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The New Jerusalem: Wealth, Ancient Building Projects and Revelation 21–22*

CANDIDA R. MOSS
Department of Theology, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK. Email: c.moss.1@bham.ac.uk

LIANE M. FELDMAN
Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, New York University, New York, NY 10012, USA. Email: lmfeldman@nyu.edu

Scholarly interpretations of the descent and description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21–22 have tended to evaluate the city against biblical and extra-canonical descriptions of the Jerusalem Temple, apocalyptic accounts of heaven and ancient utopian literature in general. While some have noted the ways in which the New Jerusalem parallels the description of Babylon elsewhere in the Apocalypse, no one has yet considered the ways in which the New Jerusalem mimics, mirrors and adapts the excesses of elite Roman architecture and decor. The argument of this article is that when viewed against the backdrop of literary and archaeological evidence for upper-class living space, the luxury of the New Jerusalem is domesticated and functions to democratise access to wealth in the coming epoch. The ways in which Revelation's New Jerusalem rehearses the conventions of morally problematic displays of luxury can partially explain later patristic discomfort with literalist readings of this passage.

Keywords: New Jerusalem, imperial architecture, Rome, luxury, Revelation

Introduction

At the beginning of *De tranquillitate animi*, Serenus, a correspondent and young prefect in Nero's night watch, wrote to his mentor, Seneca, in great distress. Despite his moderate lifestyle and self-discipline his mind had been 'dazzled … by the sight of a house where one even treads on precious stone and riches are scattered about in every corner, where the very roofs glitter, and the whole town pays court … [and by] the waters, transparent to the bottom, that flow around the guests even as they banquet'. The sight of these things is so unsettling that he

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returns home 'sadder ... and [finds that] there enters a secret sting and the doubt whether the other life is better'.[1] Serenus is suffering, in the words of Galen, from acquisitiveness, the gateway character flaw that leads not only to distress but to envy of every kind.[2] Seneca responds with directions for what has variously been called the therapy of desire or the care of the soul: he recommends practices of self-discipline designed to erase distress.[3]

One can only imagine how Serenus would have responded if he had read the ekphrastic description of the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21–22.[4] The city is constructed using the most expensive materials available. The walls are made with jasper (21.18a); the foundations are 'adorned with every jewel', the gates with pearls, the main square of the city is 'pure gold' like 'transparent glass' (21.19–21).[5] The city is technologically superior to ordinary spaces; it is permanently lit by the glory of the God, so that there is no need for lamps or even the sun (21.23; 22.5). Paradoxically, this urban centre contains within it all the splendour of rural creation: a river flows through the city and on either side of the water grows a tree of life, brimming with twelve kinds of fruit that flower all year round (22.2).[6] The New Jerusalem, we must conclude, is a city of luxury and wealth.[7]

The purpose of this article is to consider the significance of the New Jerusalem against the backdrop of elite ancient Roman building projects. While previous scholarship has evaluated the origins of the design and decor in light of the Jerusalem

1 Seneca, *De tranquillitate animi* 1.8.

2 Galen, *On Affections and Errors* 48, I.32 Kuhn.

3 On the language of the 'therapy of desire', see M. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). For the language of the 'care of the self', see P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (trans. M. Chase; Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

4 On the use of the technique of ekphrasis in descriptions of the afterlife in Revelation, see M. R. Henning, *Educating Early Christians through the Rhetoric of Hell: 'Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth' as Paideia in Matthew and the Early Church* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); R. J. Whitaker, *Ekphrasis, Vision, and Persuasion in the Book of Revelation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

5 Unless otherwise noted translations are from the NRSV.

6 The existence of paradoxes within heavenly space is a feature of Second Temple Jewish apocalyptic literature. See, for example, the presence of both fire and ice in heaven in 1 En. 14.10, 13–14, in which the temple is 'hot as fire and cold as snow'. See discussion in G. W. E. Nickelsburg, 'Enoch, Levi, and Peter: Recipients of Revelation in Upper Galilee', *JBL* 100 (1981) 575–600; M. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 120 n. 31. There is, perhaps, a remnant of the description in Rev 15.2, in which God's throne is described as 'a sea of glass mingled with fire'.

7 Like so much in the Apocalypse, the description of the heavenly city is replete with symbolic numbers. The measuring and measurements of the space, reminiscent of the prophetic and apocalyptic descriptions of the ideal temple, articulate the divine schema through the use of symbolic numbering.

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temple – both the earthly temple and heavenly one – and descriptions of utopian spaces in the ancient imagination, the question of the text's relationship to non-Jewish earthly architecture has remained unexplored.[8] The current article will explore how affinities with Roman building projects affect our reading of this passage.

