

*If it is only that we have hoped in Christ in this life,
we are of all men most miserable.*

1 Corinthians 15:19

To the vast majority of Christians, there is a life after death; there is a hope founded on the belief in the resurrection of Christ the Lord from the dead. Without this hope a sometimes miserable life that now is would become altogether most miserable, and for many, unbearable. The gospel that the apostle Paul preached offered the basic proclamation that Christ “has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:4) and put forward the hope that we too would be raised eventually. The faith of the believers expects that the dead are to be raised as well (vv. 14-17). And as certain as life after death is, so certain is the understanding that that life will be far superior to the life we experience now. “For the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and guide them to springs of waters of life; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:17).

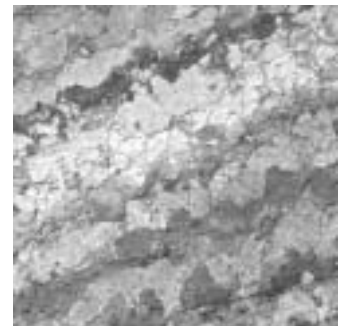
This being the hope of our faith, it is no wonder that we Christians speculate continually concerning our future in eternity. And the range of speculation is indeed wide. At one end of the spectrum, there are the fantastic and highly physical imaginations concerning heaven—glowing and warm and emotional; at the other end, the cooler minds dominate, denying the possibility of knowing at all what eternity will be like and resigning themselves to the bare belief only that there will be an eternity with God. The fantastic and the agnostic—these are the “heavens” that exist in the minds of most Christians today. The question is, Are either of these “heavens” proper to Christian belief? For some, heaven is the assumed destination of the Christian life; for others *heaven* is merely a convenient label for the vaguest of notions regarding eternal bliss. But in either case, our future in eternity has been consistently characterized as being “in heaven.” The overwhelmingly general consensus is that when we Christians die, we will go to heaven. But will we? Has the assumption been firmly proven by reference to Scripture? And if it has not, what can we say and what should we say, based on Scripture, about our existence with God in eternity?

In this article I wish to test the one assumption (heaven as our destination) and its two variant conceptual representations (the fantastic and the agnostic). This I intend to do by first examining the conceptual representations and hopefully showing the inadequacy of each in describing our future state with God. Then I will turn to the base assumption itself, seeking to determine its validity according to the standard of the Bible. If I succeed in this endeavor, I will conclude with a suggestion on how we can and should think about our eternity, based on the Scriptures.

But a word of defense first: I have noticed time after time that when one asserts that heaven is not the goal of the Christian life, the assertion can be and usually is understood

THE HISTORY OF HEAVEN AND THE HOPE OF THE HEREAFTER

BY KERRY S. ROBICHAUX



to mean that there is no life after death, that there is no eternal destiny for the believers, and that the present life is all that there is. Nothing could be further from the truth. What I question is not our eternal destiny but the common characterizations of it. Further, what I wish to elucidate is not a hopeless position but one full of hope in eternity future and in its relation to life present. My firm conviction is that the prevailing views of “heaven” do not help us at all, either in our apprehension of eternity or in our pursuit for it now. Instead, there is a view of eternity in the Bible that is neither fantastic nor agnostic, a view that is rich in its presentation of our glorious future with God and most beneficial to our living today for that goal. I do not think that when we die we will go to heaven in the fantastic or agnostic senses that prevail, but I do hope in the resurrection of the dead and in a glorious living thereafter with our Lord, whom we have loved and lived in this life.

Where the Imaginative Go When They Die

In the popular Christian mind, it is a given that when believers die, they go to heaven. This consoles those who are bereaved of loved ones and encourages those who suffer in this life. But to console and encourage, the promise of heaven has had to have some substance to it, some conception of what heaven will be like, and in the popular mind there is substance indeed to the concept. Unfortunately, there is no single, well-defined description of what heaven must hold for its inhabitants. Streets of gold, gates of pearl, harps, choirs of angels, green pastures, sunshine, golf, baseball, lots of babies, the spouse I love, the children I’ve lost, bright light, God, love—all are meshed inextricably in the conceptual menagerie of a popular heaven. Some of it is borrowed from the truth, but most of it derives from the collective imagination of Western civilization as it has developed in art, literature, music, and spirituality since the ancient world.

