

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY – CHARLOTTE

JOHN AND THE DISAPPEARING SEA: REVELATION 21:1

SUBMITTED TO DR. KRUGER  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
HEBREWS TO REVELATION

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MAY 10, 2016

## Introduction

Few phrases in the Bible are more exhilarating than the words of John in Revelation 21:1 when he spectacularly declares, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, *and the sea was no more*.”<sup>1</sup> This vision of the future has stimulated the minds of Christians for hundreds of years and offered hope to many for the future restoration of God’s creation. Yet, within this exciting proclamation are also some of the most enigmatic words in the New Testament. The closing phrase of Revelation 21:1, “and the sea was no more,” has caused much speculation by scholars and found little consensus on the meaning of this phrase. Some dismiss it as a passing phrase of slight importance<sup>2</sup> while others hold it up as one of the major interpretive keys to the entire book of Revelation.<sup>3</sup> Even among those who believe that the phrase is significant, there is great debate over what the “sea” John envisions actually is.<sup>4</sup> This lack of consensus leads to a number of important interpretive questions: Is this sea literal or figurative? If it is figurative, what does it represent? Is it related to other uses of the “sea” in Revelation? Is John drawing from Old Testament allusions that he expects us to read into his statement in 21:1c? How we answer these questions and others like them will have a serious impact on how we understand Revelation as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis mine. All Scripture quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1981), 199; Rudolph W. Raber, “Revelation 21:1-8,” *Interpretation* 40, no. 3 (July 1986): 296.

<sup>3</sup> D. Mathewson, “New Exodus as a Background for ‘The Sea Was No More’ in Revelation 21:1c,” *Trinity Journal* 24, no. 2 (2003): 243; J. Moo, “The Sea That Is No More : Rev 21:1 and the Function of Sea Imagery in the Apocalypse of John,” *Novum Testamentum* 51, no. 2 (2009): 148.

<sup>4</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich. : W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 1042; Mathewson, “New Exodus,” 246; Moo, “The Sea That Is No More,” 150-160. Beale, Mathewson, and Moo all offer a summary of the most popular interpretations. (1) John is talking about a literal sea that separates him from his readers. (2) The sea is a portion of the tripartite division of creation that consists of heaven, earth, and sea. (3) The sea is the heavenly sea mentioned in Revelation 4 and 15. (4) The sea is the origin of cosmic evil. (5) The sea is the place of the dead. (6) The sea represents unbelieving, rebellious nations. (7) The sea is the location of the idolatrous trade activity of the world. I will address these interpretations in more detail throughout the paper. Most of them have some merit, but placing the weight of focus on a single explanation prevents one from apprehending the greater structure that undergirds John’s imagery of the sea throughout Revelation and culminates in 21:1c

In this paper I will propose that the words John writes in Revelation 21:1c, “and the sea was no more,” are much more than a passing phrase to be glossed over. In fact, I am convinced that this phrase is the last, consummate statement on a theme that is woven throughout the Bible from the very creation of the world in Genesis 1-2 to the final consummation of the New Heavens and New Earth in Revelation 21-22. I believe that when we consider Revelation 21:1c in its immediate context, it points us toward Old Testament threads that must be present in our minds if we are to properly interpret both John’s general use of the sea throughout Revelation and his specific use in 21:1c. Once we understand the overarching theme that John draws from in this phrase, we will be able to better grasp and appreciate not only this short phrase, but also what he tells us regarding the New Heavens and New Earth in Revelation 21-22.

### **Revelation 21:1c in its Immediate Context**

When we consider Revelation 21:1c in its immediate context (21:1-5), it becomes clear that “the sea was no more” is intended to lead the reader back to the Old Testament. This passage forms a chiasmic structure that progresses from what John “sees” (καὶ εἶδον) in verses 1-2 to what John “hears” (καὶ ἤκουσα) in verses 3-5.<sup>5</sup> The chiasm is arranged in the following way:

- A. New heavens and new earth (1a)
- B. First heaven and earth have passed away (1b)
- C. The Sea is no more (1c)
- D. The New Jerusalem-bride (2)
- (shift from vision to audition)*
- D.’ Dwelling of God with his bride (3)
- C.’ Death, sorrow, and pain are no more (4a-c)
- B.’ The former things have passed away (4d)
- A.’ All things are made new (5a)

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<sup>5</sup> Mathewson, “New Exodus,” 244-245.

