

“Upon the Lampstand”

“After lighting a lamp there is not one person who conceals it with something or who puts it underneath a bed. Instead the person puts it upon a Lampstand so that those who come inside may see the light.”—*Jesus of Nazareth*, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke 8:16–17.

Question: *How do you reconcile the belief in an earthly paradise for believers with the teaching of Hebrews 11:13–16 and 11:39–40? (February 25, 2007)*

Answer: The passages read as follows according to the NWT:

Hebrews 11:13–16 (NWT)

In faith all these died, although they did not get the [fulfillment of the] promises, but they saw them afar off and welcomed them and publicly declared that they were strangers and temporary residents in the land. For those who say such things give evidence that they are earnestly seeking a place of their own. And yet, if they had indeed kept remembering that [place] from which they had gone forth, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they are reaching out for a better [place], that is, one belonging to heaven. Hence God is not ashamed of them, to be called upon as their God, for he has made a city ready for them.

Hebrews 11:39–40 (NWT)

And yet all these, although they had witness borne to them through their faith, did not get the [fulfillment of the] promise, as God foresaw something better for us, in order that they might not be made perfect apart from us.

In the Second Edition of my book, *Jehovah’s Witnesses Defended: An Answer to Scholars and Critics* (Huntington Beach, CA: Elihu Book, 2000), pages 532–534, under the sub-heading *Hebrews 11 and the “promises” to “men of old,”* I offer several arguments in support of the view published by the Governing Body of Jehovah’s Witnesses through the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. This view draws a distinction between those who declared themselves “strangers and temporary residents” in the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament, and “the temporary residents scattered about” that are mentioned in the New Testament (1 Peter 1:1). This distinction is said to involve an earthly hope for the former, and a heavenly hope for the latter.

Speaking of those who had faith, the author of Hebrews references “Abraham,” who was “an alien in the land of the promise” (Hebrews 11:9), as was his son Isaac and his son Jacob, “heirs with him of the very same promise” (Hebrews 11:9). What promise was that? As Jehovah God told Jacob: “I am Jehovah the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land upon which you are lying, to you I am going to give it and to your

seed” (Genesis 28:13). But more was needed in order to truly possess this land, namely, “the city having real foundations, the builder and maker of which [city] is God (Hebrews 11:10). Thus, Abraham’s hope was to ‘possess the land’ (compare Psalm 37:29) of promise, and to truly do so he would have to wait for a ‘city built by God.’

In the New Testament, the Christian hope described in Hebrews 11 and elsewhere is for those who belong to Christ to actually *become* “the city having real foundations.” Consider:

Ephesians 2:19–22 (NWT)

Certainly, therefore, YOU are no longer strangers and alien residents, but YOU are fellow citizens of the holy ones and are members of the household of God, and YOU have been built up upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, while Christ Jesus himself is the foundation cornerstone. In union with him the whole building, being harmoniously joined together, is growing into a holy temple for Jehovah. In union with him YOU, too, are being built up together into a place for God to inhabit by spirit.

Now, whether or not the “apostles and prophets” includes “prophets” from the Old Testament or is a reference to the “apostles” and “prophets” of 1 Corinthians 12:28, I cannot say. But it does appear clear that the apostles and other Christians sealed by God and Christ will become in some special way the “city” itself:

Revelation 3:12 (NWT)

“The one that conquers—I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will by no means go out [from it] anymore, and I will write upon him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which descends out of heaven from my God, and that new name of mine.”

