

Question: What is “the new heavens and the new earth” that the Bible talks about?

I believe that the phrase “the new heavens and the new earth” refers to our present world after it has been purified of all the effects of sin and evil. This will take place upon the return of Christ at the end of the present age. I realize this is different from the traditional understanding, but at this stage of my study this is what I understand for the following reasons.

Jesus often spoke of “heaven” as the place where God the Father resides. For example, He taught his disciples to pray, “Our Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9). At other times, Jesus used the word “heaven” to describe the place where the birds fly (Matt. 6:26), the lightning flashes (Luke 17:24) and the sun, moon and stars reside (Matt. 24:29). Thus, we see that the words “heaven” and “earth” used in conjunction with each other as in “the heaven and the earth” refer to the whole of God’s created world.

When God first created our world, he placed the first man and woman in a sinless place on earth called the “Garden of Eden” (Genesis 2:8-15). But when Adam and Eve sinned, the entire world was tragically affected. The man and woman were banished from Eden and separated from “the tree of life.” Through painful toil the man would have to work the ground that would now produce thorns and thistles, and the woman would suffer pain in childbearing (Genesis 3:16-24). After thousands of years of sin’s devastating effects upon the whole creation, the apostle Paul wrote that “the creation was subjected to frustration” and “has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Romans 8:20-22). But he also stated that there is hope for the creation itself to be “liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). This indicates that God has a future plan for his creation, the “heaven and the earth.”

A few years later, the apostle Peter discussed the events that would occur when the Lord comes again at the end of the present age. He said that some people scoffed at the promise of the Lord’s coming, saying: “Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:4). But Peter reminded them that long ago “the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water” (2 Peter 3:5-7).

Then, he added: “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare” (2 Peter 3:10).

We should not understand this fiery “destruction” of the world to mean the world will be totally annihilated any more than the Genesis flood annihilated the earth in Noah’s time. The same word for “destroyed” is used to describe both events. Instead, the fiery destruction that God will bring upon the earth will serve to destroy all sin and evil and return to us a purified world, just as the flood cleansed the earth in ancient days. In an earlier writing, Peter spoke of “gold, which is destroyed even though refined by fire” (1 Peter 1:7). When gold is passed through a fire to be refined, the gold itself is not destroyed; but the impurities are burned up so that the gold becomes even more precious. In a similar way, this old world of evil will be destroyed by fire and heat; and the “new heavens and a new earth” that have been cleansed of all sin will be brought forth.

Also, to call the purified world “new” does not mean that it never existed before. For example, 2 Corinthians 5:17 calls believers in Christ “a new creation.” This believer is the same person he was before being in Christ; but at the same time, he is not the same person. The old person has been cleansed of past sin and evil desires in order to now “live a new life” (Romans 6:4) as a new creation of God. In the same way, the “new heavens and new earth” will be the same world and yet not the same old sinful world. God will have given it a transformed newness by purification through fire.

The final time the expression “new heaven and new earth” is mentioned is in the last two chapters of the Bible (Revelation 21:1). There it is described in terms that remind us of the Garden of Eden with the tree of life (Rev. 22:1ff). As he did in the garden, once again God will live with his people; and they will reign with him forever and ever. Thus, I believe that the “new heaven and the new earth” is a return to the original place and plan God had for his creation from the beginning of time. I don’t know about you, but I’m looking forward to being there with my heavenly Father.

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