According to the above structure, the removal of the sea is “paired lexically and syntactically with the removal of death, sorrow, and pain in 4a-c.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, when we explore the scholarly work on this passage it becomes clear that every portion of it contains allusions to the Old Testament that have been readily acknowledged by numerous authors.<sup>7</sup> The one major exception to this is Revelation 21:1c, which most scholars attribute solely to ancient Near Eastern cultural beliefs about the sea as a source of chaos, disorder, and evil.<sup>8</sup> While this is surely a piece of the meaning that lies behind Revelation 21:1c, it would be shortsighted not to delve into the Old Testament themes that John may be drawing from when he uses this phrase, especially when we see that John uses Old Testament allusions in every other portion of the passage. If John were doing anything other than pointing the reader back to the Old Testament when he writes, “the sea is no more,” it would be quite an anomaly.<sup>9</sup>

### The Scope of Interpretation

Fortunately, John does not leave us completely in the dark when it comes to the range of interpretive possibilities available as we look for correspondences between the Old Testament and Revelation 21:1c. The chiastic structure of Revelation 21:1-5 reveals a correlation between the disappearance of the sea (“C” in the chart above) and the removal

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<sup>6</sup> Mathewson, “New Exodus,” 245. Mathewson and others also point out the clear connection between 21:1c and 21:4a-c because John uses the exact same wording (οὐκ ἐστὶν ἐτι) to declare that they are no more. Also see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1042; Simon Kistemaker, *Revelation*, New Testament Commentary, v. 20 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2001), 555; D. J. MacLeod, “The Seventh ‘Last Thing’: The New Heaven and the New Earth (Rev. 21:1-8),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157, no. 628 (2000): 442.

<sup>7</sup> Mathewson, “New Exodus,” 248. Revelation 21:1a-b alludes to Isaiah 65:17 (cf. 66:22). Revelation 21:2 alludes to Isaiah 65:18b; 52:1; 54:5; 61:10; 62:1-2. Revelation 21:3 alludes to Ezekiel 37:27; 43:7; Zechariah 2:10-11a [MT 2:14-15a]; 8:3, 8. Revelation 21:4 alludes to Isaiah 25:8; 51:11; 65:19b-20a. Revelation 21:5 alludes to Isaiah 43:19.

<sup>8</sup> D. E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22* (WBC 52c; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1119; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1041-43; A. Y. Collins, *The Apocalypse* (New Testament Message 22; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1990), 144; J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Westminster Pelican Commentaries; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 297. While this cultural belief may play a role in our interpretation of Revelation 21:1c, I believe that it stops short of the deeper biblical themes that John is incorporating in this phrase.

<sup>9</sup> Mathewson, “New Exodus,” 248. “Obviously, this does not insure that an OT reference lies behind the disappearing sea in 21:1c, but it does invite the interpreter to explore such a possibility.”

of sorrow, death, and pain (C' in the chart above).<sup>10</sup> This parallel leads to some helpful observations: (1) the removal of the sea is clearly a blessing for God's people,<sup>11</sup> (2) the very existence of the sea serves as a barrier to the establishment of the New Heavens and New Earth,<sup>12</sup> (3) God alone is the one who is able to overcome the barrier and bless his people. These points of clarity delineate the framework by which we can now explore the Old Testament references to the "sea" that may lie behind John's words in Revelation 21:1c.

### **The Sea in the Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Literature**

#### **Creation**

One of the indicators that John may be drawing from the creation story in Revelation 21:1-5 is his list of seven things that will be no more: the sea (21:1), death, mourning, crying, pain, the former things (21:4), and night (22:5).<sup>13</sup> Every one of these items that John lists is associated with the accounts of the creation and fall. "The middle five can in biblical tradition be related ultimately to the effects of the curse and the expulsion from Eden described in Gen 3...echoing Zech 14:11, but with Gen 3:17 also looming in the background."<sup>14</sup> The first and last items that bookend John's list "are representative of the pre-creation state of the world in Gen 1:2, when 'darkness was upon the face of the abyss, and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.'"<sup>15</sup> Together, these seven items

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<sup>10</sup> Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 555.

<sup>11</sup> Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 162. "...the removal of the sea in Revelation is made parallel not to other judgments but to other blessings. The end of the sea cannot be construed as a further punishment of humankind or even of evil nations, but rather its absence is an integral part of what makes the new creation a place of joy, without evil, death, pain or sorrow." This is an important interpretive key for Revelation 21:1c that seems to be overlooked by many authors.

<sup>12</sup> Mathewson, "New Exodus," 246-247. "...within the chiastic arrangement of 21:1-5a observed above, the disappearing sea is paired with the disappearance of death, mourning and weeping, all of which God's people are subject to as part of belonging to the old order...these connotations—chaos, realm of evil powers, affliction, and suffering—contribute to the *negative* notion of the sea as which is inimical to the establishment of the new creation (21:4)."

<sup>13</sup> Another indicator is the tree of life in 22:2.

<sup>14</sup> Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 165.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-166.

represent (1) the order that God imposed upon chaos and disorder when he formed the world and (2) the chaos and disorder that then entered the world when Adam and Eve sinned. The connection John draws between Genesis 1-3 and Revelation 21-22 should not surprise us. In fact, it would be odd for John not to describe the creation of a New Heaven and New Earth without harkening back to the original creation.