Note: “*he will by no means go out*” from “*the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which descends out of heaven.*” Further:

Revelation 21:9–14 (NWT)

And there came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls which were full of the seven last plagues, and he spoke with me and said: “Come here, I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” So he carried me away in [the power of the] spirit to a great and lofty mountain, and he showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God and having the glory of God. Its radiance was like a most precious stone, as a jasper stone shining crystal-clear. It had a great and lofty wall and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names were inscribed which are those of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. On the east were three gates, and on the north three gates, and on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. The wall of the city also had twelve foundation stones, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Here we can see that “the bride, the Lamb’s wife,” is “the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.” Exactly what this “coming down out of heaven” means is not clear, since “heavenly Jerusalem ... and the congregation of the firstborn ... have been enrolled in the heavens (Hebrews 12:22–23), but I take it to mean some sort of governance by Jesus and his “bride” over the earth, even as he promised them (Romans 5:17; 1 Corinthians 4:8; Revelation 2:26–27; 3:21; 5:9–10). Again, they will “by no means go out” from “the city ... which descends out of heaven” (Revelation 3:12). The “governance” I see in relation to New Jerusalem “coming down out of heaven” is further described in relation to “mankind,” this way:

Revelation 21:1–4 (NWT)

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea is no more. I saw also the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God and prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. With that I heard a loud voice from the throne say: “Look! The tent of God is with mankind, and he will reside with them, and they will be his peoples. And God himself will be with them. And he will wipe out every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither will mourning nor outcry nor pain be anymore. The former things have passed away.”

Thus, the descending of this “holy city” signals “the tent of God [being with] mankind” (Revelation 21:3). But if all righteous “mankind” were with God in heaven before New Jerusalem descended, as part of this “holy city,” how does its descent cause God to be “with mankind” anymore than he already was, unless there are humans on earth to whom he, through New Jerusalem, descends to be “with”? I believe that those on earth at the time of New Jerusalem’s descent are the same ones described, using almost exactly the same language, in Revelation 7:9–17 as “the great crowd”:

Revelation 7:15–17 (NWT)

[A]nd the One seated on the throne will spread his tent over them. They will hunger no more nor thirst anymore, neither will the sun beat down upon them nor any scorching heat, because the Lamb, who is in the midst of the throne, will shepherd them, and will guide them to fountains of waters of life. And God will wipe out every tear from their eyes.

If the “New Jerusalem” is the same thing as this “tent” from God, which is “spread ... over them” the same way that New Jerusalem ‘comes down from heaven’ to be with “mankind,” with similar consequences (= “he will wipe out every tear from their eyes”), then we have a distinction between those who *are* “the bride, the Lamb’s wife ... the holy city Jerusalem,” and those to whom it descends, again, “mankind.”

Further, Revelation 22:1–2 describes “a river of water of life, clear as crystal, flowing out from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of its [= New Jerusalem’s] broad way.” On each side of this river are “trees of life ... And the leaves of the trees

[are] for the curing of the nations.” The “bride” of Christ which descends from God does not need any more ‘curing.’ Those to whom it descends, “mankind,” will, as it evidenced by the effects that result from the descent of New Jerusalem. All of this is prefaced by John’s vision of “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1).

Therefore, while I do not pretend to know exactly how all of this will be realized, that is, the actual spiritual or physical relationship between Christ and New Jerusalem and “mankind,” I can speak of the hope of the life that will be realized by God through Christ in relation to these events.

Now, returning to Hebrews 11, in addition to what I have said above, and in addition to what I wrote in the previously referenced section of my Second Edition of *Jehovah’s Witnesses Defended*, there is something else I wanted to say in that Edition, but did not. In the last draft of my Second Edition I had several paragraphs of information on Hebrews 11 that one Christian brother who reviewed the manuscript suggested I leave out, since he believed it might confuse others and go contrary to the publications of the “faithful slave.” At the time, though I personally did not see the material as in any way damaging to the Society’s teachings on the subject overall, I also did not consider the material worth providing over and against the brother’s recommendation, whose opinion I respected. So, I cut it out and it has been preserved only in a file named “Hebrews 11_DELETED_SECTION,” ever since. That is, until now.

Below is the entirety of the aforementioned file, which I had planned on putting in the Second Edition, and which I will use in the Third Edition, together with other related material. This should give you some additional thoughts on the passages in question. But, as you can see from the above, I do not see Hebrews 11:13–16, 39–40 as at all contrary to the belief that the “new earth” represents an earthly paradise like Eden in which “righteousness” will dwell (2 Peter 3:13).