1. Utopian Spaces in Ancient Literature

Even though, unlike other apocalyptic tours of heavenly space, the New Jerusalem of Rev 21–22 does not contain a temple, the real and idealised temple is often regularly cited as a source for Revelation's description of the eschatological city.[9] Throughout Revelation there are references to heavenly space – for example the altar under which the souls dwell and from which they cry out – that suggest it is a temple. The description of the New Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God and his people in 21.3b recalls the way that the temple functions in Ezek 37.27, which is itself a reflection of the priestly pentateuchal idea that God desires to live in the midst of his people.[10] Just as with Ezekiel's Temple, Revelation's city is carefully measured with a golden rod to ensure its symmetry and perfect proportions.[11]

8 Comparatively recent surveys of the cultural and literary sources of the New Jerusalem include P. Lee, *The New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation: A Study of Revelation 21–22 in the Light of its Background in Jewish Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001); E. J. Gilchrist, *Revelation 21–22 in Light of Jewish and Greco-Roman Utopianism* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

9 There are many reasons to think that heavenly space is conceived of as a Temple. First, much apocalyptic literature is generated by concerns about the defilement or destruction of the Temple. For this view see, for example, the statement of J. J. Collins that 'much of Jewish apocalyptic literature was inspired by three major crises that befell Jerusalem and its temple' (J. J. Collins, 'Jerusalem and the Temple in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature of the Second Temple Period', *International Rennert Guest Lecture Series* 1 (1998) 10. For the view that Revelation was composed in reaction to the Judean war, see J. W. Marshall, *Parables of War: Reading John's Jewish Apocalypse* (Waterloo, ON: Wildred Laurier University Press, 2001) 88–97. Second, a number of ancient apocalyptic Jewish texts express the idea that heaven is a kind of temple and relate earthly rituals and practices to that heavenly temple. Finally, many elements of the description of the New Jerusalem overlap with descriptions of the earthly and heavenly temples and Rev 11.19 strongly implies that there is a heavenly city that contains the ark of the covenant. Interestingly, Zeno prohibited the building of temples in his description of the ideal city (*SVF* 1.62, frs. 264–71). See discussion in A. Erskine, *The Hellenistic Stoa: Political Thought and Action* (London: Duckworth, 1990), 24.

10 See Exod 25.8. For a discussion of divine dwelling places in the Hebrew Bible, see M. B. Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth: Safeguarding the Divine Presence in the Priestly Tabernacle* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011). For the connection of a New Jerusalem with Ezekiel's temple, see E. S. Fiorenza, *Priester für Gott: Studien zum Herrschafts-und Priestermotiv in der Apokalypse* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1972) 51. See Ezek 34.30; 36.28; 37.27; and Tg. Ezek. 37.26–7.

11 Ezek 40.3 and 5Q15. See discussion in F. García Martínez, 'The "New Jerusalem" and the Future Temple of the Manuscripts from Qumran', *Qumran and Apocalyptic: Studies on the*

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In the same way, the style in which the details of the city are enumerated is characteristic both of apocalyptic descriptions of the temple and other sections of the book of Revelation itself.[12] Walls of precious stones are mentioned in Isaiah, Tobit and a number of Qumran texts.[13] Likewise, the floor under God's feet in Exod 24.10 is described as looking like bricks of sapphire. A similar group of precious stones appear on the breast plate of the high priest in Exod 28.17–20, and have been connected with the Garden of Eden in subsequent traditions.[14] Isa 54.11–12 describes the construction of the New Jerusalem with what is, again, a near-identical grouping of stones. In Ps.-Philo's *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* the stones are brought to the temple from the Havilah (which is essentially Paradise in the text). The physical relocation of precious stones leads Richard Bauckham to conclude that the New Jerusalem in Revelation is 'a Temple-city adorned with all the fabulously radiant precious metals of paradise'.[15] Finally, while Jewish sources do not regularly describe the eschatological Jerusalem as made of gold, both Isaiah and Tobit use the expression 'Jerusalem the golden' and the holiest parts of the Solomonic, Herodian and eschatological temples were apparently overlaid with gold.[16]

Elements of the city's description are familiar to readers of other ancient utopian visions. In mid-second century CE parody, Lucian describes a city constructed of gold, featuring 'clear glass streets' and surrounded by an emerald wall.[17] It is, perhaps, noteworthy that the scholiasts thought Lucian's description was modelled on the eschatological Jerusalem.[18] In general, Greco-Roman philosophical utopia does not regularly feature precious metals and jewels in their construction, instead focusing on temperate climate and the absence of war, illness and poisonous herbs.[19] Fruit-bearing trees, lush vegetation and springs,

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Aramaic Texts from Qumran (ed. F. García Martínez; Sudies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 180–213 [131–3].

12 On numerology in apocalyptic literature in general and Revelation in particular, see A. Y. Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* (Leiden/New York: Brill, 1996) 55–137.

13 The construction of the city parallels 4Q164, a commentary on Isa 54.11–12 that describes the heavenly Jerusalem and mentions precious stones.

14 Tob 13.16–17; Pesiq. Rab Kah. 18.4–6. See discussion in García Martínez, 'New Jerusalem', 199.

15 R. J. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995) 134. Bauckham is followed on this point by L. Pilchan, *The New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation: A Study of Revelation 21–22 in the Light of its Background in Jewish Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001) 285–6.

16 Isa 54.11–12; Tob 13.16–17; 11QTemple 36.11; 39.3; 41.15; Josephus, *JW* 5.201, 205, 207–8; m. Mid. 2.3.

17 Lucian, *Ver. hist.* 2.11–13.

18 Schol. 14 on *Ver. hist.* 2.11. H. Rabe, *Scholia in Lucianum* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1906) 21.