This connection between the original creation in Genesis and the final creation in Revelation 21:1c leads to a significant interpretive conclusion: in order to remain consistent with our understanding of the “sea” in Revelation 21, the untamed waters of Genesis 1:2 must be understood as something that was not good. This is not necessarily a problem, for in Israel and in the rest of the ancient Near East the sea was often depicted as a source of chaos, evil, and death that carried the potential to disrupt the order of the world.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the chaotic nature of the ocean does not in any way undermine God’s sovereignty as creator. Israel’s commitment to an all-powerful God led them to a very different conclusion than their geographical neighbors regarding the tension between the chaos of the sea and the authority of their God. “Whereas in the Near Eastern myths there is a static, unresolvable, dualistic tension between chaos and order, in the Bible there is a dynamic, historical tension between chaos and personal Creator.”<sup>17</sup> Though the sea may try to rebel against God, it will ultimately submit to God’s command; there is no tension, God alone is sovereign.<sup>18</sup> This reality is exactly what we see in the creation story. The untamed sea in Genesis 1:2 is a barrier to God’s order and to his people inhabiting the earth;<sup>19</sup> but when God moves to subdue it, the sea offers no pushback, it is ordered

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<sup>16</sup> Leland Ryken et al., eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 711. Also see Thomas E. Schmidt, “‘And The Sea Was No More’: Water as People, Not Place,” in *To Tell the Mystery: Essays on New Testament Eschatology in Honor of Robert H. Gundry*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement 100 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 237-239.

<sup>17</sup> Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 496-497.

<sup>18</sup> A. H. W. Curtis, “The ‘Subjugation of the Waters’ Motif in the Psalms: Imagery or Polemic?,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 23 (1978): 255. Curtis even suggests that the “subjugation of the waters” motif in Genesis 1-2 may have been equally, if not more, prominent to the ancient Near Eastern mind set than the motif of creation. “References to creation occur in some nineteen of the Psalms; of these, eleven also refer to the checking of the waters, and possibly as many as twenty-six Psalms contain references to the fact that Yahweh has the waters in subjection.”

<sup>19</sup> Mathewson, “New Exodus,” 251.

and formed in exact accordance to God's will by the very power of his word.<sup>20</sup> This creative event in Genesis and John's allusion to it in Revelation 21:1c offers a helpful starting point for a theme that is woven throughout scripture.

### The Flood

The second place in Genesis where the sea plays a prominent role is the Flood narrative in Genesis 6-9. There are at least three reasons why this story may also lie behind the image of the sea being removed in Revelation 21: (1) Second only to the final judgment in Revelation, the Flood narrative is the most pervasive act of judgment by God against humanity and even foreshadows the final judgment of God at the end times,<sup>21</sup> (2) God's sentencing on the wicked is carried out by the use of the sea, and (3) like Revelation, the Flood narrative also includes a re-creation event that looks forward to the final renewal of all things at the consummation of Christ's kingdom.<sup>22</sup>

God's use of the sea as his mode of judgment is significant in this story because it is the first time in scripture that we see God actively wiping out (nearly) the entire human race. In doing so, God sets a precedent that continues to be seen in throughout the Bible, "the sea is preeminently that part of the cosmos that God is seen to use in judging the world and its inhabitants."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the way that God's use of the sea in the Flood narrative echoes back to the threat of the chaotic "waters" mentioned in Genesis 1:2.<sup>24</sup> In the creation story, the authority of God over the sea is first brought to light. In the Flood

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<sup>20</sup> Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 166. Moo, interestingly, suggests that the existence of the sea in Genesis 1:2 hints at the potential for evil to "spring up in an otherwise good creation" and may even foreshadow the later rebellion of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3.

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Michael J. Kruger, "1 Peter: Important Sections/Issues" (lecture, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC, March 21, 2016). Multiple New Testament authors use the flood narrative as a paradigm for understanding the final judgment and the second coming of Christ. See also Matthew 24:37-44, Luke 17:26-30, 1 Peter 3:18-22, 2 Peter 3:4-5.

<sup>22</sup> G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2011), 414 n.70. Furthermore, the precise parallel between the cultural mandate given to Adam in the garden before the Fall and to Noah after the flood also suggests that the Flood is intended to be understood as a recreation event.

<sup>23</sup> Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 165.

<sup>24</sup> Graydon F. Snyder, "Sea Monsters in Early Christian Art," *Biblical Research* 44 (1999): 15.

narrative, God's supreme sovereignty over it is emphasized to an even greater degree. God is not only able to set boundaries on the sea, but he is able to direct it as the mode of punishment to simultaneously destroy sinners and save the righteous. The salvation of Noah and his family further reveal God's surgical, precise ability to both judge and save exactly whom he wills by bringing them through the very same floodwaters that he employed to impose retribution on the rest of the world.

