

THE HEAVENLY SANCTUARY MOTIF IN REVELATION 21:3 AND THE ISSUE OF OMNIPRESENCE: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The concept of divine omnipresence has been a central yet often underexplored attribute of God, particularly in relation to the sanctuary motif. Various theological perspectives have influenced interpretations of God's presence. These views often challenge the biblical portrayal of a tangible sanctuary, prompting significant theological inquiries. Revelation 21:3, declaring that "the tabernacle of God is with men," challenges these interpretations by emphasizing a direct, spatial, and relational aspect of God's presence with humanity. This study, through an exegetical study of Rev 21:3, offers some data on this discussion, arguing that the New Jerusalem tabernacle functions both as a concrete, eschatological space where God resides with His people and as a representation of His all-encompassing presence. It clarifies the eschatological role of the sanctuary, demonstrating that God's omnipresence complements a localized divine presence, with the sanctuary serving as the focal point of divine-human communion in the new creation.

Keywords: Divine omnipresence, sanctuary motif, Revelation 21:3, pantheism, classical theism, panentheism, and immanence

1. Introduction

Among the omni-attributes of God, omnipresence has received comparatively less attention than attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence.¹ However, the concept of divine omnipresence has been a fundamental aspect of understanding the sanctuary motif, spanning from ancient Egyptian² beliefs to contemporary New Age philosophy.³ This becomes clear in the fact that omnipresence is generally considered the property of being present everywhere,⁴ and sanctuary has been understood through the ages as an environment or place where the divine is perceived.

Many tentative formulations have been made in order to explain omnipresence.⁵ Those formulations have implications in the conception and perception of the idea of sanctuary as well as in the interpretation of biblical

¹ Edward Wierenga, "Omnipresence," *Stanford University*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/omnipresence>. See also, Edward R. Wierenga, "Omnipresence," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 286–90.

² As the gods of ancient Egypt were powerful beings seen in human terms, they needed a house in which to live, food, and family. Consequently, Egyptian temples were seen as houses where gods truly abode, quite literally. The pylon, a grand gateway, served as the entrance, while the open courts functioned as spaces where visitors could be received. The hypostyle hall and the sanctuary were akin to the more private sections of a home, such as bedrooms, accessible only to the pharaoh, in his role as high priest, and other high-ranking officials. At the very core of the sanctuary stood the deity's inner sanctum, the holiest and most secluded space, accessible only to the pharaoh in his role as high priest or to a high priest designated by him (Lorna Oakes and Lucia Gahlim, *Ancient Egypt: An Illustrated Reference to the Myths, Religion, Pyramids, and Temples of the Land of the Pharaohs* [New York: Hermes House, 2002], 148; Rolf Gundlach, "Temples," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Donald B. Redford [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 366).

³ Adam K. Arap Chepkwony, "New Age Movement: A Challenge to the Church in the 21st Century," *AFER* 48.4 (2006), 317–20. Chepkwony identifies five foundational principles held by New Agers: (1) Everything exists as a unified, indivisible reality—"all is one," (2) "All is God," as Shirley Maclaine says, "the God we are all seeking lies inside oneself, not outside;" Ernest Lucas, *Science and the New Age Challenge* [Leicester: Apollos, 1996], 15; (3) Total autonomy—since we are gods we can do everything; (4) There is no absolute; (5) Salvation is associated with transformation of the individual consciousness. Those five New Age principles can be related to the concept of omnipresence with implications to the notion of temple, mainly the two first ones.

⁴ Wierenga, "Omnipresence," 286.

⁵ Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 183–86. Enns succinctly presents many ways of perceiving God both theistically and anti-theistically. This is a place to start basic research about God and omnipresence.

passages where the sanctuary motif is present. One way of understanding omnipresence is through the eyes of pantheism: God is all, and all is God.⁶ If God is solely immanent, He is confounded with the universe.⁷ Consequently, God and sanctuary are conceived as one and the same thing: the universe is the temple, and the temple is the universe.⁸

For classical theism, God is immanent, though ontologically distinct, God is also transcendent and immutable. God is Spirit and does not exist in time.⁹ In this context, the idea of a heavenly temple is frequently understood in a spiritualized, Platonic framework.¹⁰ As a result, biblical portrayals of God residing among His people in a sanctuary are often seen as symbolic or allegorical expressions of the close relationship He seeks to establish with them. Thus, biblical depictions of God dwelling with His people in a sanctuary are often interpreted as metaphors or allegories representing the intimate relationship He desires with them.¹¹

In more recent times, pantheism has arisen as a relevant way of looking at God's omnipresence and, consequently, to the sanctuary concept. For pantheism, "although God and the world are ontologically distinct,

⁶ Pantheism believes that "everything is God and God is everything" (Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 186). In his famous quotation, Seneca, *Nat. quaest.*, I, prol. 13, said, "*quid est deus? Quod vides totum et quod non vides totum*" ("What is God? He is all that you see and all that you do not see"). For more on Seneca's pantheism, see Henry F. Burton, "Seneca's Idea of God," *The American Journal of Theology* 13.3 (1909): 350–69. For Seneca's entire book, visit, <https://archive.org/details/seneca.-cuestiones-naturales.-naturales-quaestiones.-vol.-i-1979/page/n61/mode/2up>.

⁷ Cf. Michael P. Levine, "What Is Pantheism," *Dialogue & Alliance* 6.2 (1992): 17–33.

⁸ In this conception, texts such as "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (Rev 21:22) are singled out. All English biblical references will be from the *New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), unless specified otherwise.

