ABSTRACT

Scholars interested in the history of Christian eschatological thought have focused primarily on the theme of heaven or on the various interpretations of the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20:1-6. Virtually no attention has been given to past interpretations of the biblical phrase "the new heavens and earth." This dissertation uncovers the interpretations of this phrase that were extant in seventeenth-century England. These interpretations fall into two basic camps--those who understood the phrase metaphorically and those who understood the phrase literally.

One group of English divines believed the new heavens and earth was a phrase referring to the new age of the gospel that commenced in the first century CE. Subsequent to the earthly ministry of Jesus, God flung open the doors of salvation to Gentiles while at the same time bringing judgment to the Jewish nation for its failure to recognize and embrace Jesus as Messiah. This judgment culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, bringing an end to the Jewish political and religious systems. Christianity replaced Judaism, bringing with it the hope of salvation for Gentiles. Such an epic event was fittingly described as a new heavens and earth.

A second group of English interpreters believed the phrase stood for a yet future time when the political and religious circumstances of the world would change for the betterment of the church for one thousand years. The new heavens and earth stood for a future millennium in which Christ would establish his reign over the world prior to the day of resurrection and final judgment. The papacy would fall and true religion would flourish in the world. Christ would reign over the earth either personally or via the church.

These metaphorical interpretations of the new heavens and earth existed alongside a more literal one. Theologians who accepted a literal understanding believed the new heavens and earth described the renovation of the physical creation at the final judgment. Adam's sin had introduced corruption into the created order and God would eventually purge creation from the effects of Adam's fall. Among this group, differences of opinion existed with respect to how much of the world would need cleansing, what creatures would be restored and of what use would a renovated world serve.
Two main opinions existed about the use of a renewed world. The majority of scholars believed the purged world would serve as a monument to God's glory, wisdom, and power. God's people would be able to see this monument from their permanent abode in heaven. A few divines adopted the idea that the new heavens and earth would be home to Christ and his people for eternity. Christ would resign his position as head over the Father's kingdom and take up his own kingdom on earth in fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, David, and the Old Testament prophets.