If the Flood narrative does indeed lie behind the removal of the sea in Revelation 21:1c, then it would serve as the second knot in the thematic thread that John ties between the Old Testament and Revelation 21:1c. Additionally, this story would clarify certain aspects of John's sea imagery. In the Flood narrative, God used the sea to wipe out the sin and wickedness that had spread through the world, but in the New Heavens and New Earth there will be no sin. With this perfect world in mind, John may be using the imagery of a nonexistent sea to emphasize that where there is no sin there is also no threat of judgment. Therefore, the greatest threat and reminder of God's judgment would be removed, and along with this removal would come the disappearance of any fear of future judgment.<sup>25</sup>

### The Exodus

The third instance where the sea plays a major role in the Old Testament is in the Exodus event when God parts the Red Sea. This phenomenon is used throughout the Old Testament as "a paradigm of God's further acts of deliverance of his people from the threat of enemies and death."<sup>26</sup> Many of the psalms and prophets that speak of God exercising his sovereignty over creation by drying up the sea and making dry land "have their antecedent in the Exodus event."<sup>27</sup> For example, the New Exodus described in Isaiah 40-55 looks back to the Exodus event and uses it as a model for God's future

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<sup>25</sup> Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 165.

<sup>26</sup> Mathewson, "New Exodus," 250-251. Also see Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 70; Schmidt, "'And The Sea Was No More,'" 239; Snyder, "Sea Monsters," 15.

<sup>27</sup> Mathewson, "New Exodus," 249-250. Mathewson lists Psalm 18:15, 74:3, 106:9; Isaiah 44:27, 50:2d-e, 51:10-11; Nahum 1:4; Zechariah 10:10-11.

salvation. Moreover, John even uses this “New Exodus” motif in Revelation in ways that echo back to Isaiah.<sup>28</sup> John also uses Passover language to depict Christ as the true Passover Lamb (1:5-6), he alludes to the victory song of Moses in Exodus 15 as the people of the Lamb sing a new song by the sea (15:3), and he employs plague imagery reminiscent of Exodus 7-11 in Revelation 15 to describe the wrath of God being poured out on the nations, and utilizes Sinai theophany imagery to depict future judgment (4:5, 8:5, 11:19, 16:18-21).<sup>29</sup>

The New Exodus may be one of the most helpful interpretive keys for Revelation because it so accurately describes the circumstances of John’s audience. They were Christians who were wandering through the wilderness of the world awaiting their entrance to the final, eschatological Promised Land of the New Heavens and New Earth.<sup>30</sup> Both Isaiah and Zechariah envisioned a new, eschatological exodus for the people of God, and John might very well be drawing on this theme when he describes the new creation.<sup>31</sup> For the Israelites who were leaving Egypt, the Red Sea was a seemingly insurmountable barrier that simultaneously blocked their path to salvation and pinned them in against the impending army of Egypt. The circumstances were hopeless and the Israelites were helpless. But in this moment of weakness, God exercised his power over the waters of chaos not only to bring his people into freedom but also to simultaneously bring judgment down on the evil army of the Egyptians.<sup>32</sup> It is this cosmic event of salvation that lies behind Isaiah 51:10 and Zechariah 10:11.<sup>33</sup> What is significant about

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<sup>28</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1043. Regarding Revelation 21:1c in particular, Beal writes that Isaiah 51:10-11 “metaphorically equates the removal of the waters at the Red Sea deliverance to the removal of sorrows at the consummation of the ages.”

<sup>29</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation*, 70-71; Mathewson, “New Exodus,” 255; Moo, “The Sea That Is No More,” 155.

<sup>30</sup> This context continues to be relevant to Christians today.

<sup>31</sup> Moo, “The Sea That Is No More,” 163.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 165. “The exodus itself represented not only the Lord making a way through the sea for his people but using its waters to drown their pursuers.” There is a clear parallel between the exodus and the flood in God bringing his people through the waters and drowning his enemies in the waters concurrently.

<sup>33</sup> Isaiah 51:10, “Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the deep, who made the depths of sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?” Zechariah 10:11, “He shall pass through the sea of troubles and strike down the waves of the sea, and all the depths of the Nile shall be dried up.”

each of these passages is that they were written after Israel's exile and looked forward to a New Exodus when God would finally and permanently bring his people through the seas of chaos and evil and back to the Promised Land from which they had been removed.<sup>34</sup> John seems to see the consummation of Christ's kingdom as the fulfillment of the New Exodus and draws a correlation between this eschatological event and the removal of the sea.<sup>35</sup>

### The Thematic Unity of The Creation, Flood, and Exodus

In these three historical events we see common themes that collectively indicate a leitmotif that runs through the Old Testament. This leitmotif seems to play a significant role in Israel's understanding of God and how he accomplishes salvation for his people. All three episodes share a number of features: (1) the sea serves as a barrier between God's people and the land, (2) the presence of the sea poses a threat to the welfare of God's people, (3) God governs the waters to bring about life for his people and subjugation over his enemies, and (4) from his governing of the waters comes new life and a new creation.<sup>36</sup> In these three historical events God lays down a precedent and model that his people can use to properly understand his character by his acts of salvation, judgment, and creation.

The shared thematic elements among these three episodes suggest that they ought to be read in light of one another. Furthermore, because John also deals with these concepts in Revelation, we ought to filter our own interpretation of Revelation through this same lens. It is unlikely that John would implement so much sea imagery into his book without connecting it to the Old Testament framework he uses throughout Revelation. For these reasons, as we consider the sea imagery within Revelation, we must approach it through the biblical paradigm of creation, flood, and exodus.