⁹ Jonh W. Cooper, "Pantheism: The Other "God of the Philosophers:" An Overview," *American Theological Inquiry* 1.1 (2008): 12. According to Classical Theism, God is always present in every being and event, regardless of time or place, while still maintaining a distinct ontological nature.

¹⁰ Aelred Cody, *Heavenly Sanctuary and Liturgy in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Achievement of Salvation in the Epistle's Perspective* (St. Meinrad, IN: Grail, 1960), 155. Cody affirms, "The theology of the economy of salvation in Christ is presented by the Epistle's author in the form of a symbolic parable using the categories of Alexandrian dualism."

¹¹ Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 222–24. See also F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 78–79, 163, 201–2.

and God transcends the world, the world is “in” God ontologically.¹² So, for this view, there is no need for either a sanctuary or a heavenly sanctuary “because everything exists within God in a series of concentric emanations ... of lesser kinds of being.”¹³ Everything belongs to the Great Soul. In this case, “the sanctuary continues to play no role.”¹⁴ The sanctuary, both as a structure and in its associated rituals, should be interpreted metaphorically.¹⁵ In summary, each of these two perspectives¹⁶ on God and His

¹² Cooper, “Pantheism,” 15. See also, Nancy Frankenberry, “Classical Theism, Pantheism, and Pantheism: On the Relation between God Construction and Gender Construction,” *Zygon* 28.1 (1993): 30. God is conceived “as an all-inclusive whole,” since all is in God (“pantheism”).

¹³ Cooper, “Pantheism,” 15, 22.

¹⁴ Fernando Luis Canale, “Philosophical Foundations and the Biblical Sanctuary,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 36.2 (1998): 198.

¹⁵ Canale, “Philosophical Foundations,” 198. The pantheistic mindset is well expressed and advocated by Bruce G. Epperly, “Process Theology and Lived Omnipresence: An Essay in Practical Theology,” *Encounter* 68. 3 (2007): 19–31. A cherished biblical text for them becomes “in God we live and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28), and a text like “God with us” (Rev 21:3) is turned into “we in God.”

¹⁶ In contemporary theological scholarship, John Peckham’s treatment of divine omnipresence offers a significant contribution to the discourse on God’s attributes, particularly in reorienting the discussion from metaphysical abstraction to relational and covenantal theology. Peckham challenges the traditional conception of omnipresence as a spatial or metaphysical diffusion of divine being, proposing instead that it represents God’s dynamic engagement with creation according to His covenantal purposes. Within this framework, God’s presence is both universal and particular. He sustains all existence yet manifests Himself in distinct redemptive contexts, such as in the burning bush (Exod 3), the tabernacle (Exod 25:8), and ultimately in the incarnation (Matt 1:23). His approach integrates divine transcendence and immanence, affirming that while God is unbounded by space (1 Kgs 8:27), He freely chooses to dwell among His people (Lev 26:12) as an expression of covenantal faithfulness. This model stands in contrast to pantheistic and deistic perspectives, which either dissolve or distance the divine presence, respectively. See John Peckham, *Divine Attributes: Knowing the Covenantal God of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 74–91; John Peckham, “Toward a Systematic Theology of the Sanctuary,” in *A Song for the Sanctuary: Experiencing God’s Presence in Shadow and Reality*, ed. Richard M. Davidson (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2022), 687–92; John Peckham, *The Doctrine of God: Introducing the Big Questions* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 100–105. His view is corroborated by the exegetical work of this article and counterpoints the three mainstream views briefly explained in the main text.

omnipresence, in some manner, lessens or even nullifies the concept of a heavenly sanctuary as a tangible reality in space and time.¹⁷

2. Definition of the Issue

One biblical passage that deals with many of the mentioned issues is Rev 21:3:

And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and be* their God.”

καὶ ἤκουσα φωνὴν μεγάλην ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου λέγουσαν· Ἴδου ἡ σκηνὴ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστὶν μετὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ σκηνώσει ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν· καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔσονται λαὸς αὐτοῦ, καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ θεὸς ἔσται μετ’ αὐτῶν [ὁ θεὸς αὐτῶν].¹⁸

As stated in the introduction, the concept of divine omnipresence has often been discussed within philosophical and theological frameworks, each of which shapes the understanding of the sanctuary motif in distinct ways. However, these perspectives tend to either diminish or negate the idea of a tangible heavenly sanctuary. While Rev 21:3 explicitly describes God’s tabernacle as being “with men,” there remains an open question as to whether this should be understood as a literal dwelling place or merely a metaphor for God’s omnipresence.

In general, the interpretation of the sanctuary in Revelation has its

¹⁷ This effect is evident in how many exegetical Bible commentaries interpret passages related to the heavenly sanctuary theme. See for example, how Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 274, had already highlighted various interpretations of Rev 21:3. For Canale, “Philosophical Foundations,” 198, “the classical approach to the interpretation of the sanctuary continues exercising its influence not only on dogmatic interpretations but, at times, also on exegetical ones.” “Space-time reality” is a common expression within systematic theology to say that something is real in the sense of literal.