However, I cannot say for a certainty whether God or Christ will have with them any faithful men or women of old. I do not believe that they will, but I do not doubt that they might. I am content with believing in a more general promise, that of life in either a “new heavens” or in a “new earth.” I know where my hope is, and I do not pretend to know the hopes of others. We all must remain content with the faith that God has given us, and work together without regard for who believes he or she will live where. Doing otherwise only seems to cause division and class distinctions that, in my opinion, are unhealthy.

Having said that, here is the missing section, which you can combine with the above and with pages 532–534 of the Second Edition of my *Jehovah’s Witnesses Defended*, which I hope will be of benefit to you as you consider God’s Word yourself.

Material withheld from the Second Edition of Jehovah's Witnesses Defended (2000), concerning Hebrews 11:

Hebrews 11 begins with a definition of faith, and then from verses 3 through 12 several examples of faithful men and women are used to illustrate the definition of faith. The list of faithful ones is picked up again starting in verse 17, and continues through verse 38. What, then, is the point of verses 13–16? Let us take a close look at what is said, according to the NRSV:

All these died in faith without having received the promise, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak [Greek for "speak": *legontes*] in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire [Greek: *oregontai*] a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

I have underlined two sections in the above quotation, one from verse 14 and one from verse 16. In the NRSV, as in the NWT, NASB, NEB and other translations, the English present tense is used in both underlined sections. In Greek, the present is used in both passages, corresponding to the underlined portion above. The NIV and the JB (and the NJB) use an English present tense for *legontes* ("use such terms") but an English past tense ("were longing") is used for *oregontai*, and the same is true in the TEV. What, though, is significant about these two terms?

In reading Hebrews 11 one cannot help but notice the break in the "By faith" examples in verses 13 through 16. As we previously noted, beginning in verse 2 the author of Hebrews gives a list of faithful men and women in the Hebrew Scriptures. The listing is picked up again in 17 and continues through verse 38. The author's use of the present "those who say" (NWT) seems to bring the historical declaration of verse 13, namely, being "strangers and temporary residents in the land" to the Christian experience (see Php 3:20). While this could be viewed as a reference to both the Christian experience and those in pre-Christian times, verse 16 seems to restrict the "better place, that is, one belonging to heaven," to those who are "now [Greek: *nun*] . . . reaching out" for it.

It very well could be that the author of Hebrews uses examples of faith in ancient times, who confessed themselves to be strangers in literal, earthly lands and who hoped for an earthly city (compare Ps 37:29) that God would provide, to make a point about the Christian Congregation whom he addresses as "partakers of the heavenly calling" (Heb 3:1). [End of quotation of deleted material.]

In other words, one could see in the contrast between “those who say such things” now, or in Paul’s day, versus when “such things” (that is, being “strangers and temporary residents in the land” [Hebrews 11:13]) were said by faithful men and woman of old. This contrast appears to me to be between those who hope for a “better place, that is, one belonging to heaven,” and the “city” that some ‘await’ in order to realize the fulfillment of the promise to “possess the land” (again, Genesis 28:13; Psalm 37:29). Both hopes are for a place “better” than the one realized then or now, which will be realized ultimately for all those chosen by God when the “city,” the “bride” of the Lamb, descends from heaven to bless “mankind” (2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 21:1–4, 9–14).

Therefore, it is best, I think, to simply focus on what we know for a certainty in relation to all, and to keep our own hope from causing division among fellow Christians. For, again, “there are new heavens and a new earth that we are awaiting according to his promise, and in these righteousness is to dwell” (2 Peter 3:13). His “promise” is in relation to both, and while they are distinct they are very much related, so much so that the ultimate hope of seeing the fulfillment of God’s promises does not need to be as divided as it is today. .

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***This article was revised on the date indicated only in minor grammatical, stylistic, and formatting respects. No substantive changes were made to the content of the original article.**