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<sup>34</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation*, 70; Mathewson, "New Exodus," 252; Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 162-163

<sup>35</sup> See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1043; Mathewson, "New Exodus," 254; Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 165.

<sup>36</sup> Mathewson, "New Exodus," 251.

## The Sea in Ancient Near Eastern Literature

A secondary, but nevertheless helpful set of resources that also sheds light on Revelation 21:1c are some of the available non-biblical works of ancient Near Eastern literature.

These works illustrate just how pervasive ideas associated with the sea have been over the course of history and aid our interpretation of sea imagery by filtering it through a culturally appropriate lens. One concept that has been closely tied to the sea in many cultures is that of death. “Ancient coastal societies (Greeks, Romans, Palestinians) were conscious of two abodes of the dead, the sea, thought inappropriate and unnatural...and the land, widely regarded as appropriate.”<sup>37</sup> We even see this concept illustrated in Revelation 20:13 where John writes, “the sea gave up the dead who were in it...”<sup>38</sup>

Another ancient Near Eastern concept connected to the sea is the Combat Myth or Chaoskampf. This myth describes the struggle between order and chaos (what we would now call “good” and “evil”). Many of Israel’s neighbors used these Combat Myths to explain the dualistic struggle between the two, with the sea always representative of chaos.<sup>39</sup> We see this illustrated in the Babylonian Epic of Creation, called the *Enuma Elish*, where “the primeval forces of water, Tiamat and Apsu...must be overcome by [Marduk] before the world can be created.”<sup>40</sup> The Canaanites had a similar myth recounting the battle between the storm god Baal and the sea god Yamm.<sup>41</sup> Along similar lines, the sea was also known to be the abode of viscous sea monsters that threatened the order of the world.<sup>42</sup> While the Israelites rejected these Combat Myths and dualistic battles in favor of the creation story of Genesis 1-2, they still viewed the sea as an agent

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<sup>37</sup> Aune, *Revelation*, 1102.

<sup>38</sup> See Moo, “The Sea That Is No More,” 160.

<sup>39</sup> Reid et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 497.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 107. Also see Gale Heide, “What Is New about the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no. 1 (March 1997): 45 n.25.

<sup>41</sup> Curtis, “The ‘Subjugation of the Waters,’” 250.

<sup>42</sup> See Snyder, “Sea Monsters,” 10-11. Snyder mentions three sea monsters described in the Bible: Leviathan (Psalm 74:14; Isaiah 27:1), Rahab (Isaiah 51:9-10), and Tannin (Genesis 1:21; Ezekiel 29:3-4; Psalm 148:7).

of chaos, a source of danger, a place of malevolent evil, and an abode of death.<sup>43</sup> In fact, many of God's acts of sovereignty over the sea in the Old Testament may have been partially for the purpose of absolutely establishing himself as the supreme ruler over all creation. Nonetheless, these Combat Myths and sea monsters were well known throughout the ancient world and are addressed by both Old and New Testament authors. Our own awareness of them will better equip us to understand sea imagery throughout the Bible, and particularly in Revelation.

The sea also plays a prominent role in extra-biblical apocalyptic literature. These works are especially relevant to the book of Revelation because they share a similar genre. In fact, many scholars are convinced that these books are the primary matrix for understanding John's statement that the sea is no more.<sup>44</sup> While I am not of that conviction, I do believe that these extra-biblical resources can still be helpful by shedding light on ideas that were common during the eras of Old and New Testament authors.<sup>45</sup> These concepts can serve us as we attempt to properly interpret Revelation 21:1c. There are three major references to the removal of the sea in these apocalyptic works: *Sibylline Oracles* 5:447-48,<sup>46</sup> *Apocalypse of Moses* 10:6,<sup>47</sup> and *Apocalypse of Elijah* 5:9-14.<sup>48</sup> Of them, "the closest parallel to Rev 21:1c appears to be *Apocalypse of Elijah* 5:9, 14, where the disappearance of the sea functions as a prelude to the establishment of the

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<sup>43</sup> Reid et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 711. The Bible gives no indication that God is ever at war with the sea, as is implied in the Combat Myths. In fact, it suggests the exact opposite to be true. The stories of creation, the flood, and the exodus alone illustrate God's complete sovereignty over the waters. Yahweh is unique among the other gods of the time in this way. Nevertheless, these associations with the sea were ever present in the minds of all Ancient Near Eastern people groups. Also see Aune, *Revelation*, 1119-1120. Aune points out the multitude of ways God subjugates the waters throughout the Old Testament.

<sup>44</sup> Mathewson, "New Exodus," 247.

<sup>45</sup> Heide, "What Is New," 45; Ladd 276.

<sup>46</sup> "In the last time, one day the sea will be dry, and ships will then no longer sail to Italy."