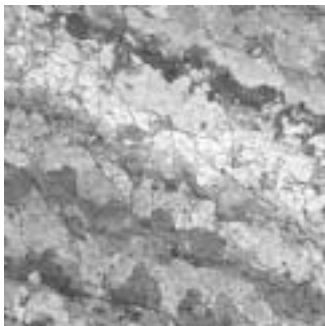
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It is a difficult task to critique a concept of imagination such as heaven because it is difficult to nail down its specifics and to validate its commonalities among those who hold it. But I believe that there are broad categories of common thought on what heaven should be like, and these ought to be examined to some degree. Certainly many will complain, saying that they themselves do not believe that in heaven there will be this particular matter or that particular experience, and thus they will exculpate themselves from critique. But a critique of this sort, directed not at a consensus of faith but at a collective of speculations, should attempt to address more tendencies of thought among masses of population and less individual thinkers and authors of doctrines. There is, in fact, little doctrinal formulation regarding “going to heaven,” the various doctrinal bodies taking the more careful tack of making only nebulous pronouncements regarding our eternity ahead. For example, the Roman Catholic Church in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description. Scripture speaks of it in images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father’s house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise: “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.” (§1027)

The one exception to these nebulous pronouncements is the very extensive theology of the afterlife held by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly called Mormons; see a descriptive account of their view, in Millet and McConkie, *The Life Beyond*). Many Christians, however, would not identify Mormon theology as normative Christian theology and thus summarily reject the Mormon theology of afterlife.

But the fact that some may so easily escape criticism because of particulars points to a major weakness in the concept of heaven, that is, that particulars that are universally held can hardly be found in the concept and thus the notion as a whole is not



well-defined. Rather, what we are dealing with are broad categories of imagination, and these, I hope, my reader will tolerate as objects of scrutiny.

Heaven as a historical concept seems to have two major facets: the theocentric and the anthropocentric. These two facets are represented in the art and literature of centuries of Western civilization. On the one hand, art and literature have reflected these notions of heaven at any given time; on the other, they have reinforced the contemporary notions and even influenced later ones. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, in *Heaven: A History*, have offered a very fine and detailed historical study of popular heaven in Western art and literature, and in their study these two facets are easily identified throughout the centuries. The theocentric concept of heaven involves the undistracted vision of God in glory, beheld by the redeemed as their eternal pastime and enjoyed by them as their eternal reward. It has been also called the beatific vision. The anthropocentric concept involves a widened attention for the redeemed, allowing the enjoyment of human endeavor and relationships. The former concept offers an other-worldly existence for the redeemed; the latter, a continuation of the present state of affairs, only purified, uplifted, and glorious. It appears that the anthropocentric concept, insofar as it has developed in the past two millennia, may be more a reflex to the theocentric concept than a purely independent alternative to it. On the one hand, the starkness of the theocentric view may have appeared to many to be too sterile, too uninviting, and too unrewarding; on the other hand, the thought of the absence of earthly relationships and of the product of human labor in the theocentric view may have impelled many to hope in something more than the beatific vision. Hence, as the centuries progressed, the anthropocentric view prevailed, and today it is the primary characteristic of the modern popular notion of heaven. Life in heaven, to the modern imagination, will be much like life on earth, only that all imperfections of earthly existence will be eradicated and all that is good will be brought to its most heightened state.

McDannell and Lang begin their study with “the dawn of heaven” in the religious and popular culture of the ancient Mediterranean world prior to the birth of Christ. Showing a progression from little expectation for the dead, through belief in resurrection, and finally to hope in a heavenly afterlife, the authors demonstrate that this final notion is not particularly biblical. Indeed, if we accept the arguments of McDannell and Lang, we would have to admit that, if anything, the notion is derived primarily from ancient Greek religion (16-17). Whether Hellenism influenced the biblical record or vice versa as some may contend, McDannell and Lang hardly establish the fact that the Old Testament presents heaven as the ultimate destiny of God’s people. Of equal uncertainty is their claim that the New Testament is decidedly tilted toward a theocentric view of the heavenly existence (23-46, 353-354).

