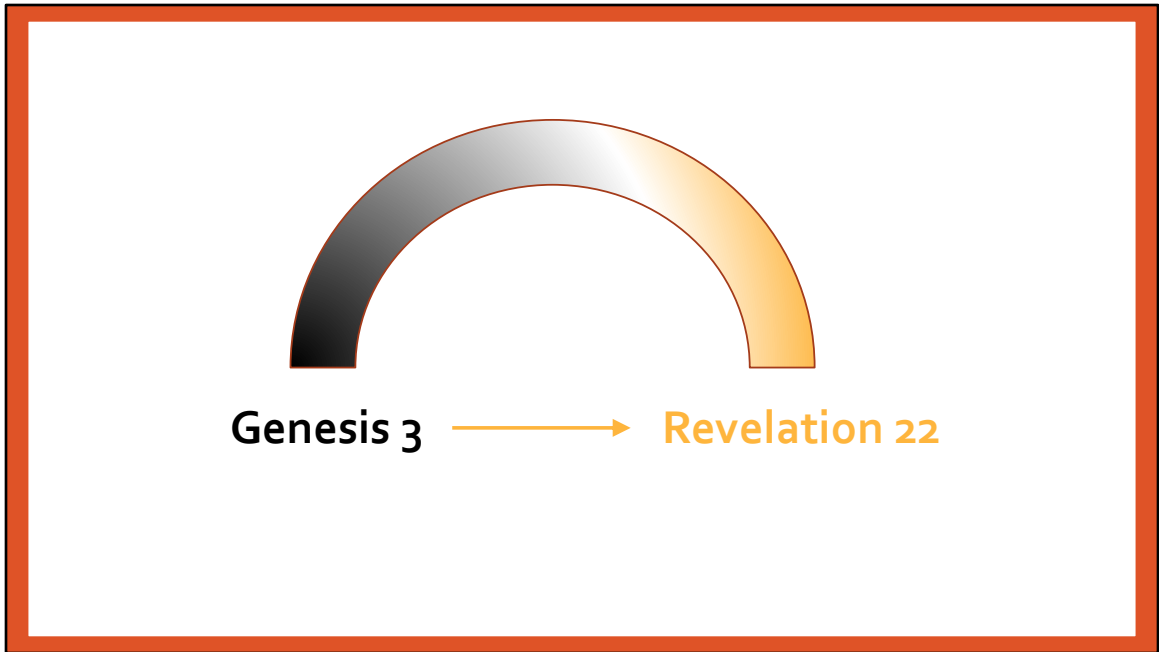
Both elements, river and tree of life, take us back to the very beginning of the Bible, to the garden of Eden in Genesis 2. This is its counterpart. The crisis that developed in Genesis 3 has been resolved. Everything sinful and evil and corrupt has been transformed or removed. Creation has been restored to its original harmony and peace (or shalom), and more.

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The story that begins in a garden ends in a city that is at the same time also a garden. The photo shows the hospital in Darmstadt, Germany, designed by the Austrian architect Hundertwasser. City and garden can go together. The city is not necessarily a place of darkness and evil; it can be redeemed and become a place of healing.

Kiefer, 23 August 2015, "Waldspirale, designed by Austrian artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Darmstadt, Hessen, Germany",
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Genesis 3 tells us how paradise was lost. Revelation 22 shows us that paradise has been restored. And in this restored garden of Eden, there is no serpent.

God once again dwells with humans as in the beginning, except that it is now a huge community (a multitude no one can number), not two individuals, and a glorified creation, transformed to match and reflect God's eternal glory forever.

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With that, we have come to the end of the vision and the end of this series of lectures on the book of Revelation. The book finishes with additional affirmations and warnings that I will not further discuss, except to point out there is an invitation as well.

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The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. (Rev. 22:17 ESV)

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Come. Take. The life of the future can already be enjoyed in the present.

So what else are we to take away from all this? Many things, no doubt, but the book's main aim is to provide *hope* in order to inspire *commitment* and to empower God's people for *perseverance*, especially those who will face the threat of martyrdom. I hope it has this effect on you.

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But I believe the book also wants to inspire us to already live the qualities of the future in the present: purity; transparency; holiness; union with God and with others; love; beauty; radiance. Because this reality is not limited to the future; in some ways, it is also already present.

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Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20)

Because as believers we are the people of this city, already in possession of our heavenly citizenship, so Paul in Philippians 3:20. In our communities on earth, that is, in the church, the light of this heavenly and future community should already be shining through.

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As Jesus put it in Mt. 5: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden ... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Mt. 5:14, 16 ESV)

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