<sup>47</sup> "And the sea all the way to the abyss will retire, to the sources of waters which fail. Yea, the rivers will vanish away."

<sup>48</sup> "The earth will be dry. The waters of the sea will dry up...We went to the deep places of the sea, and we did not find water."

new creation.”<sup>49</sup> While none of these extra-biblical passages are exact parallels to Revelation 21:1, they reveal that many people in the ancient Near East believed that in a perfect, redeemed world something like the sea, which was associated with chaos and evil, simply could not be allowed to exist.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, they impress upon us the importance of understanding John’s use of sea imagery in Revelation through a Biblically and culturally appropriate framework. John spoke in a particular time and place to a particular group of people, and we must let that reality inform how we understand his writing.

### **The Sea in John’s Apocalypse**

#### **Introduction**

The book of Revelation is saturated with water imagery and comprises “by far the greatest concentration of such imagery in the Bible or in contemporary apocalyptic literature.”<sup>51</sup> In fact, one of the greatest challenges to resolving the meaning of “sea” in 21:1c arises from how challenging it is to determine the level of continuity/discontinuity among the different ways he uses it. John uses sea imagery in a number of ways throughout Revelation. Some of the most striking uses are the sea as a part of the created order (5:13; 7:1-3; 8:8-9; 10:2, 5-6, 8; 14:7; 16:3), the sea of glass in the throne room of God (4:6), the sea of glass mixed with fire (15:2),<sup>52</sup> the sea as the abode of the beast and the rebellious nations (13:1), the sea as the means of trade for the harlot Babylon (18:17, 19), the sea that gives up the dead in it (20:13), and the sea that is no more (21:1). We must sift through this litany of sea imagery in order to determine which one(s), if any, might serve as an interpretive key to 21:1. However, while we do this, we must also keep in mind our prior survey of Old Testament sea imagery, which will serve as a hermeneutical guardrail and steer us toward a Biblically centered and unified exegesis of the phrase at hand.

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<sup>49</sup> Mathewson, “New Exodus,” 247.

<sup>50</sup> Schmidt, ““And The Sea Was No More,”” 242-243.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>52</sup> The sea of glass in 4:6 may or may not be the same as the sea of glass mixed with fire in 15:2. In this paper, I will address the two together.

### The Sea as Part of The Created Order

Many times in the book of Revelation John refers to the sea as one part of the created order. In these instances it does not seem that he is using the sea for any sort of metaphorical purpose. Rather, he uses it to represent a part of the world or the dwelling of sea creatures that give praise to God. Some scholars believe that John's reference to the sea in 21:1 bears no special significance and should simply be interpreted as a part of the created order that has been removed. This is highly unlikely because the sea in 21:1 is not mentioned alongside the heavens and earth, but apart from them, indicating that the lack of sea in 21:1 is intended to serve a special, symbolic significance.<sup>53</sup> Along these same lines, others have suggested that the sea of Revelation 21:1 is the literal sea of John's day that separated him from his readers. According to this view, the disappearance of the sea is purely about John being reunited with his audience.<sup>54</sup> This interpretation also falls short because it utterly fails to take into account the context of 21:1 and the parallel it shares with 21:4, which associates John's disappearing sea with the disappearance of other present day realities such as death, sorrow, and pain.<sup>55</sup> For these reasons, it is safe to reject the literal use of the sea in Revelation as the interpretive key for understanding 21:1.

### The Sea of Glass

In Revelation we also discover "something like a sea of glass" (ὡς θαλασσαν υαλινην) in 4:6 and 15:2. The similar language suggests that these two references may be related, but the context of each indicates that even if they are related, they are communicating different messages. The "sea of glass" in 4:6 is located in the throne room of God and seems to be "at once the floor of heaven and by extension the ceiling above the earth."<sup>56</sup> Others, along this line of thinking, have attributed the sea of glass here to the covering or

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<sup>53</sup> Mathewson, "New Exodus," 246; Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 150.

<sup>54</sup> Mathewson, "New Exodus," 244.

<sup>55</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1043.

<sup>56</sup> Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 152.

veil that separates heaven from earth in Isaiah 25:7.<sup>57</sup> If this is the case, there may be a sense in which the “sea of glass” in 4:6 emphasizes God’s sovereignty over the waters.<sup>58</sup> But even if that were true, it is hard to square this “sea of glass” with the disappearing sea of 21:1. The presence of the sea in 4:6 is not depicted as something that is bad and needs to be wiped away, while the sea in 21:1 is clearly associated with evil realities and is removed along with them. This contrast demonstrates that the “sea of glass” in 4:6 and the “sea that is no more” in 21:1 are not the same sea. While they may both thematically serve to illustrate God’s total sovereignty over the waters, they are associated with different, even contrary themes.