It seems that this latter observation may be based on only a cursory reading of the New Testament. Concluding their summation of the New Testament, they write: “The commitment of Jesus, Paul, and John of Patmos—indeed that of any charismatic leader—is difficult to duplicate. To forsake social position, economic security, and sexual intimacy by rejecting the family cannot be accomplished by all” (45). However, there is much more to the message of the New Testament than forsaking human involvements and rejecting familial relationships. Paul particularly speaks in detail concerning social position (cf. 1 Cor. 7:20-24; Philem. 1-24), economic security (2 Cor. 8:12-15), and sexual intimacy (1 Cor. 7:9; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; Heb. 13:4); further, he spends a great deal of time exhorting the saints to live properly in families before God (e.g., Eph. 5:22—6:4; Col. 3:18-25). And on a deeper level and one more intrinsic to his message, there is the very rich vein in Paul’s writings concerning the Body of Christ, which hardly turns its back on the social existence of the believers. In addition, the visionary John was not so radically theocentric that he could not elsewhere write, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God, and everyone who loves has been begotten of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7), echoing as it were the words of

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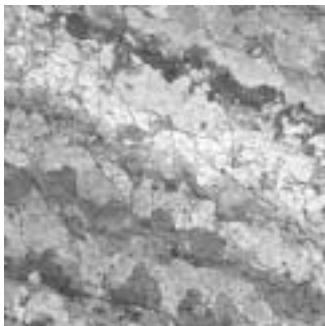
Jesus: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (John 13:34). Certainly Christ spoke starkly of forsaking mother and father, wife and children, brothers and sisters (Luke 14:26), but in His dying breath He nevertheless affirmed these relationships (John 19:26-27). McDannell and Lang’s oversimplification of the New Testament message weakens their assertions concerning its concept of heavenly existence, and like many, they appear to fall prey to the popular assumption that the New Testament affirms that the eternal destiny of the believers is heaven. But on another level, since for many the ultimate “proof” of how eternity will be depends on the biblical text, McDannell and Lang’s characterization of a New Testament notion of heavenly existence must at least be suspended, for the sake of argument, as a too simple and facile treatment of the source text for all subsequent considerations of eternal existence.

Of more value, and indeed of immense value, are McDannell and Lang’s insights into how church and society after New Testament times imagined heaven would be. There is still the nagging *a priori* assumption, at least in their treatment of Irenaeus and Augustine, that heaven was indeed understood by the church fathers to be the eternal destiny of the believers, and some of the evidence they provide could just as easily be understood to refer more generally to the resurrection from the dead or simply to some nebulous notion of eternal bliss. But certainly by the time of the Middle Ages the notion of heaven as destiny was firmly established in the Christian mind. The two facets of the notion are clearly evidenced: The theocentric notion is rarefied, much beyond its supposed New Testament embodiment, to a mythical proportion, and at the same time, a continual tension against the theocentric notion is expressed in a steadily developing anthropocentric one.

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McDannell and Lang identify three conceptions of heaven in the Middle Ages, each advanced by its specific advocate: the monk, the theologian, and the mystic (69-110). Monks and friars, who populated the ranks of artists and poets at the time, viewed heaven in mostly environmental terms. Here is where we find the blossoming of heavenly lands and golden cities. This first view of heaven reflected the idealized earthly living of either its rural or urban author. Rich fields, lush pastures, aromatic meadows of lilies and roses, and harmonious animals, all in a perfected manifestation of nature, will be enjoyed by naked and blissful innocents. Expanding Eden to an eternal dimension, the rural monk characterized heaven as a return to humankind’s paradisiacal starting point. In the beginning it was so; in the end it shall be so. But the urban artist imagined heaven in his or her own urban way, appealing to the end of the Bible for support. Golden cities, heavenly castles, lofty mansions, richly-jeweled walls, and streets of gold will be populated by inhabitants whose opulent clothing only reinforces the wealth and splendor of that eternal bliss. The medieval cathedral, the epitome of Middle Age speculation on heavenly existence, stands to this day as a monument to the urban medieval concept of heaven. Since the Bible concludes with a vision of a city, heaven, in the mind of the urban thinker, must be primarily urban.

