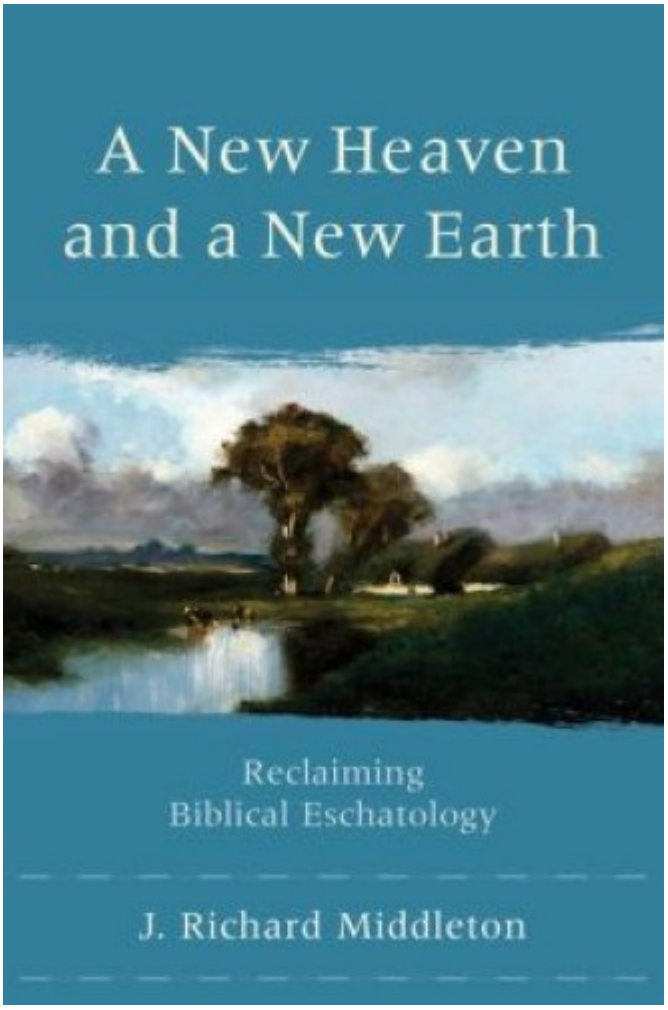
A New Heaven and a New Earth, by J. Richard Middleton

reviewed by James C. Howell in the April 29, 2015 issue

In Review



A New Heaven and a New Earth

By J. Richard Middleton
Baker Academic

In these days when moviegoers, gamers, and television watchers demonstrate a strong taste for postapocalyptic settings, we need and long for a strong current of theological explication of Christian eschatology. J. Richard Middleton has stepped

forward with a thoughtful, thorough, and well-written book on biblical eschatology—although he doesn't mention zombies. Instead of responding to the entertainment industry, Middleton's message concerns, secondarily, Christians' fixation on the rapture and, primarily, virtually all of Christian preaching and teaching that eviscerates the richness of the Bible's eschatology, offering nothing more than the chance to go to heaven after we die and this world has ended.

Middleton eloquently lifts up what is entirely plain if you pay attention: "the Bible consistently anticipates the redemption of the entire created order." Guiding us on a dazzling tour through the broad range of relevant texts, he makes clear the Bible's emphasis on the material order—on culture, bodies, and buildings—and shows that the Creator's purpose isn't for creation to be swept away, but for it to be entirely redeemed. This he dubs "the Bible's best-kept secret."

Of course, something so obvious can't be a real secret. I found myself wishing Middleton would assess why theologians throughout many centuries have read eschatological texts so selectively and have failed to foster a common hope in the redemption of creation and our bodies. If anything, Middleton seems to chalk up this narrow emphasis on spiritual heavenly bliss to banal thinking or some stubborn thinness of spirituality.

Middleton's tone is constructive when he is dealing with texts, but when he is speaking of those who don't see things his way, his tone is dismissive. With slashing sarcasm, Middleton reports that he has offered money to anyone who can find even one text in the Bible that declares Christians will live forever in heaven. "I still have all my money," he writes. He thumbs his nose at Aquinas, Calvin, and Augustine—some pretty sharp heads there. I would guess that Middleton is a solid, well-liked teacher who engages churchpeople and doesn't mind when they offer up counterexamples. But when he deals with texts that imply the end of the created order, or a heavenly life with God, he explains away and debunks them in a section long enough to make us wonder if it's as neat as he makes it all appear.

It seems as though Middleton is determined to prove that there is a single, unified, holistic eschatology in the Bible. For instance, he bends over backward to demonstrate that judgment is exclusively in the service of redemption: God smites in order to heal. But scripture isn't monolithic on this, and that's OK, perhaps even helpful. Diversity within scripture invites conversation and generally speaks more truly of God than a single harmonized viewpoint does.

Middleton's need for a single eschatology seems to be linked to a curious kind of literalism in his reading of texts. In one way, it's refreshing to stumble upon a scholar who thinks eschatological events really will occur. But then his reading misses the rhapsodic poetry of kaleidoscopic language that prompts the imagination to conceive of something beyond prosaic happenings. Metaphorical flashes speak truly about God's ultimate plans, but we can be sure that what actually takes place will blow the metaphorical language to smithereens. We won't say, "Oh, it happened just as Mark 13 said it would." Instead, our jaws will drop, and we'll stutter and mumble and weep for joy.

Although Middleton doesn't dwell on it, he does remind us that a robust theology of hoped-for redemption of the created order is deeply pertinent to what's going on in the world. The implications for the Ferguson protests, police brutality, torture, the environment, sex trafficking, and everything else blaring on the evening news are self-evident. It may be that we overspiritualize partly because of our thinness of soul and as the result of vapid teaching, but we do so also because this world is so lackluster and overwhelmingly troubled. Our flattened-out imaginations cannot begin to conceive of redemption. So we may well pray, "Lord, surprise us with a restored world, please!" The impulse of the spirituals will forever provide us relief and succor as we faithfully dream of a day when we will be done with the troubles of this world.

Middleton's contributions are salutary, and more important now than ever. But I found myself wishing he had focused on giving us a fuller, denser, more wonderful kind of eschatology without tossing centuries of piety into the dustbin. He is right: "Jesus came initially not to save the world from sin, but rather to restore Israel to righteousness and blessing." Yet isn't it a non sequitur to say, "Heaven as the eternal hope of the righteous has no structural place in the story . . . and was never part of God's purposes for humanity"? This is only so if we define heaven trivially or poorly. True, salvation isn't simply about going to heaven. It's broader, thankfully. But my place in heaven after I've died is something to which I rightly cling—and is plenty biblical.

Finally, Middleton's shrewd portrayal of the Bible's vision for the future, of a this-worldly restoration of all things, raises the prickliest and most daunting of all questions in our day and age. A few scientists who enjoy rock-star status, like Stephen Hawking, would inevitably chuckle over all the ink spilt clarifying that the Bible writers wished us to believe in the redemption of all creation with Christ at its

center. Which creation? Which or how many of the parallel universes? How could we ever comprehend one-billionth of it? Where would the center be? These are the questions thoughtful people in the pews raise. But there’s always something, isn’t there? And Middleton, I am sure, would heartily agree.