The second instance of the “sea of glass” occurs in 15:2, where it is “mingled with fire” before God’s victorious people. In Revelation, fire imagery is “nearly always associated with judgment.”<sup>59</sup> In 15:1 we see that this “sea of glass mingled with fire” is linked to the “seven angels with seven plagues...for with them the wrath of God is finished.” The plague imagery used in this description of God’s judgment indicates that John is intentionally connecting the “sea of glass” to the Exodus event. This becomes even more evident in 15:2b-3, where the saints of God are “standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses...” If this is the case, then John is correlating the “sea of glass mingled with fire” to the parting of the Red Sea.<sup>60</sup> In both events God’s enemies are finally and fully judged by means of the sea while God’s people stand safely on the shore and sing songs of victory. This image strikes much closer to the image of Revelation 21:1. Both instances associate the sea with death, and the final judgment of God’s enemies in 15:2 suggests what may be the explanation behind the absence of the sea in 21:1. This connection implies a successful

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<sup>57</sup> J. Webb Mealy, *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20* (JSNTSup 70; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 96.

<sup>58</sup> Moo, “The Sea That Is No More,” 153, Resseguie, 80.

<sup>59</sup> Moo, “The Sea That Is No More,” 154.

<sup>60</sup> Mathewson, “New Exodus,” 255 n.45.

and final exodus for the people of God, a theme that permeates Revelation and even echoes back to the New Exodus spoken of in Isaiah 40-55.<sup>61</sup>

### The Sea and the Beast/Babylon/Satan

The third major use of sea imagery in Revelation revolves around the beasts/Babylon and the evil, rebellious nations of the world. These images conjure up much of the evil and chaos that was associated with the sea in the ancient Near East. In 13:1, the beast arises out of the sea, wins followers from the world, and threatens God's kingdom and people.<sup>62</sup> It is in this use of the sea that John's awareness of ancient Chaaskampfs is most evident. While some scholars believe that John is drawing primarily from these Combat Myths,<sup>63</sup> it is more likely that he is drawing from Old Testament themes that may have had these Combat Myths in the background.<sup>64</sup> In the actual Chaaskampfs, the sea itself is the primary antagonist who opposes the god of order in the story, but in Revelation the sea is not the personified enemy, but rather the abode or dwelling place of the enemy (the beasts/Babylon/Satan).<sup>65</sup> This suggests that John's use of the sea in Revelation is much more in line with the Old Testament than with any ancient Combat Myth.

Nevertheless, this image of the sea does seem to share qualities with the disappearance of the sea in 21:1. First of all, both view the sea negatively and associate it with chaos, the realm of evil powers, affliction, and suffering.<sup>66</sup> Secondly, both view the

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<sup>61</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1043; Mathewson, "New Exodus," 253; Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 155.

<sup>62</sup> C. Deutsch, "Transformation of Symbols : The New Jerusalem in Rv 21:1--22:5," *Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 78, no. 1 (1987): 115-116; Mathewson, "New Exodus," 246; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 369-370.

<sup>63</sup> A.Y. Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1976) 207-234.

<sup>64</sup> Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 158. Moo writes, "[John's] basic reliance on the Old Testament throughout Revelation means that his use of extra-biblical mythic material is likely to have been reworked in its light and even to derive much of its *significance* from scriptural categories."

<sup>65</sup> Heide, "What Is New," 44; Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 158.

<sup>66</sup> Mathewson, "New Exodus," 247.

existence of the sea as a threat to God's order, which echoes back to the sea as a potential threat to God's people in the Creation, Flood, and Exodus narratives. Thirdly, both associate the sea with God's judgment. In Revelation 18, the sea is the mode of Babylon's idolatrous trade and the source of its wealth, but in the end it is thrown into the sea and destroyed by the very thing that had previously brought it prosperity.<sup>67</sup> The theme of judgment also harkens back to God's judgment of the world through the Flood and his judgment of Egypt in the parting of the Red Sea. Based on these Old Testament connections and the shared qualities between John's use of sea imagery here and its use in 21:1c, we are able to find many points of correlation.<sup>68</sup>

### **Conclusion**

#### **The Meaning of Revelation 21:1c**

Now that we have surveyed the corresponding themes of sea imagery in the Old Testament and Revelation, we can piece together the greater meaning behind the disappearance of the sea in Revelation 21:1. The three major Old Testament events we have explored share a similar story: there is disorder and evil in the world,<sup>69</sup> but God imposes his sovereign will on this disorder and uses the sea to establish a new creation. Yet, in each story, the threat of de-creation remains. Redemptive history shows us that the original Creation, the Flood, and the Exodus do not lead to the final stage of the earth's existence. What they do reveal and point toward is that the world needs to be re-created if God's people are to experience full and lasting salvation, but they all fall short of accomplishing what they point toward. In many ways, the continued existence of the sea throughout these events serves as a sign and reminder: as long as the sea exists, the threat of de-creation and the need for a final re-creation remains. Although God is completely sovereign over the waters, while the sea persists, both the threat of evil and

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<sup>67</sup> Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 159-160.

<sup>68</sup> Mathewson, "New Exodus," 247; Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 157.

