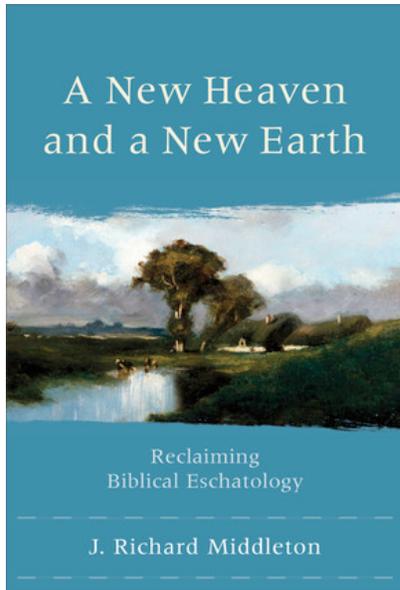


RBL 08/2016



**J. Richard Middleton**

*A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology*

Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014. Pp. 332. Paper.  
\$26.99. ISBN 9780801048685.

J. P. Davies  
Trinity College  
Stoke Hill, Bristol, United Kingdom

J. Richard Middleton's *A New Heaven and A New Earth* has already received critical acclaim, being named the 2014 Word Guild Award best book in biblical studies and receiving a 2015 Canadian Christian Book Award. This examination of biblical eschatology strikes a balance between popular book and academic monograph, its content and tone suggesting a comparison with N. T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope*. Indeed, Middleton makes no secret of the connection he shares with Wright, a scholarly relationship that is particularly apparent in some places (see 311 n. 143).

Middleton's book is an extended argument for the rejection of an eschatology based on Platonic dualism in favor of reclaiming a holistic biblical eschatology. This vision of the renewal of all things, Middleton asserts, is "the Bible's best-kept secret" (24) that the church must recover. But his argument is not merely a matter of defending theoretical-doctrinal orthodoxy. If it were, this would be a great irony, as Middleton insists throughout on the connection of eschatology to the Christian life, concluding the book with an extended discussion of Christian worship and kingdom ethics in the light of biblical eschatology. This is vital, since "ethics," he says, "is lived eschatology" (24).

For all its critique of modern Christian piety (particularly worship songs—Bob Marley faring better than many classic hymns) Middleton's book is more than a cynical academic

attack on popular eschatology. It presents a robust biblical eschatology based on the premise of “one comprehensive and ultimately coherent story” (71) while making space for the diversity of eschatological views in scripture. Crucially, Middleton’s narrative biblical theology does not flatten into destoried eschatological themes and is a model of how biblical theology can and should be done in a way that respects the complexities of the biblical texts. While one might have wished that more space could have been given to some of these dissonances (for example, the conquest of Canaan is described as being “in significant tension with the overall plot of the biblical story” but is dealt with in a footnote, 64 n. 16), his approach is nonetheless compelling.

Part 1 of the book presents a diagnosis of how “we” got it wrong, beginning with a discussion of the human earthly vocation in Genesis (ch. 2) and then tracing the biblical story of redemption in the light of that starting point (ch. 3). Middleton’s methodology demonstrates, perhaps, an overreliance on the categories of Greimas’s actantial analysis, mediated through Wright, but those who are unfriendly with such structuralism should not be put off and should note Middleton’s insistence that he intends this as heuristic (58 n. 4). Middleton’s critique is most forceful in assessing the place of *heaven* in biblical eschatology. While maintaining the importance of heaven as the divine throne room, the realm where God’s will is done, heaven as the eternal destiny of believers has, for Middleton, no place in the plot of the Bible. It is, he argues, an idea extraneous to that narrative with no biblical support (71–72), and all Christians should, therefore, follow him in repenting of this use of heaven (237).

After the initial discussion of Genesis, more in-depth study of the Old Testament follows in part 2, highlighting the exodus as paradigm for salvation (ch. 4), the vision of earthly flourishing in the law, wisdom, and the prophets (ch. 5), and the Old Testament vision, often portrayed in calamitous language, of the coming of God in judgment (ch. 6). This, for Middleton, should not be interpreted as “cosmic annihilation” but as a description of God’s *redemptive* judgment. The apocalyptic language of destruction employed in the Old Testament does not signify cosmic dissolution but rather the dramatic act of God in bringing liberation, healing, and flourishing to the earth.