But these very physical notions of heaven were the stay and amusement of the common masses and not the considered opinion of the scholastic theologians, who dominated intellectual thought in the Middle Ages. These viewed eternity in expressly abstract terms that conformed to their ideals of light, harmony, and contemplation. Heaven to them will be the uninterrupted contemplation of the Divine in a place of divine light, called the empyrean. This empyrean will be the abode of angels and saints, though not that of God Himself, and these inhabitants were described in no more graphic terms than that of beings of light. This highly intellectual view of heaven was not limited to the Scholastics, however; surprisingly, it is most widely known from the work of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the well-educated Italian poet whose masterpiece *The Divine Comedy* details the poet’s visions of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Dante’s highest heaven conforms to the scholastic notion of order and harmony and contemplation, and is markedly less



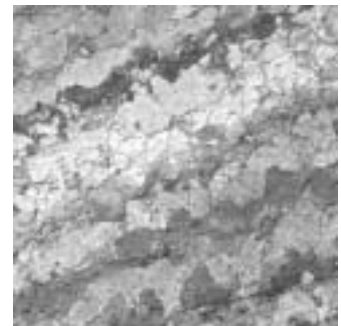
concerned with the earthly appeals of the more popular and contemporary notions of heaven.

Mystics, primarily female, provided a third view of heaven in the Middle Ages. This view was based on a personal love relationship between the believer and Christ, and held promise of an eternal personal marriage between the two in the hereafter. Much of this was driven by an attention to the matter of love which flourished in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This was the era of the great medieval romances (e.g., the Latin *Historia regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, the French works of Chrétien de Troyes, Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan und Isolde* in German), and it appears that these tales of courtly love wafted into the religious imagination of how heaven would be. Many mystics expected eternity to be a life of unsurpassed love for Christ, even more idealized than the love relationships of the popular Arthurian romances of the times. McDannell and Lang point out that, unlike the scholastic view of heaven, this mystic view of heaven did not survive the Middle Ages as a normative perspective. "The theological heaven would be voiced in the public space of the university, seminary, and pulpit, and the mystical heaven in the private space of the diary, cloister, confessional, and chapel" (109).

Heaven of the imagination fully blossomed in the Middle Ages, providing for the centuries to come the basic genres of thought regarding the hereafter. Again, the primary facets of this imagination are the theocentric and anthropocentric, the former expressed primarily by the Scholastic and the latter by both the monk and the mystic. McDannell and Lang point out that as the Renaissance dawned in Europe, concepts of heaven incorporated both facets, as artisans and literati forged a twofold heaven that respected both positions (111-144). The upper heaven answered the requirements of the medieval Scholastics, offering a haven of undistracted contemplation of the Divine, perfect harmony, and empyrean stasis. It was akin to the great cathedral that drew its worshippers from the surrounding city, a place where God dwelled and people came to worship. The blessed redeemed were to dwell in the lower heaven, which answered the needs of the ever self-dignifying human race of the Renaissance. Here earthly pleasures were imagined in their highest and noblest forms, and again a perfected manifestation of nature was expected. The art, literature, and architecture of the Renaissance that depict the hope of heaven are lavishly sensual and predominately physical. Angels take on ideal, mostly feminine, human forms, and the redeemed don perfected, indeed, robust classical physiques. Verdant pastures are filled with singing birds and dancing saints, and as it was thought in medieval times, heaven for the redeemed turns out to be much the Eden that was lost by Adam's fall. The Renaissance, however, develops one important and very potent notion for the afterlife, that of the heavenly reunion. Being the rebirth of classical thought, the Renaissance rekindled interest in writers like Cicero, who offered a view of the afterlife that primarily depended on reunions in eternity. This notion influenced Renaissance thinkers as they also imagined eternity for the redeemed as a place of reunion between friends, lovers, spouses, and families. It is safe to say that the heavenly reunion is the one permanent and innovative contribution of the Renaissance to the heaven of the imagination that survives into the modern day. Moderns can hardly think of heaven apart from the notion that there they will meet their loved ones again, and this they owe to the Renaissance imagination.