¹⁸ Unless otherwise mentioned, the Greek Text and Apparatus come from Barbara Aland et al., ed., *The Greek New Testament*, 5th (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014). In this verse, there is one variant reading that needs some comments. Namely, the presence or absence of the words αὐτῶν θεός (“be their God”). MMS evidence seems to be inconclusive. While Codex Sinaiticus is in favor of the shorter reading, Codex Alexandrinus favors the longer one. The phrase αὐτῶν θεός can be considered a marginal gloss, a superfluous addition to make a better parallelism with the preceding clause, or could be otherwise omitted in some manuscripts due to redundancy (Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 688–89. See also, Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1992], 454).

complexities due to the book's symbolic nature, particularly in relation to the New Jerusalem tabernacle described in Rev 21:3. A central question is whether this tabernacle refers to a specific, tangible location or if it symbolically represents God's presence with His people regardless of space. This leads to further inquiries: Can the sanctuary function both as a distinct site for divine revelation and as a symbol of God's all-encompassing omnipresence? Does the Book of Revelation provide theological support for this dual understanding of the sanctuary? Additionally, if God dwells with His people in the New Jerusalem tabernacle, does this suggest that His presence is localized there, or does it remain unrestricted? Ultimately, this study seeks to explore how Rev 21:3 contributes to a clearer comprehension of the sanctuary, the temple, and God's presence, particularly in relation to the broader doctrine of His omnipresence. In other words, it aims to conduct an exegetical analysis of Rev 21:3 or gain deeper insight into the concepts of the sanctuary and God's presence, as well as their interrelationship, with the goal of clarifying the theological implications of omnipresence and the sanctuary.

3. Exegesis

The questions raised above will be addressed through an exegetical approach, which involves careful examination of both the immediate and broader literary contexts of the book of Revelation, as well as its overall structure. The study will culminate in a detailed textual analysis of selected passages. Before engaging directly in exegesis, however, it is necessary to offer preliminary observations on the symbolic nature of Revelation, since symbolism plays a central role in shaping its meaning.

3.1 Symbolism in Revelation

Jon Paulien provides helpful guidance for interpreting the symbolism of Revelation and outlines three essential principles for reading the book responsibly. First, as an apocalyptic work, Revelation uses narrative and imagery to reveal divine realities that transcend ordinary human perception, while still communicating those realities in forms accessible to human understanding. Second, interpretation must take into account the historical and cultural background of John's time, including his extensive use of OT imagery. At the same time, Paulien emphasizes that Revelation's visions are not confined to their original historical setting but possess broader theological and eschatological significance. Third, because Revelation is saturated

with symbolic language, its expressions should generally be interpreted figuratively unless careful analysis clearly indicates that a literal reading is required.¹⁹

While emphasizing symbolism, Ranko Stefanovic cautions against assuming that everything in Revelation is figurative. He notes that certain persons, places, and events such as John on Patmos, the seven churches, Christ, tribulation, war, and death are clearly intended to be understood literally. This balance highlights the need for discernment, recognizing that Revelation combines literal and symbolic elements, each functioning within the book's apocalyptic framework.²⁰

Gregory K. Beale further develops criteria for identifying figurative language in Revelation's semiology. He suggests that symbolism is indicated when two distinct realities are explicitly equated, such as in Rev 1:20 ("the seven lampstands are the seven churches"); when descriptive terms signal comparison, as in Rev 11:8 ("the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt"); or when literal interpretation would result in absurdity, contradiction, or impossibility, such as eating a book (Rev 10:10) or identifying the two witnesses as lampstands and olive trees (Rev 11:3–4). Beale also emphasizes the importance of literary context and consistent symbolic usage throughout the book as key indicators of figurative meaning, noting that repeated symbolic use strongly supports symbolic interpretation in specific passages.²¹

3.2 Large Context

The structure of the Book of Revelation can be analyzed from multiple perspectives, each offering a unique yet complementary insight into its literary composition. Those perspectives can be regarded as intrinsically connected and interwoven, showing the literary beauty of the book and enhancing its theological understanding. Stefanovic has pointed out many of those approaches, such as recapitulative, historical-eschatological, annual cycle of

¹⁹ Jon Paulien, "The Hermeneutics of Biblical Apocalyptic," in *Understanding Scripture: And Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute of General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist, 2005), 254–70.

²⁰ Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 17.

²¹ Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 57. For further ways to identify comparative statements see G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 186–97.

festivals, chiastic, threefold, and introductory sanctuary scenes, among others.²² For the aim of this article, the introductory sanctuary scenes will be highlighted.

Building on Strand's works,²³ Davidson and Paulien advocate for a chiastic structure in the Book of Revelation. Their argument is based on the presence of seven sanctuary scenes, which are intricately woven together with the pattern of the Israelite annual festival cycle.²⁴ Their literary structure may be summarized as follows (Table 1):

*Table 1: Davidson's Introductory Sanctuary Scenes Structure of the Book of Revelation*²⁵

Passage	Sanctuary Activity	Spatiotemporal Movement
1:12–20	(1) Focus on the earthly ministry of Christ	Earth (imagery of the Holy Place)
4–5	(2) Inauguration of the heavenly sanctuary	Heaven (mixture of sanctuary imagery, with focus on the Holy Place)
8:3–5	(3) Intercession in the heavenly sanctuary	Heaven (Holy Place)
11:19	(4) Judgment in the heavenly sanctuary	Heaven (Most Holy Place)
15:5–8	(5) Cessation of heavenly sanctuary ministry	Heaven

²² Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 25–46.

²³ Kenneth A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation: Hermeneutical Guidelines, with Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Naples, FL: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1979), 43–52; Kenneth A. Strand, "The Eight Basic Visions in the Book of Revelation," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 25.1 (1987): 107–21; Kenneth A. Strand, "The 'Victorious-Introduction' Scenes in the Visions in the Book of Revelation," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 25.3 (1987): 267–88.