19 Plato, *Leg.* 761c; Aratus, *Phaen.* 107–9.; Virgil, *Aen.* 8.325; Ovid, *Met.* 1.107–8.

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however, are elements in some Greek conceptions of the afterlife and Plato describes the world 'above the cave' as a place of spectacularly large jewels.[20]

At the same time, the references to the trees, streams and garden at the heart of the city evoke the primeval paradise from which Adam and Eve were ejected in Genesis 3.[21] Psalm 22 refers to the bucolic setting and 'quiet waters' in which the psalmist expects to enjoy God's protection and provision. Genesis 2–3 describes Eden as a place filled with fruit-bearing trees which, much like the tree of healing, had the potential to effect the permanent transformation of those who ate from them.[22] In addition to evoking the glassy marble feel of the Herodian temple, the glass-like floor may well have served as a gesture towards the waters of creation.[23]

Certainly, many of the specific details of the New Jerusalem as well as the broad contours of its description fit well within the conventions of Second Temple Jewish descriptions of otherworldly or idyllic space. In particular, the repeated references to symbolic numbers, the utilisations of precious materials, the precise measuring of the city and the notion of God dwelling in a physical structure were familiar to those who heard biblical and extracanonical traditions about both heaven and the eschaton. At the same time, the city contains no temple, and while the trees gesture to Eden the scene is not a straightforward restoration of paradise.[24]

2. Elite Dwellings in the Roman Empire

At the same time, while the author of Revelation was probably familiar with eschatological expectations about the heavenly city and new (or renewed) temple, it is equally possible that he contextualised the New Jerusalem in light of real-

20 For fertile soil and easy cultivation, see descriptions of the Islands of the Blessed in Hesiod, *Op.* 161–73; *Theog.* 215–16; Pindar, *Ol.* 2.61–78; Elysian fields in *Od.* 4.561–9; Garden of Alcinous in *Od.* 7.112–32; Seneca, *Herc. fur.* 928–39. For the jewels of Platonic mythology, see Plato, *Phaed.* 107b–115c.

21 The tree of life is referenced in Rev 2.7 and Gen 2.9, and the river in Gen. 2.9–10.

22 On transformative eating in the ancient world, see M. J. C. Warren, *Food and Transformation in Ancient Mediterranean Literature* (ed. C. K. Rothschild; Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series; Atlanta: SBL, 2019).

23 For Talmudic references to the Herodian temple and its aesthetic, see discussion in T. Grossmark, 'Shayish (Marble) in Rabbinic Literature', *Marble Studies: Roman Palestine and the Marble Trade* (ed. M. L. Fischer; Konstanz: Universtätsverlag Konstanz, 1998) 274–84, at 277–8. For the view that glassy floors were intended to evoke creation imagery, see F. Barry, 'Walking on Water: Cosmic Floors in Antiquity and the Middle Ages', *The Art Bulletin* 89 (2007) 627–56, at 637.

24 For the view that the primeval garden of Revelation is not restored, see S. J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of Revelation: Reading Revelation in Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 161.

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world, man-made constructions. On purely literary grounds, Revelation presents Rome and the New Jerusalem in similar terms, thereby suggesting that we should, in some sense, read them together.[25] Though this line of argument is not, to our knowledge, advanced by any modern scholars, it seems likely that the description of the New Jerusalem called to mind the high-class and imperial building projects of the day.[26] Given Revelation's demonstrable animus towards Roman imperial power, it is easy to see why the relationship between them has been overlooked.[27] While golden streets seem otherworldly and implausibly decadent to modern ears, Serenus' letter to Seneca reveals that houses of precious jewels and gold were a reality for ancient Romans. The purpose of this article is to consider

25 J. N. Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010) 164.

26 Parallels between real-world implements and architecture usually focus on the Jerusalem temple and ancient Near Eastern examples. See, for example, T. Ganzel's and Shalom Holtz's discussion of the influence of Babylonian temple architecture on Ezekiel's description of a temple in chapters 40–8 (T. Ganzel and S. E. Holtz, 'Ezekiel's Temple in Babylonian Context', *VT* 64 (2014) 211–26. See also David Aune's commentary, which discusses water flow in (real-life) Jerusalem and the golden measuring rod to an overlaid measuring stick from eighteenth-century dynastic Egypt (D. E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22* (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 1177, 59. The Roman elite was well known for using expensive materials for household items: according to Pliny, Mark Antony used 'golden vessels' as chamber pots (*Nat.* 33.50).

Steve Friesen comes closest to our argument when he discusses homologies in the Book of Revelation: 'Rome/Babylon, the earthly Jerusalem, and the New Jerusalem are described in similar ways that point to "a common structure within good and evil in the Apocalypse"' (Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 164). He cites Leonard Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 82. Thompson highlights the manner in which both Babylon and the New Jerusalem are dressed with gold, pearls and precious stones (Rev 18.16; 19.8; 21.18–19, 21). Both Thompson and Friesen deftly draw attention to the literary presentation of the major cities of the Book of Revelation. Our argument takes a somewhat different approach and argues that the description of the New Jerusalem resonates with descriptions of elite building projects in the Roman Empire. The descriptions thus have this-world as well as other-worldly connotations.

27 On animosity towards Rome in Revelation see A. Y. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 47, 111, 24; Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 21, 50; Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 172, 208–11; Thompson, *Revelation*, 191–2; S. D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Bible in the Modern World 12; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006) 97–121. Moore argues that the author of Revelation is not against empire in principle but only against the wrong people exercising imperial power.