The hopeful outlook of the Renaissance on humankind and its potentialities was soon smashed by the grimmer realizations of the Reformers, who saw the darker side of nature and the need for God's redemption of humankind regardless of any apparent bright façades. To them heaven could not possibly be a heightened continuation of the best of earthly existence, for even the best of earthly existence was rotten, soiled, and grossly in need of conversion. Rather, the heaven of the Protestant and Catholic reformers necessarily involved a stark disjunction from earthly life, a new order that reveled not in human dignity but in divine glory. McDannell and Lang demonstrate that among the many

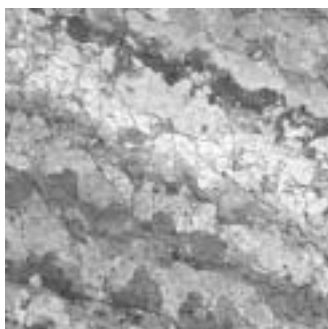
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endeavors of the Reformers, the stripping away of fantasy, so heavily employed in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, left popular culture with a view of heaven that was once again starkly theocentric (145-180). This model of heaven was “simple, direct, and theologically uncontroversial” (180), in that it relied on an assumption not easily contested, that is, that God alone was sufficient as a reward and attraction for the blessed in eternity. The Reformers did not need to bother with speculation about what the saints will do in eternity. In fact, such speculation would have been viewed as idle and worthless. McDannell and Lang point out that in the Reformers’ view “the saints do not have to *do* anything, they merely experience the fullness of their being by existing with God” (180). Again, the theocentric facet of heaven took center stage, and again the notion was rarefied, but this time not to a mythical extent as was seen in the early centuries of the church. The theocentric heaven of the Protestant and Catholic reformers was non-speculative and unadorned, requiring a faith in the satisfying goodness of God and a resistance to the lures of fleshy imagination.

Mcdannell and Lang (181-227) identify the modern notion of heaven as starkly different from that of Reformation-era thinkers and credit its emergence to Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), who experienced a long series of visions of the afterlife and vividly described them in the many volumes of his writings. Swedenborg revolted against the sterile theocentric heaven of the Protestant and Catholic reformers and presented a view of heavenly afterlife that has become, according to McDannell and Lang, the basis of what most today imagine heaven will be like. An interesting account by Swedenborg brings to the fore his notions regarding a contemplative, theocentric heaven. In his visions he saw some newly arrived believers in heaven, eagerly awaiting an eternity of God-centered adoration and praise. They were not to be let down in the vision, but were immediately hurried to a splendid temple, where they would enjoy their perpetual occupation of glorifying God. However, before entering they had to prepare themselves with praying, singing, and listening to sermons for three days and three nights. To this end, they were led into another temple, the doors were locked, and guards were posted to assure that they stayed put for the initiation. The newcomers were shocked to find that those already within the temple were either asleep or yawning perpetually; many were dazed with boredom. Soon the temple worshippers made a break for the doors, overpowering the guards and fleeing from the preachers within. Swedenborg’s point was that those who dream of a theocentric heaven would be shocked at the reality of it, for perpetual worship and contemplation is not what heaven (in his mind) would be like at all. Swedenborg’s heaven, and in many senses the modern notion of heaven, is strictly anthropocentric. It depends on the love, work, and society of the believers in heaven. There is a strong component of the continuation of human relations that so much occupy us in our earthly existence. There are husbands and wives in this heaven. There are also occupations held by the heavenly citizens, and the community of the saints is as important a factor in this heaven as the presence of God. Swedenborg’s heaven casts away the abstract existences of the medieval Scholastics and bluntly asserts a perfect material realm. In essence, there is no difference between heavenly existence and earthly existence, except that imperfections of the latter are precluded in the former. While most of Swedenborg’s theological concepts are radically divergent from the historical teachings of the Christian church, it is uncanny how his primary focus on the physical qualities of heaven have greatly influenced the modern Christian imagination regarding heaven. McDannell and Lang are not wrong at all in identifying Swedenborg’s visions with the emergence of the modern notion of heaven.

WHILE MOST OF SWEDENBORG’S CONCEPTS ARE RADICALLY DIVERGENT FROM THE HISTORICAL TEACHINGS OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, HIS PRIMARY FOCUS ON THE PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF HEAVEN HAVE GREATLY INFLUENCED THE MODERN CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION.