²⁴ Richard M. Davidson, "Sanctuary Typology," in *Symposium on Revelation—Book I*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 111–26; Jon Paulien, "Seals and Trumpets: Some Current Discussions," in *Symposium on Revelation—Book I*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 187–92. The main difference between Strand and Davidson/Paulien is that Strand considers Rev 16:18–17:3a as a sanctuary scene and Davidson/Paulien do not.

²⁵ A complete explanation about this table can be found in Davidson, "Sanctuary Typology," 112–15.

19:1–10	(6) Doxology in heaven	(No explicit sanctuary imagery)
21:1–22:5	(7) “The tabernacle of God is with men”	Back to Earth

The literary structure of Revelation according Paulien may be summarized as follows (Table 2):

Table 2: Paulien’s Introductory Sanctuary Scenes Structure of the Book of Revelation

(1) 1:12–20		Earth
(2) 4–5	Inauguration	
(3) 8:2–6	Intercession	
(4) 11:19	Judgment	Heaven
(5) 15:5–8	Cessation	
(6) 19:1–10	Absence	
(7) 21:1–22:5		Earth

According to Davidson, this literary structure is tightly intertwined with the historical-eschatological typological structure.²⁶ Additionally, the structure of the earlier sanctuary scenes illustrates a clear progression “from earth to heaven, and then back to earth.”²⁷ These two directions of progression—historical and spatial—when tied to the NT typology,²⁸ provide significant insights into the understanding of the sanctuary in Revelation.²⁹

It should be understood that in the eschatological framework, the ultimate fulfillment of the *τυπός* (“typos”) passages includes a threefold aspect. That is, in the typological relationship between an OT type and its corresponding NT antitype, there is one fulfillment involving three aspects or phases: “(1) The first advent of Christ brought about an *inauguration* of the

²⁶ Davidson has detected five typological structures that consistently emerge from a detailed analysis of NT passages that contain the word *τυπός* (“type”), namely, historical, prophetic, Christological-soteriological, ecclesiological, and eschatological. A summary of this study can be found in Richard M. Davidson, “Typology in the Book of Hebrews,” in *Issues in the Book of Hebrews*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1989), 129–32. For a detailed study, see Davidson, *Typology in Scripture*.

²⁷ Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” 115.

²⁸ Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” 114–15.

²⁹ Paulien, “Seals and Trumpets: Some Current Discussions,” 188.

eschatological fulfillment in the kingdom of grace. (2) The church now lives in the time of *appropriation*, the time of eschatological *tension* between the “already” and the “not yet.” (3) The Second Advent will usher in the eschatological *consummation* in the kingdom of glory.”³⁰ These three phases can be labeled as Christological, ecclesiological, and apocalyptic.³¹

Davidson has detected that those three aspects also contain three different modes of fulfillment.³² Accordingly, “the fulfillment of the types shares the same character as the nature of Christ’s presence.”³³ At the first advent, Jesus’s disciples could relate to Him corporeally and locally. Therefore, “the types are fulfilled literally and locally in Him.”³⁴ Following His ascension to heaven, He interacts with His church solely in a spiritual manner, through faith, and by the work of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16–17, 25–26; Rom 8:23, 26). “Therefore, the fulfillment experienced by the church on earth is of a spiritual nature.”³⁵ Nevertheless, at the same time, because Christ is physically present in the heavenly sanctuary, the sanctuary types find their literal fulfillment in that heavenly sanctuary.³⁶ “At the final consummation, Christ is *literally* reunited with His people, and the types have a glorious, final, universal, and literal fulfillment.”³⁷

³⁰ Davidson, “Typology in the Book of Hebrews,” 130.

³¹ Davidson, *Typology in Scripture*, 388–97.

³² This conclusion arises from the Christological-soteriological, ecclesiological typological structures. See, Davidson, *Typology in Scripture*, 101–2; Davidson, “Typology in the Book of Hebrews,” 130–31.

³³ Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” 108.

³⁴ Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” 108.

³⁵ Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” 108.

³⁶ Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” 108.

³⁷ Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943), 15–22; Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation*, Andrews University Monographs Studies in Religion (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983), passim; Louis Were, *The Certainty of the Third Angel’s Message* (Berrien Springs, MI: First Impressions, 1979), 308–14. In the Gospels, Jesus Christ also presents these three aspects of the kingdom of God: (1) He himself as the embodiment of the kingdom (Matt 11:3–6; 12:26, 28–29); (2) the spiritual and interior kingdom (Luke 17:20–21); and (3) the apocalyptic, literal, and final kingdom (Matt 24; 25:34; 26:26–30; cf. 1 Cor 11:24–26). See also Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans., John E. Alsup (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 1:93; D. R. W. Wood I. and Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 648. Gösta Lundström states, “The kingdom is God’s Kingdom, concentrating in the King, who is one with the Kingdom” (Gösta Lundström, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, trans., Joan Bulman [Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1963]. A detailed explanation of Luke 17:20–21 and the expression ἐντός ὑμῶν can be found in

This threefold eschatological structure, with its three modes of fulfillment, applies to the sanctuary as well. Christ Himself is seen as the antitypical temple (John 1:14; 2:21; Matt 12:6); the church is referred to as “the temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 3:16, 17; 2 Cor 6:16), and the heavenly sanctuary “becomes especially significant at the time of apocalyptic fulfillment”³⁸ (e.g. Rev 3:12; 7:15; 11:19; 21:3).