Many of these works fall within the broader interest in 'empire studies' and responses to colonialisation. Key treatments of responses to empire within the field of New Testament include W. Howard-Brook and A. Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001); R. A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); W. Carter, 'Proclaiming (in/against) Empire Then and Now', *Word and World* 25 (2005) 149–58.

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how Revelation's heavenly city would have been received by those familiar with ancient architecture and decor and, subsequently, how this might affect our reading of the New Jerusalem.

Perhaps the best-known example of first-century CE architectural decadence is Nero's Domus Aurea. Built only a few decades before the composition of Revelation,[28] the Golden House was known for its extensive use of gold leaf, bejewelled walls and ceilings, glassy floors and monumental gardens (complete with an artificial lake, streams and trees).[29] The most extended description of the Domus Aurea is found in the writings of Nero's highly critical biographer Suetonius. According to Suetonius, the house stretched from the Palatine to the Esquiline:

> Its vestibule was large enough to contain a colossal statue of the emperor 120 feet high; and it was so extensive that it had a triple colonnade a mile long. There was a pond too, like a sea, surrounded with buildings to represent cities, besides tracts of country, varied by tilled fields, vineyards, pastures and woods, with great numbers of wild and domestic animals. In the rest of the house all parts were overlaid with gold and adorned with gems and mother-of-pearl. There were dining rooms with fretted ceilings of ivory, whose panels could turn and shower down flowers and were fitted with pipes for sprinkling the guests with perfumes. The main banquet hall was circular and constantly revolved day and night, like the heavens (*Nero* 31.1–2).

The luxurious adornments that formed part of the construction of the house were not, in the opinion of Tacitus, its most remarkable or unique feature. He writes: 'Nero availed himself of the ruins of his country and built a house in which not so much the gold and precious stones were to be marvelled at, things which, in the luxury of the times, were long since usual and familiar to all, as the fields and pools and great lonely woods and open spaces and broad vistas' (*Ann.* 15.42.1). Tacitus' statements both draw attention to the remarkable gardens that formed part of structure and direct us to the predictable quality of jewels and gold, which he describes as 'usual and familiar'. It was the scale of a palace that could encompass a rural wonderland in its enclaves that most impressed observers.

The Domus Aurea has a certain exceptional quality to it. In addition to being an imperial palace of enormous size, its construction did not include bathrooms,

28 This statement depends, of course, upon when one dates the Book of Revelation. Timothy D. Barnes argues that the book was written 'late in Asia Minor in 68–69', which would place the composition of the book within the latter period of the building's project. Even if Barnes's dating is correct, the Domus Aurea would have been commanding a great deal of attention. See T. D. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History 5* (Tria Corda; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 37–41 (quotation at 40).

29 Descriptions of the Golden House are preserved in the writings of a number of Nero's critics: Suetonius, *Nero* 31.1–2; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.42; and Pliny, *Nat.* 34.84, 35.120, 36.111

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sleeping quarters, or even a kitchen area. The palace was built for entertaining and dining, but not for living. The extraordinary layout of rooms led Andrew Wallace-Hadrill to speculate that Nero intended to share the palace with the citizens of Rome.[30] If this theory is correct, the palace was constructed as a place for communal and civic celebrations. It defined membership in the civic body of Rome as the prerequisite for entrance, and forms an interesting analogue to the New Jerusalem in which the faithful will dwell.

Though it was fairly quickly destroyed by the construction projects of the Flavian dynasty, this spectacular building project was profoundly influential. It informed the garden-like square of the Templum Pacis, which in many ways responded to the decadence of the Golden House and – coincidentally – housed many of the treasures seized from the Jerusalem temple towards the end of the Jewish War.[31] Its effects are also felt in Christian ecclesial decorative programmes in Rome, Ravenna and Constantinople, in which the Neronian innovation of raising mosaics onto the ceilings became a feature of Christian art.[32]

The Golden House was only one of numerous luxuriously decorated villas in Rome and Roman cities around the Empire. In ancient society, as at many other moments in time, private houses were one means by which the elite could inscribe their identity and status.[33] The affluent engaged in competitive building projects designed to overshadow their neighbours.[34] Starting in the second century BCE, Roman elites began to construct elaborate and extravagant homes as a means of displaying their wealth. Among other functions, these homes hosted lavish banquets and even served as a staging ground for political life.[35]

For Rome's elite, the use of precious metals and stones in unexpected locations was one way that wealth was displayed. According to Suetonius, the emperor Caligula adorned the sterns of boats with gems (*Cal.* 37.2). In his critique of bathing practices, Seneca offers a glimpse into the expectations of aristocratic

30 Andrew Wallace-Hadrill quoted in 'Nero's Pleasure Dome', *The Telegraph*, 29 June 1999.

31 See discussion in J. W. Stamper, *The Architecture of Roman Temples: The Republic to the Middle Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 158; R. Meneghini, A. Corsaro and B. P. Caboni, 'Il Templum Pacis alla luce dei recenti scavi', *Divus Vespasianus: il bimelillenario del Flavi* (ed. F. Coarelli; Rome: Ministero per i beni e la attivita culturali, 2009) 190–201, at 190.