Part 3 turns to the New Testament, addressing the place of the “revolutionary doctrine” (Wright’s expression, 154) of resurrection as it relates to the holistic vision of the biblical narrative and its promise of human eschatological rule. Actually, the majority of chapter 7 is spent discussing the Old Testament, the Jewish Apocrypha, and apocalyptic texts—leaving one wondering whether a separate chapter on “resurrection in Second Temple Judaism” might have been more helpful here and might have allowed Middleton more space for a closer study of the New Testament texts, which are rather too rapidly surveyed. It is in chapter 8 that the New Testament receives closer attention, as Middleton

examines the centrality of the theme of a cosmic and comprehensive restoration for New Testament eschatology, moving through Acts 3, Eph 1, Col 1, Rom 8, and 2 Pet 3 before arriving at Rev 21–22, drawing helpfully on the themes of the destiny of the cosmic temple and the heavenly city to anchor his vision of an eschatological ethics of human flourishing and rule.

Part 4 turns to New Testament “problem texts” for this holistic eschatology: those that seem to argue for “cosmic annihilation” (ch. 9) or an otherworldly heaven as humanity’s final destiny (ch. 10). The first of these problem texts, involving the language of cosmic destruction, are the Synoptic Olivet Discourse, Rev 6 and 21–22, and 2 Pet 3 and Heb 12. Each is dealt with in detail, drawing on the Old Testament background for such judgment language (discussed in ch. 6) in order to demonstrate that there is no inconsistency with a holistic biblical eschatology. Such language was intended to convey not the eradication of the cosmos but events within it, events of “earth-shaking significance” (184). Middleton then briefly addresses numerous *heaven* texts (Matt 25:34; 1 Pet 1:3–5; Col 1:5; 2 Cor 5:1–5; John 14:1–3; Phil 3:20–21; Heb 11:13–16; Rev 21:1–2), all treated according to a pattern of New Testament apocalyptic thought—summarized by Middleton as “preparation in heaven, unveiling on earth” (212)—in order to dispose of “egregious interpretation of texts that supposedly support a heavenly future” (221). He then focuses a similar analysis on passages that seem to support the idea of a “rapture” from the earth (1 Thess 4:13–18; Matt 24:40–41) and on those that describe heaven as a temporary eschatological dwelling place (John 14:1–3; 2 Cor 5:6–9; Phil 1:23; Luke 16:19–31; Rev 6:9–10; Luke 23:39–43). The latter group of texts lead Middleton to a surprising conclusion (and a point at which he departs from Wright, 236 n. 53): there is very little biblical evidence for heaven as an “interim state.”

As promised, the last part of the book (part 5) brings all this to bear on “the ethics of the kingdom.” Here, many have taken the Johannine phrase “eternal life,” understood as life after death, and have used it as a lens with which to interpret the Synoptic teaching on the “kingdom of God/heaven.” The equation of the kingdom with heaven is, for Middleton, a symptom of an unbiblical dualistic eschatology leading to a similar otherworldly dualism in interpreting the ethics of Jesus’s ministry, a point underlined through his discussion of the ethical implications of the *Nazareth manifesto* (Luke 4:16–30). The final chapter of the book explores the ethical challenges posed by a holistic biblical eschatology for dualistic limitations of salvation to the “soul” alone and for church attitudes toward outsiders. Middleton makes an impassioned plea for the church to abandon its “bifurcated habits of mind and life” (272) in order that it might set about the business of Jesus’s holistic eschatological-ethical program.

Middleton closes with an appendix on the subject of how this holistic eschatology came to be lost from view in Christian thought. This historical survey makes instructive reading for anyone who wonders how things might have gone awry. Beginning with the early discussions of Origen, Justin, Irenaeus, and Methodius, Middleton then moves quickly from Augustine to the Reformation and the modern period (with a particular focus on the impact of North American dispensationalism). While scholars outside North America may not feel the weight of this interpretative history quite so heavily, its effects are nonetheless felt globally, and awareness of our often-shared genealogy is valuable. In closing, Middleton is encouraged to observe that “we are in the midst of a paradigm shift” (312) in reclaiming this lost biblical eschatology, although he believes more is to be done.

There is much to commend in this book, both in method and content, and I will certainly recommend it to undergraduates and others wishing to explore biblical eschatology. Nevertheless, I am left with a lingering question (not unique to this volume but hovering over a century of narrative approaches to biblical salvation history): in Middleton’s telling of the story from creation to eschaton, is the Christ-event adequately “irruptive,” or does his biblical-theological method leave him open to the charge of smoothing out the “apocalypse of Jesus Christ” into a mere culmination (67, 85) of a historical-progressive narrative? (Here, too, ethics and eschatology cannot be separated.) I suspect that Middleton would reject this question as misplaced, but I also suspect that many—particularly those advocating an “apocalyptic” approach to theology—will find it on target and in need of an answer.