The historical and spatial lines of progression in the book of Revelation, when linked to NT typology, provide a crucial key to understanding the use of sanctuary symbolism in Revelation. “We should expect that when sanctuary imagery in Revelation is applied to an *earthly* setting in the time of the church, there will be a *spiritual* and not literal interpretation, since the temple is a spiritual one here on earth.... In harmony with this hermeneutical principle, the antitypical lampstands on earth in Rev 1 are not literal but spiritual.”³⁹ When the scene transitions to heaven in Rev 4:1, the sanctuary imagery—specifically regarding the heavenly sanctuary—aligns with the same mode as Christ’s presence, meaning it is literally and antitypically fulfilled.”⁴⁰ When, in the heavenly section of the book, there are brief shifts to earthly sanctuary allusions (Rev 6:9–11; 11:1–2), “we should interpret these earthly references in a spiritual, nonliteral way.”⁴¹ At the conclusion of the book of Revelation, following Jesus’s return, the apocalyptic phase of sanctuary imagery resolves the tension between the earthly and heavenly realms.

During the era of the church, spiritual Israel is united in a spiritual sense with the heavenly Jerusalem on Mount Zion (Heb 12:22–24). However, when “the tabernacle of God is with men” (Rev 21:3), all of Israel, from every generation, will be physically gathered to the New Jerusalem. After a literal thousand years, the heavenly Jerusalem will physically descend to earth. Following the final judgment and the purification of the earth by fire, the

Gerald F. Hawthorne, “The Essential Nature of the Kingdom of God,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 25.1 (1963): 35–47.

³⁸ Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” 108.

³⁹ Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” 109.

⁴⁰ Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” 110.

⁴¹ Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” 110. Davidson continues on the same page, “so, not a literal altar, not literal ‘souls’ under? the altar, are in view, but rather an ecclesiological fulfillment in the martyred saints and prophets whose blood spiritually cries out for vindication by God.”

restored earth (resembling Eden) will be joined with its core, the actual tabernacle of God, in the actual New Jerusalem.⁴²

Therefore, when analyzing the text of Rev 21:3, one should bear in mind (1) the overall structure of Revelation, (2) sanctuary typology in its threefold eschatological fulfillment with its tripartite modes, and consequently (3) the spatiotemporal nature of the tabernacle in this passage.

3.3 Immediate Context

Revelation 21:3 is included in the vision of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:1–22:5), which is divided into three successive sections: (1) Rev 21:1–8; (2) Rev 21:9–27, (3) Rev 22:1–5. These sections share at least four common traits: each part (1) begins with a “seeing” statement, (2) concludes with a statement of exclusion or caution, underscoring the sanctity of the city and its inhabitants, (3) offers a progressively detailed description of the city’s attributes, and (4) moves from a broad overview to specific details.⁴³

The first scene emphasizes the concept of renewal. John observes a new heaven and a new earth (21:1), with the New Jerusalem descending from heaven to earth (v. 2; cf., v. 10), referred to as “the tabernacle of God” (ἡ σκηνὴ τοῦ θεοῦ, v. 3). Verse 4 presents this “newness” in a negative light, describing the absence of tears, death, grief, crying, or pain, “for the former things have passed away.” Verse 5 encapsulates the entire scene: “He who sat on the throne declared, “Behold, I make all things new” (v. 5). In the immediate context, v. 3 depicts this new stage of God’s relationship with His people in “the tabernacle of God,” the New Jerusalem descending from heaven to the renewed earth (cf., Rev 21:10).

Furthermore, the expression “it is done” (v. 6) within the context of Rev 21:1–8 emphasizes that, for God, this new creation is not merely a potential but an actual reality.⁴⁴ Badenas further contends that although the portrayal of the New Jerusalem functions as a recapitulation of salvation history and undoubtedly bears symbolic meaning, the specific textual elements point

⁴² Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” 111. The threefold aspect of eschatological fulfillment of NT typology is also of help in the interpretation of time periods in the book of Revelation.

⁴³ Roberto Badenas, “New Jerusalem – The Holy City,” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book I*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 245–46.

⁴⁴ Badenas, “New Jerusalem – The Holy City,” 250.

toward a future realization of this reality within a transformed, physical creation rather than a purely spiritual domain. Consequently, exegetical analysis does not support interpretations that identify the New Jerusalem of Rev 21–22 with the historical manifestation of the Christian Church on earth.⁴⁵

Therefore, whereas this passage is filled with symbolism, this scene deals with spatiotemporal reality. The second and third scenes further develop and reinforce the declaration from the throne about the New Jerusalem as the tabernacle of God and God's presence with His people.⁴⁶ In the second scene, for example, John observes the New Jerusalem "having the glory of God" (Rev 21:10–11). Both Ezekiel and John associate the glory with God's personal presence. The term "glory" is a theophanic term, signifying the tangible manifestation of God's very essence.⁴⁷

Moreover, the city is described as a perfect cube (Rev 21:15–17), mirroring the shape of the Most Holy Place in the sanctuary (1 Kg 6:20; cf. Ezek 45:2–3).⁴⁸ Additionally, the foundation stones (Rev 21:18–20) are the same as those found in the high priest's breastplate (Exod 28:17–20; 39:8–14), including gold.⁴⁹

Revelation 21:22, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb," does not negate that the city is the temple, which is stated in v. 3 and indicated in the whole chapter. It only says

⁴⁵ Badenas, "New Jerusalem – The Holy City," 270. See also, François Bovon, "Le Christ de L'apocalypse," *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 22 (1972): 71; Robert Martin-Achard, "Esaie 54 et la Nouvelle Jerusalem," *Cahiers de la revue de théologie et de philosophie* 11.7 (1984): 204.