32 S. V. Leatherbury, 'Christian Wall Mosaics and the Creation of Sacred Space', *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art* (ed. R. M. Jensen and M. D. Ellison; New York: Routledge, 2018) 86–103. For the perspective that the influence of the Domus Aurea has been overstated see P. G. Warden, 'The Domus Aurea Reconsidered', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 40 (1981) 271–8.

33 E. Zanda, *Fighting Hydra-Like Luxury: Sumptuary Regulation in the Roman Republic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011) 16–18.

34 Cicero, *Dom.* 116.

35 Cicero, who generally opposed ostentatious displays of wealth, considered it appropriate for politicians to live in spaces large enough to house large gatherings.

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lifestyle: 'We think ourselves wretched if our walls do not gleam with large and expensive mirrors; if our Alexandrian marbles are not set off by Numidian stone … We have become so luxurious that we will have nothing but precious stones to walk on' (*Ep.* 86.6–7). Seneca is, of course, exaggerating for rhetorical effect but his words, though hyperbolic, contain an element of truth. Rumours, if not the reality, of jewel and gold-encrusted houses circulated widely. The gemstones and precious metals that adorned the walls and gates of the New Jerusalem were already a reality for some of the wealthy.

Nero and the author of Revelation were not the first to think of placing gardens and water features inside the walls of the home. Elaborate gardens were a feature of the Roman Republic.[36] Pastoral imagery figured highly in murals and frescos, and there is evidence that some villas were constructed so that the householder could watch agricultural scenes from inside. The presence of trees inside private familial spaces is also well attested.[37] Pliny provides evidence of the regular practice of creating 'country houses, which go by the name of *horii*, actually within the city'.[38] Trees were luxury items in the gardens of wealthy Romans.[39] There is evidence to suggest that some of the trees that grew inside villa complexes were citrus trees, just as the tree of life inside the New Jerusalem is a fruit tree.[40] While these trees certainly did not yield twelve kinds of fruit concurrently, citrus was – broadly speaking – a plant that was associated with health, healing and the avoidance of decay.[41] Citrus trees were also thought, according to ancient writers, to produce fruit all year round (cf. Rev 22.2). In Dioscorides' description of citrus,

36 Plutarch writes that the 'the gardens of Lucullus are considered among the most lavish of the imperial gardens' (*Luc.* 39.2–3).

37 As the pioneering work of Wilhelmina Jashemski demonstrated, the remains of trees are sometimes found within houses. See W. F. Jashemski, 'The Garden of Hercules at Pompeii (II.viii.6): The Discovery of a Commercial Flower Garden', *AJA* 83 (1979) 403–22; *The Gardens of Pompeii, Herculaneum and the Villa Destroyed by Vesuvius, 1* (New Rochelle: Caratzas Brothers, 1979) 290; *The Gardens of Pompeii, Herculaneum and the Villa Destroyed by Vesuvius, 2* (New Rochelle: Caratzas Brothers, 1993).

38 Pliny, *Nat.* 19.50.

39 Pliny, *Nat.* 17.1. The House of the Moralist in Pompeii boasted a grove of Diana inside; on this, see P. Zanker, 'Die Villa als Vorbild des späten pompejanischen Wohngeschmacks', *Jahrbuch des deutschen archäologischen Instituts* 94 (1979) 460–523, at 488–9.

40 On the presence of lemon trees in the Villa di Poppea in Oplontis, see E. R. Ermolli, B. Menal, and M. R. B. Lumaga, 'Pollen Morphology Reveals the Presence of *Citrus Medica* and *Citrus X Limon* in a Garden of *Villa Di Poppea* in Oplontis (1st Century BC)', *Agrumed: Archaeology and History of Citrus Fruit in the Mediterranea. Acclimatization, Diversifications, Uses* (ed. V. Zech-Matterne and G. Fiorentino; Naples: Publications du Centre Jean Bérard, 2018) 157–84.

41 For details, see Pliny, *Nat.* 12.15, 15.47, 16.107, 17.64, 23.105. Pliny identifies citrus as an antidote to poison in 23.105. The motif of twelve forms of fruit is a continuation of Revelation's interest in numerology which, in this case, gestures to the tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples.

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'the tree bears fruit at all seasons'.[42] We might summarise, with Clémence Pagnoux, that the tree 'was probably considered as a miraculous plant'.[43]

The impulse to challenge and rival nature extended beyond merely bringing the countryside into man-made spaces. Even the boundary between sea and land was open to coercion and manipulation. Plutarch dwells on the building projects of Lucullus, whose wealth enabled him to alter the landscape so that 'he suspended hills over enormous tunnels, circled his residences with moats linked to the sea and with streams for the breeding of fish – when Tubero the Stoic saw them, he called [Lucullus] Xerxes in a toga'.[44] Caligula, disregarding the cost of his constructions, attempted 'to do what people said was impossible'. He 'built up plains to the level of mountain peaks and razed mountains flat with the plain' and 'built motes out into the deep and stormy sea'. In her work on luxury in the Roman empire, Catharine Edwards remarks that 'not content with rearranging the boundary between land and sea (by this time commonplace) [Caligula] went one better' and constructed boats that contained trees and gardens.[45]