<sup>69</sup> This applies even in the creation story. For, although the world was without sin and Adam and Eve were without sin, the very presence of Satan in the world shows us that evil existed before the earth was created. The Fall didn't bring evil into existence, it brought into a perfect world the evil that already existed.

the need for God's judgment endure.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, in each of these events the sea also serves as a barrier to God's people inhabiting the land.<sup>71</sup> In Genesis, the waters over the face of the earth must be subjugated and separated for Adam and Eve to multiply and fill the earth. This same command is also given to Noah, when God causes the flood waters to recede and gives Noah dry land to dwell on. Likewise, God causes the waters to recede in Exodus so that Israel can escape Egypt and enter the Promised Land.

The continuity among these redemptive historical events undergird John's use of sea imagery in Revelation, particularly regarding the disappearance of the sea in 21:1. We see the same themes of Creation, Flood, and Exodus present throughout Revelation. God's people are moving toward a final and lasting salvation; but the sea continually reminds the reader that danger remains, evil threatens the security of God's people, final judgment has not yet been accomplished, and the new creation remains to be seen. But throughout Revelation there are glimpses of hope: God's saints emerge victorious over the beast and stand safely on the "sea of glass mixed with fire" as they sing a song of victory (15:2) and Babylon is sentenced to destruction by being thrown into the sea (18:21). Then, in Revelation 21:1, we see "a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away..." This statement leads us to a question, "Is this the final creation even of redemptive history? Or is it like the first Creation, the Flood, and the Exodus; another redemptive historical event that fails to fully accomplish what it points toward?" This question is then answered in 21:1c, "...and the sea was no more." The absence of the sea is no mere observational add-on; it is the inaugural declaration that this truly is the final, permanent, and eternal re-creation event! It is the fulfillment of the Old Testament shadow, and it resolutely declares that the world John is about to describe is unlike anything humanity has ever seen before.<sup>72</sup> Unlike the first creation, unlike the world after the flood, and unlike Israel in the Promised Land, this new world is

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<sup>70</sup> Moo, "The Sea That Is No More," 167.

<sup>71</sup> J. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1992), 91.

<sup>72</sup> Mathewson, "New Exodus," 258. "Rev 21:1c stands at the climax of a chain of references to God controlling the antagonistic sea which has throughout history threatened his people, beginning at creation, and recurring at crucial junctures such as the flood and the Exodus, where God created things anew by subduing the waters in a new creative act."

eternally secure to the extent that chaos and evil are utterly powerless, non-existent, and unable to even threaten the communion of God and his people.<sup>73</sup> The absence of the sea illustrates this future reality in a unique way that brings absolute, eschatological relief to the tension that has existed since the very creation of the world. Furthermore, it serves as the interpretive key that unlocks the unparalleled, once-in-an-eternity newness of the New Heavens and New Earth!

### Theological Application

One question this paper has led me to ask is, “Why does this matter? Does the absence of the sea and what it represents regarding the newness of the New Heavens and New Earth have any practical theological implications for God’s people today?” I believe the answer to this inquiry is a resounding, “Yes!” Let us begin by considering that there has never been a point in human history when the threat of evil did not exist in some form or fashion. As I’ve already mentioned, even in the garden before Adam and Eve sinned, Satan existed and roamed the earth. His very presence threatened everything that God had created and declared good in the world.

When Adam and Eve sinned, the Fall affected the world in more ways than we know; and because of it we cannot conceive of a world without sin. Even when we are doing well and life seems to be going smoothly, the threat of sin is never far off. It was present in Old Testament Israel when the Israelites looked to the sea and shuddered with fear at the chaotic forces it represented. It is present today when we take our perfectly healthy child to the doctor knowing that it only takes one abnormal test to discover the presence of a terminal disease. No human being has ever lived in a world where the threat of sin and evil are completely nonexistent, and their constant presence has always forced God’s people to live within a tension.

This reality, when it comes into contact with our understanding of God, leads many people to ask, “Can God even create a world where the very threat and existence of evil is utterly and eternally dispelled?” This is a fair question, seeing as how humanity has never glimpsed a world of that nature in all human history. Even the great creation/re-

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<sup>73</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation*, 53.

creation events of redemptive history (the first Creation, the Flood, and the Exodus) did not accomplish this goal. For after these great acts of God, humanity continued to be ravaged by the power and effects of sin in the world. This continual, pervasive existence and threat of evil is one of the greatest reasons why people reject or abandon the Christian faith. They see and experience the effects of sin and cannot square this reality with a sovereign, creator God. They ask, “Is God sovereign, but evil; or is God good, but not sovereign?” This is a fair question, and this is why John’s statement in Revelation 21:1c is so important. It answers this question that lingers in the back of our minds. In this short phrase we are able to glimpse an entirely new and different world, unlike anything anyone has ever seen. In this world, the sea is no more. What this means is that the reality and threat of evil *can* be utterly and completely wiped away. What it means is that God is able to create a world where evil is absolutely non-existent. What it means is that God is both sovereign and good. And if that is true, then we can have hope that produces perseverance in the face of evil and its dwindling reign over the earth.

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