⁴⁶ See Andrea L. Robinson, *Temple of Presence: The Christological Fulfillment of Ezekiel 40–48 in Revelation 21:1–22:5* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 122; Jan du Rand, "The New Jerusalem as Pinnacle of Salvation: Text (Rev 21:1–22:5) and Intertext," *Neot* 38 (2004) 275–302.

⁴⁷ Robinson, *Temple of Presence*, 134. See Ezek 1:28; 3:23; 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18–19; 11:22–23; 39:21; 43:2, 4–5; 44:4; Rev 15:8; 21:11, 23. For Moshe Weinfeld, "God the Creator in Gen. 1 and in the Prophecy of Second Isaiah / ישעיהו השני וּבְנוֹאֵת יִשְׁעִיהוּ הַשֵּׁנִי," *Tarbiz* 37.2, 1968), 117, in the OT, "glory" (כְּבוֹד) means "body and substance," that is, God himself. Also, Rimmon Kasher, "Anthropomorphism, Holiness, and Cult: A New Look at Ezekiel 40–48," *ZAW* 110 (1998), 192, 203. For "glory" as God's personal presence in the NT, see Beale, *Revelation*, 1066; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 390.

⁴⁸ George B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John*, BNTC19, Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 272–73; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1073–79. For a full treatment of the interrelationship between Ezek 40–45 and Rev 21:1–22:5, see Robinson, *Temple of Presence*, 110–84.

⁴⁹ Beale, *Revelation*, 1080–81.

that there is no temple in the city (“the city is the temple,” v. 3) and God and the Lamb are the temple of the city. The language of v. 22 emphasizes that the saints will have direct access to God and the Lamb, the ultimate temple.⁵⁰ The following verse (Rev 21:23) shows God’s and the Lamb’s function in the “tabernacle of God” with cultic language: “the glory of God” and “the lamp” give light to the city, while in the last scene (Rev 22:1–5), the work the redeemed is called *λατρεύω*, to “render cultic service” in the capacity of a priest.⁵¹ Against this background the text of Rev 21:3 needs to be considered.

3.4 Textual Analysis

Some terms need special attention in this paper. Firstly, *σκηνή* has the basic meaning of “tent.”⁵² The LXX employs *σκηνή* to indicate a simple booth, hut or an abode, but also for the Israelite Tabernacle of the wilderness.⁵³ In the NT, the term *σκηνή* appears 20 times (Matt 17:4; Mark 9:5; Luke 9:33; 16:9; Acts 7:43–44; 15:16; Heb 8:2, 5; 9:2–3, 6, 8, 11, 21; 11:9; 13:10; Rev 13:6; 15:5; 21:3), with 14 of these instances referring to a sacred place (Acts 7:43–44; Heb 8:2, 5; 9:2–3, 6, 8, 11, 21; 13:10; Rev 13:6; 15:5; 21:3).

In the sense of a sacred place, outside Revelation, in the NT, *σκηνή* always alludes to the Israelite Tabernacle and evokes the perception of dwelling or abode.⁵⁴ In the Book of Revelation, the term *σκηνή* is consistently used to refer to God’s heavenly sanctuary (Rev 13:6; 15:5; 21:3). This is particularly evident in Rev 21:3, where, in v. 2, the city/temple is described as “coming

⁵⁰ In the same vein, Richard M. Davidson, *A Song for the Sanctuary: Experiencing God’s Presence in Shadow and Reality* (Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2022), 44, 79, 152, 178, 181, 640, 648–50, 664; and Nicholas J. Moore, *The Open Sanctuary: Access to God and the Heavenly Temple in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2024), 70–74, 188.

⁵¹ BDAG, “*λατρεύω*,” 587.

⁵² Berne W. Michaelis, “*Σκηνή*,” *TDNT* 7:368–69.

⁵³ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1994).

⁵⁴ Other terms in the NT refer to the sanctuary or temple, such as *ναός*, *ἄγιος*, *δικος*, *δικία*, *δικητήριον*, *δικοδομή*, and *τύπος*, each emphasizing a different aspect. In addition to Hebrews and Revelation, several passages in the NT reference the heavenly sanctuary, including Matt 5:34, 23:22; John 14:1–3; Acts 2:30–32; 7:55–56; Rom 8:33–34; 2 Cor 5:1–2; Eph 1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12; Col 3:1; 2 Thess 2:4; and 1 John 2:1–2. See Leonardo G. Nunes, “Function and Nature of The Heavenly Sanctuary/Temple and Its Earthly Counterparts in the New Testament Gospels, Acts, and Epistles: A Motif Study of Major Passages” (Th.D. diss., Andrews University, 2020).

down from heaven" (*καταβαίνουσιν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ*), and the "voice from the throne" clarifies that this city is "the tabernacle [*σκηνή*] of God" (v. 3). As a result, in the NT, and especially in Revelation, *σκηνή* takes on a specific, technical meaning, referring to the sanctuary, which is the dwelling place of God.