Such excesses undoubtedly elicited admiration and envy but they also invited judgement from those concerned about public morality. This was true from the Republic onwards, as Cicero remarks: 'I scorn luxurious country-palaces, marble walks and panelled ceilings. Take those artificial streams which some of our friends call "Niles" or "Euripi" – who after seeing what we have before us would not laugh at them?'[46] Seneca, too, balked at the artificiality that characterised luxurious building projects by writing: 'Wherever the shore curves wound into a bay, there will you at once lay foundations, and, dissatisfied with any land unless it is artificial, you will bring the sea within your boundaries.'[47] Efforts to bring nature inside the artificial world offended Cicero and Seneca, but it seems to have been a common aspiration. One of the chief criticisms of the Domus Aurea was the manner in which its form as a 'country villa' transgressed the usual cultural divide between town and country.[48]

42 Dioscorides, *Mat. med.* 1.115.5; Pliny, *Nat.* 12.15; Servius, *Commentary on Virgil's Georgics* 2.121; Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 3.19.14.

43 C. Pagnaux, '*Citrium*: A Miraculous Fruit. Investigating the Uses of Citrus Fruits in the Western Mediterranean according to Ancient Greek and Latin Texts', *Agrumed: Archaeology and History of Citrus Fruit in the Mediterranean*, 157–84.

44 Plutarch, *Luc.* 39.2–3.

45 C. Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 146. Edwards here refers to Suetonius, *Cal.* 37.2.

46 Cicero, *Leg.* 2.2.

47 Seneca, *Ep.* 89.21. See also his objection that 'all vices rebel against nature' in *Ep.* 122.5.

48 Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.42 writes that the architects 'had the ingenuity and arrogance to try through their art what nature had forbidden and to fritter away even the resources of an emperor'. On this, see N. Purcell, 'Town in Country and Country in Town', *Ancient Roman Villa Gardens* (ed.

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Not every architectural and ornamental feature of Revelation's New Jerusalem was paralleled in Roman architecture; nevertheless, those elements discussed here should be sufficient to show that the appearance of the new Jerusalem had real-world counterparts in the homes of the wealthy elite. Merely identifying parallels between one set of structures and another, however, is insufficient. The resonances with Roman decor and building projects are only useful if they inform our interpretation of the passage. Thus, it is to this question that we now turn.

3. Re-Reading the New Jerusalem

In the first place and, arguably, in contrast with Jewish visions of the heavenly or eschatological temple, the decor and architecture of the New Jerusalem is wealthy but not luxurious beyond imagining. Elaborate gardens were a feature of many Roman villas. The introduction of seemingly impossible streams, lakes and 'natural' water features into the gardens of elite dwellings alters our perspective of the Edenic quality of the New Jerusalem's central square. No longer is the garden in the city the kind of extraordinary paradox that we find in Enoch's description of the snow and fire filled structures; now it is an elevated version of real-life exempla. The non-Christian wealthy, a primary target of the author's criticism, regularly attempted to combine the urban and the rural in astonishing ways that were intended to dazzle and display power.

Many of the showier elements of architectural displays of status and ingenuity were intended, as already discussed, to subvert nature. The construction of Nero's central dining hall was such that it revolved 'like the heavens'. To be sure, this was an astonishing feat of engineering, but it was also one that set in its sights the elevated nature of dwelling in the heavens. Though they pale alongside the presence of God that constantly illuminates the New Jerusalem, the Golden House and Roman architecture more broadly have these kinds of lofty ambitions. In the competition for status the New Jerusalem clearly surpasses even imperial structures.

As Steve Friesen has cautioned, the similarities between Roman architecture (and, indeed, Rome itself) and the New Jerusalem should not lead us to conclude that there is a 'fundamental similarity' between the two.[49] Most scholars of Revelation view the book as a response to imperial domination, power and

E. B. MacDougall; Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987) 187–203. See also Pliny, *Nat.* 19.50.

49 Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 164. Similarly, see Kraybill's statement that '[i]f Christians adapted sign and symbols from the Roman Empire and used them in exclusive worship of God and the Lamb, the borrowing was politically subversive' (J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in the Book of Revelation* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1996) 62).

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persecution (whether real or perceived).[50] Though some have dated the book to as early as 68–70 CE, the majority of scholars would place it slightly later, likely during the reign of the emperor Domitian.[51] For our purposes, it is the orientation of the book vis-à-vis Rome, rather than the precise year of its composition, that is of importance.[52] Upon this orientation there is broad agreement that this author of Revelation and the community to which it is addressed is, at a minimum, hostile towards and critical of Roman authorities and power.[53]

50 For a critique of the idea that Nero persecuted Christians, see C. Moss, *Myth of Persecution* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2013) 138–9. B. D. Shaw, 'The Myth of the Neronian Persecution', *JRS* 105 (2015) 73–100. For criticisms of the existence of Domitianic persecution, see P. Kereszes, 'The Jews, the Christians, and Emperor Domitian', *VC* 27 (1973) 1–28; L. Thompson, 'Social Location of the Early Christian Apocalyptic', *ANRW* II.26.3 (1996) 2615–56, at 2630–1. Adela Yarbro Collins hypothesises that rather than actually experiencing widespread persecution, the communities understood themselves to be experiencing persecution due to hostility from the local community. See Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 97–103.