Similarly, the verb *σκηνώω* appears only in Johannine literature in the NT (John 1:14; Rev 7:15; 12:12; 13:6; 21:3) and consistently carries a cultic or sacred connotation.⁵⁵ According to Michaelis, when the verb *σκηνώω* is used in the context of God sitting on His throne, it conveys the idea of permanent residence. Specifically, when *σκηνή* refers to the heavenly tabernacle, *σκηνώω* means "to dwell permanently," emphasizing a lasting and unchanging presence."⁵⁶

The interjection "behold" (*ἰδοὺ*; v. 3) picks up the "seeing" mentioned in the previous two verses (v. 1, *Καὶ εἶδον* ["and I saw"]; v. 2, *καὶ ... εἶδον* ["and ... I saw"]) and sets the tone for vv. 3–4. In other words, the voice from the throne is announcing that what John is witnessing, the New Jerusalem (v. 2), is "the tabernacle of God" (v. 3), the place where the fulfillment and realization of all the blessings promised in vv. 3–4 take place, specifically the presence of God (v. 3) and the passing away of "the former things" (v. 4).

The clause "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men" (v. 3b) happens only once in the Bible.⁵⁷ While in Exod 25:8, God expresses His desire to dwell with His people, in Rev 21:3, this longing is fully realized; "the tabernacle of God" "from heaven "is with men." Moreover, when the clause in v. 3b–c are considered together, they reflect a recurring theme throughout the OT, "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (e.g., Gen 17:7; Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Ezek 11:20; 37:26–27; Zech 2:10–11; 2 Cor 6:16; Rev 21:3, 7).⁵⁸ This theme is like "a golden thread woven into the fabric of Scripture from beginning to end. The thread of God's abiding love toward his covenant people."⁵⁹ As Ezek 37:26–27 declares, "I [YHWH] will establish My

⁵⁵ The verb *σκηνώω*, in non-biblical writings, means "to live or camp in a tent." See Xenophon, *Anabasis*, II, 4, 14; VII, 4, 12; Wilhelm Michaelis, "Σκηνώω," in *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 385. LXX rarely uses *σκηνώω* (4 times) and never in a liturgical sense.

⁵⁶ Michaelis, "Σκηνώω," 385–86.

⁵⁷ Andreas Hoeck, *The Descent of the New Jerusalem: A Discourse Analysis of Rev 21:1–22:5* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 142.

⁵⁸ Cf. Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 231–32.

⁵⁹ William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1953), 557.

sanctuary in their midst forever. My tabernacle will also be with them; I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” The future promise of the OT has now become a present reality in Rev 21:3—the tabernacle is with them.⁶⁰

Grant R. Osborne argues that the expression “the tabernacle of God” (ἡ σκηνη τοῦ θεοῦ, v. 3b) is understood as a Greek rendering of the Hebrew term שְׁכִינָה (*shekinah*), which signifies the intimate communion or presence of God with His people.⁶¹ For Osborne, this communion was realized in two phases: (1) in John 1:14, where “the Word became flesh and dwelt [σκηνώσας] among us,” and (2) in Rev 21:3, where “He will dwell with them” (σκηνώσει μετ’ αὐτῶν, v. 3c). “In Christ, the שְׁכִינָה (*shekinah*), took on human form, and here, the fellowship between God and His people becomes both physical and complete.”⁶²

It is important to note that while there is an intimate connection and interaction between God and His people, a distinction still exists between the tabernacle, God, and His people. The genitive of association⁶³ “with men” or “with them” (μετά + genitive) occurs 3 times in those five clauses (v. 3). It can be translated as “in association with,”⁶⁴ that is, associated but distinct. It underlines the close bond between God and men but maintains their dissimilarity.⁶⁵

The last phrase (v. 3e) has a distinctive construction, “God Himself will be with them *and be* their God” (καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ θεὸς μετ’ αὐτῶν ἔσται [αὐτῶν θεός]). “The expression αὐτὸς ὁ θεός is the only instance in Revelation where the *intensive* pronoun αὐτός is immediately followed by a substantive. It stands for a certain astonishment: “Indeed, it is God Himself!”⁶⁶ This striking ontological declaration made by the voice coming from the throne in heaven asserts that God *Himself* will be ontologically present with His people in this literal

⁶⁰ To understand the relationship of the book’s background of thought and NT echoing an OT passage, see Nunes, “Function and Nature of The Heavenly Sanctuary/Temple,” 414–39.

⁶¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 734.

⁶² Osborne, *Revelation*, 734. Emphasis supplied.

⁶³ The genitive noun indicates the one whom the noun to which it stands related is associated with. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 128–29.

⁶⁴ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 128–29.

⁶⁵ Nicholas J. Moore, *The Open Sanctuary: Access to God and the Heavenly Temple in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2024), 70–72, agrees with this understanding

⁶⁶ Hoek, *The Descent of the New Jerusalem*, 146. Emphasis supplied.

city/temple on earth. The Creator is present with His creation in both history and within the bounds of space and time.

When the Greek text of Revelation, suffused with Hebrew mindset,⁶⁷ places the verb after the object,⁶⁸ the construction may be read as consonant with the book's broader emphasis on the intimate relationship between the two referents, without making that emphasis dependent on syntax alone; that is, "God" and "people" living in an experiential and concrete relationship. However, it also points to the reality of God (not an idea about Him) being ontologically with His people as distinct beings in a city that descended from heaven to earth. David MacLeod points out:

Many people are startled by what they read in verses 1–8. They have the idea—a Greek idea, not a biblical one—that the redeemed will spend their lives in the sky. The Bible teaches, however, that man's ultimate destiny is an earthly one. As can be seen from this passage, believers will spend eternity on the new earth, not in a heavenly realm removed from earthly existence.⁶⁹

The last two words of this verse, *αὐτῶν θεός* ("their God"), can be seen as an echo of Ezek 48:35: *שָׁמָּה יְהוָה* ("The LORD Is There").⁷⁰ "God encompasses His people in a syntactically conspicuous way: "God with *them* their *God*."⁷¹ The promise of the OT becomes a reality in the last vision of the NT.