51 John Marshall argues for the slightly more specific date of 69–70. See Marshall, *Parables of War*, 88–97. Those who argue for a later date usually rely upon the testimony of Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.50.3, which is cited with approval by Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.18–20, 5.8.6 and the analysis of Rome as 'Babylon' – a designation that seems to have arisen in a post-70 CE context. See e.g. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 76; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (London: Oliphants, 1974) 1027; G. Krodel, *Revelation* (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 62. For a date between 80 and 100 CE, see C. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) 76–7. For the view that Revelation should be dated to between 90 and 95 CE, see M. Karrer, *Die Johannesoffenbarung: Ihr Text und ihre Auslegung*, vol. I (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012) 53. A date in the 60s is improbable because the city of Laodicea seems to be thriving, according to Rev 3.17, even though there was a large earthquake. See Thompson, *Revelation*; Friesen, *Imperial Cults*; A. Y. Collins, 'Myth and History in the Book of Revelation: The Problem of its Date', *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith* (ed. B. Halpern and J. D. Levenson; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1981) 377–403, at 402.

52 While the Domus Aurea, which was constructed in the late sixties, has figured prominently in our discussions of elite and imperial building projects, it is but one, albeit exaggerated, example of the ambitions and luxury of Roman architecture.

53 There has been some discussion about whether or not Revelation is hostile to all kinds of wealth and power or just particular kinds of wealth, especially mercantile power. Bauckham argues that Revelation combats 'Rome's collaborators in evil: the ruling class, the mercantile magnates, and the shipping industry'. See R. J. Bauckham, 'The Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18', *Images of Empire* (ed. L. Alexander; Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1991) 47–90, at 84. The difficulty with his analysis is that he conflates groups whose experience of wealth was very different. The *humiliores*, who worked for a living, would not have been confused with *honestiores* even if they possessed more wealth. See discussion in P. B. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast? Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 63–7.

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Recent scholarship, following the development of the field of post-colonial studies, has characterised the book as a kind of resistance literature.[54]

To some readers the luxury of heavenly space may seem surprising. After all, throughout the book the author has consoled his addressees for their poverty (Rev 2.9) and criticised the wealthy, especially those engaged in commercial business.[55] Babylon is arrayed in purple, adorned with gold and precious jewels (Rev 17.4); those who engage in business with her 'have grown rich from the power of her luxury' (Rev 1.3, 12) and her enormous wealth will be 'laid waste' in a single hour (Rev 18.17). As Robert Royalty has put it, 'The insatiable appetite of Babylon [Rome] from wealth and luxury portrayed in Revelation 18 is a symptom of complete depravity.'[56] Babylon's eventual destruction has been read by many as a critique of Roman wealth.[57]

In his work on wealth in Revelation, Royalty has argued that the moral difference between Babylon and the New Jerusalem is that heavenly wealth 'is permanent and incorruptible whereas earthly gold and possessions are corruptible and perishable'.[58] To be sure, the wealth of the New Jerusalem never receives the criticism the author levies against Rome.[59] Additionally, the comparative incorruptibility and corruptibility of heavenly and earthly riches is a theme in Second Temple Jewish literature that promotes almsgiving.[60] The differences between the wealth of Rome and the wealth of the New Jerusalem, however, are more pronounced than mere durability.

Even as the city resembles the luxurious palaces and villas of the super elite, its economic and political structure is more egalitarian than those of the aristocracy. In Roman imperial society access to citrus was restricted only to the wealthy.[61] By contrast, in Revelation's New Jerusalem everyone who enters the city is able to

54 See, for example, T. Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); G. Carey, 'Introduction: Apocalyptic Discourse, Apocalyptic Rhetoric', *Vision and Persuasion: Rhetorical Dimensions of Apocalyptic Discourse* (ed. G. Carey and L. G. Bloomquist; St. Louis: Chalice, 1999) 161–79; D. A. Sánchez, *From Patmos to the Barrio: Subverting Imperial Myths* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

55 On the distinction between wealth, land and commerce, see R. M. Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven: The Ideology of Wealth in the Apocalypse of John* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998) 102–11.

56 Royalty, *Streets of Heaven*, 209.

57 Bauckham, 'Economic Critique'.

58 Royalty, *Streets of Heaven*, 100.

59 Duff, *Who Rides the Beast*, 63.

60 G. A. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

61 D. Langgut, 'The Citrus Route Revealed: From Southeast Asia into the Mediterranean', *American Society for Horticultural Science* 52 (2017) 814–22.

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partake in healing. Those faithful previously excluded from power now have access to the city, a city that houses the presence of God.[62] Within this new 'economy of faithfulness the poor become rich by remaining loyal to the Lamb and inheriting the gold and jewel-laden New Jerusalem'.[63]

Contextualising the New Jerusalem in terms of the architecture of the Roman world not only draws attention to the wealth of the scene, it domesticates it. The New Jerusalem of Revelation not only resembles Babylon, it literally contains the decorative and architectural features of the Roman imperial world. Divine illuminating light aside, the structure is at home in a world in which ambitious social climbers attempted to accomplish feats of engineering to compete with their peers. Unlike the villas and homes of emperors and aristocrats, the New Jerusalem is not open to the critique that it breaches the laws of nature or cosmological order, because the city itself descended from the heavens and is inhabited by the divine being that created cosmic order.

4. Concerns about the Wealth of the New Jerusalem

For later readers of Revelation, the reconceptualisation of wealth as 'pure' in the New Jerusalem in some ways proved ineffective. Even if the wealth of the New Jerusalem is incorruptible, the city still contained the potential to misinform and provoke envy, just as the house of Serenus' neighbour elicited distress in Seneca's correspondent. What made *luxuria* ethically problematic was not its existence but the manner in which it might corrupt the individual and lead them to acquisitiveness and envy.[64] Luxury and wealth, even appropriate displays of wealth, have the potential to corrupt others and 'set a bad example'.

Writing around the turn of the third century, Clement of Alexandria took issue with the rather materialistic vision of heaven described in Revelation 21. In rejecting the materialism of the scene, he argued that the gold and gems of Rev 21.18–21 were mere metaphors: '[by] the incomparable brilliance of gems is understood the spotless and holy brilliance of the substance of the spirit'.[65] Only the foolish and ignorant Christian exegete would read these passages as a literal description of heaven. Clement's statement inaugurates a trend even among some of the more literal millenarian commentators on Revelation in which the heavenly city is understood symbolically as a cipher for the church and her virtues.[66]

62 On the egalitarian community of the New Jerusalem, see Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 23.

63 M. D. Mathews, *Riches, Poverty, and the Faithful: Perspectives on Wealth in the Second Temple Period and the Apocalypse of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 217.

64 Edwards, *Poiltics of Immorality*, 24–32.

65 Clement, *Paed.* 3.2.12–13, 2.12.119. The example from Clement is cited by and discussed in K. Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress: Gender, Virtue and Authority* (Routledge Studies in Ancient History; New York: Routledge, 2011) 39–40.

66 See, for example, Tyconius of Carthage, *Exposition of the Apocalypse* 7.21.

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Similar objections were voiced by Clement's ecclesiastical descendent, Dionysius of Alexandria. In writing against Nepos' deeply materialistic millennial views, Dionysius produced his now famous arguments against the Johannine authorship of Revelation (preserved in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.24–5). Less frequently noted are his arguments that millennialists lead people to 'hope for things that are trivial and corruptible' (7.24.1) and that the book 'cannot be understood in the bald, literal sense' (7.24.4). He adds the opinions of others that Revelation be attributed to Cerinthus – 'a man devoted to the pleasures of the body … the belly; and what comes beneath the belly' (7.24.3).[67] Though it is rarely noted in scholarship on the canonisation and the reception of the Apocalypse, Revelation's potential support for hedonism is one reason for Dionysius' rejection of literalist interpretations of it.[68]

5. Conclusion

In the past, where comparisons between the New Jerusalem and Rome have been made, they have been performed on literary grounds: the presumably symbolic description of the New Jerusalem matches the symbolic personification of Rome as Babylon in Revelation 17–18. They are drawn together, it is argued, through literary analogy. To this argument, we might add that the wealth of the New Jerusalem is less peculiar and opaque than it may seem. The decadence of Babylon and the New Jerusalem has grounding in ancient elite architectural and decorative programmes in which rural space and urban space were mixed; jewels adorned everyday objects; and the laws of nature were playfully and

67 Writing around 200 CE, Gaius of Rome seems to have been the first to attribute the authorship of Revelation to Cerinthus (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.28.2). On the origins of Cerinthus, see C. E. Hill, 'Cerinthus, Gnostic or Christ? A New Solution to an Old Problem', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (2000) 135–72. On the association of the belly and loins in ancient thought see, for example, the writings of the first-century medical writer Rufus of Ephesus, 'On Satyriasis and Gonorrhea 19–20', *Oeuvres de Rufus d'Éphèse: texte collationné sur les manuscripts, traduit pour la première fois en Français avec une introduction* (ed. C. Daremberg; Paris: L'Imprimerie Nationale, 1879) 64–84, at 72, lines 4–21.

68 It is more common to focus on questions of authorship and attribution: 'Revelation's universal acceptance within the early Church was based on the established tradition which attributed the book to the Apostle John' (E. S. Constatinou, *Guiding to a Blessed End: Andrew of Caesarea and his Apocalypse Commentary* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013) 17). See also W. Farmer and D. Farkasfalvy, *The Formation of the New Testament Canon* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 156–7. These criteria for canonicity are isolated and discussed in L. M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995) 228–49; 'Identifying Scripture and Canon in the Early Church: The Criteria Question', *The Canon Debate* (ed. L. M. McDonald and J. Sanders; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2002) 416–39. We might note that the debate over canonisation might unhelpfully overshadow the conversation about the interpretation of the New Jerusalem here.

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strategically transgressed. In this context, the New Jerusalem supersedes and replaces Roman building projects because its architect is more competent and accomplished. God is capable of lighting the city in perpetuity and the trees in Revelation's city are more abundant and effective than those that grew in the courtyards of Pompeii.

At the same time, the similarities between the aesthetics of elite Roman architecture and the description of the heavenly Jerusalem highlight a tension in Revelation and Christian eschatological hopes more broadly: the condemnation of *luxuria* stands in contrast to the descriptions of heaven and expectations of future indulgence. The very world condemned by Revelation, Roman moralists and numerous Christian authors is the world that Christians also hope to inhabit.

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