From the interconnectedness of the five clauses and the repeated use of the conjunction *καί*, it becomes clear that, as a result of God's tabernacle, (i.e., the sanctuary/temple, being established among humanity (v. 3a–b), several consequences follow: God and His people will dwell together eternally (v. 3c), they will be His people (v. 3d), they will experience the direct

⁶⁷ It is commonplace to perceive Revelation's and John's Jewishness. See Lizorkin and Shir, *Hebrew Insights from Revelation* (n.p.: Jewish Studies for Christians, 2021).

⁶⁸ It is commonly acknowledged that in Greek, the word order is used for emphasis. See, e.g., Hoeck, *The Descent of the New Jerusalem*, 146.

⁶⁹ David J. MacLeod, "The Seventh 'Last Thing': The New Heaven and the New Earth (Rev 21:1–8)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157.628 (2000): 444. See also Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 443; George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 275.

⁷⁰ Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 183–88. For Robinson, *Temple of Presence*, 132–34, besides Ezek 48:35, Rev 21:3 also draws from Ezek 37 and 43.

⁷¹ Hoeck, *The Descent of the New Jerusalem*, 147.

presence and physical reality of God Himself with them (v. 3e), and there will be no more pain or sorrow (v. 4).

4. Summary

To summarize, the literary structure of Revelation, rooted in sanctuary typology with its two lines of progression (historical and spatial), reveals that the New Jerusalem is a literal city-temple that will descend from heaven to earth. The immediate context of Rev 21:3 equates the New Jerusalem with the tabernacle, signifying the personal presence of God, as His Glory will be present there (cf. 21:10–11). The words *σκηνή* and *σκηνώω* reveal that when they are in the same context along with God's throne, they have signify permanent existence. Nevertheless, this is not a metaphorical presence. From the last phrase, *καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ θεὸς μετ' αὐτῶν ἔσται* [*αὐτῶν θεός*] ("and God Himself will be with them and be their God," v. 3e), it is possible to infer some important details about the God-menpeople association. First, God *Himself* will be (*ἔσται*) ontologically present (*αὐτὸς ὁ θεός*) with His people. Second, God and people are distinct; that is, they are not ontologically the same (*μετ' αὐτῶν*). And third, God and people are the two poles of this intimate relationship, as the text clearly states. On account of the God-people concept being repeated four times in Rev 21:3, it is possible to infer that the tabernacle is a place for the achievement of the God-people relationship because, at least in one pole of this correlation, the ontology of the creature demands such reality. When the whole verse is considered together, it becomes perceptible that the function of the "tabernacle of God" is to be the locus of the fulfillment and achievement of the blessings promised in v. 3–4—close association between God and His people (v. 3), and as a result, everlasting joy (v. 4). "Thus, the idea of sanctuary is not reduced to a building but emerges as a God-building-human-beings structure."⁷²

The preceding analysis shows that, given the symbolic nature of the Book of Revelation, Rev 21:3 should be understood as pointing to the fulfillment of God's desire to dwell with His people in the same way He did before the fall. However, this interpretation does not negate the spatiotemporal reality of the new earth, the New Jerusalem as the tabernacle of God on this renewed earth, or the personal and ontological relationship between God and His creatures in the sanctuary. In this way, the sanctuary emphasizes God's immanence among His creatures. While the Bible also states that God dwells throughout the entire cosmos (Isa 66:1–2) and that no physical

⁷² Canale, "Philosophical Foundations," 184.

structure can contain Him (1 Kgs 8:27; 2 Chr 2:6; Jer 23:24; Acts 7:49; 17:24), God's Omnipresence should not be viewed merely as His presence everywhere. It must also encompass the idea of God engaging in a relational experience with His people in space and time, with the sanctuary serving as His designated place to commune with His creatures.

5. Conclusion

In examining Rev 21:3, this study has underscored the multifaceted interpretations of divine omnipresence and the sanctuary motif within various theological frameworks, including pantheism, classical theism, and panentheism. These perspectives often diminish or negate the concept of a real heavenly sanctuary as a space-time reality. Through a detailed exegetical analysis, it becomes evident that Rev 21:3 portrays the New Jerusalem as a true city-temple descending from heaven to earth, embodying God's tangible presence among His people. This interpretation challenges views that consider the sanctuary purely metaphorical, emphasizing instead a concrete, spatial dwelling place for God.

The study's purpose was to clarify the theological implications of God's omnipresence in relation to the sanctuary concept, particularly as depicted in Rev 21:3. The analysis reveals that the terms *σκηνή* ("tabernacle") and *σκηνώω* ("to dwell") in this context signify not merely a symbolic presence but an actual, enduring dwelling of God with humanity. This understanding aligns with the broader biblical narrative, where the sanctuary serves as the locus for divine-human interaction, affirming that God's omnipresence also encompasses His specific, relational engagement with humanity within the sanctuary. In other words, God's presence is not confined to abstract or symbolic representations but includes a real dimension wherein the sanctuary functions as a real, spatial entity, facilitating intimate communion between God and His people. This perspective enriches theological discourse by integrating the spatial and relational aspects of God's presence, offering a holistic understanding that resonates with the scriptural portrayal of the divine dwelling among humanity.