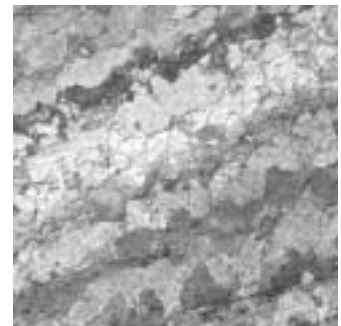
The view regarding heaven that prevailed at the end of the seventeenth century, after the Reformation had fully revolutionized European thought, is a far cry from the notion that prevails today, after the effects of the Reformation have fully worked through and shaped every channel of Western civilization. The modern concept of heaven, at least in the Fundamentalist and Conservative Christian imagination, is certainly more anthropocentric and far less sterile than the theocentric heaven of the

Protestant Reformation, thanks in large measure to Emanuel Swedenborg. Further, the notion of the heavenly reunion is again a primary component of the hope in the hereafter. A great number of modern believers also view heaven as a place of pleasure, some even joking that they will finally be able to golf or play baseball *ad infinitum*. Certainly, God has His place in the modern imagination of heaven, and indeed His place is “central.” But the heaven of many modern Christians is very much akin to their earthly Christian lives, a full agenda of social gatherings that never fail to recognize God as the One ultimately behind all these good times. He is the eternal Grandfather who sits on the porch, watching all the children play. It is not the contemplative, orderly, harmonized, and static heaven of the Scholastics, nor the austere yet somehow (“by faith we know it”) satisfying heaven of the Reformers. It is not the segregated heaven of the Renaissance that kept God in His “cathedral” and allowed the blessed the blissful pleasures of all the goodness of earthly existence. The Fundamentalist and Conservative Christian heaven is a heaven of the American dream, the family at play on a picnic on an eternal sunny day with laughing children and games and that ever-present paternal oversight that condones and smiles approvingly. And like all the heavens of past imaginations, this heaven is blatantly the reflection of its times, of the dreams and hopes of all who hold it. As one elderly woman put it, “Heaven is the place where we go to retire, eternal retirement” (Gallup 65).

But this is all imagined, and few can substantiate these notions without recourse to special visions, mystical visits, or conversations with angels, dead saints, Jesus, God the Father, etc. Near-death experiences have become the stuff of many of these heralds of heaven, but these, like all other kinds of visionary experiences, are certainly suspect and impossible to validate. Less daring are appeals to “logic,” which dictate that if things are this way here on earth, things in heaven must certainly be the same, only infinitely better (stress on *infinitely*). But these “logical” reasons rely on the assumption that eternity is subject to the constraints of the present physical realm. Imaginations about heaven turn out to be quite simply imaginations. And there is little, if anything, in the Bible to limit their flamboyance.

But, to be fair, not all who imagine heaven are as flamboyant as this. There is a respectable group of writers and thinkers who are more careful in their reasoning and expression concerning heaven, and who render heaven in less imaginative terms. They are nevertheless imagining. Currently, Peter Kreeft probably offers the best example of this type of presentation. His *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Heaven...But Never Dreamed of Asking!* offers a wide range of seriously reasoned considerations regarding heaven. Another similar volume is John Gilmore’s *Probing Heaven: Key Questions on the Hereafter*. Both of these books take the similar approach of answering the common questions people supposedly ask when they consider heaven. What is striking in this approach is that it caters to imagination, not to the divine revelation. For example, while Gilmore makes an impassioned and continual plea to draw everything from Scripture, he tells us, without too much depth of argument, that his book discusses “twenty-one often-asked questions” about heaven, because “what bothers people seems a good place to start” (21). Peter Kreeft apparently found fourteen often-asked trivial questions and some eight more thoughtful ones; the former he answers briefly in a single chapter, the latter more substantively in chapters devoted to each. There is some commonality between the two authors’ lists of common questions (e.g., “Where is heaven?” “What will we do in heaven?” “Is there time in heaven?” “Is there sex in heaven?”), but each author perceives differently what seems to bother people about heaven. Kreeft, writing from a Roman Catholic perspective, deals with issues like purgatory (a very Catholic anxiety) and the communion of the saints, and further considers the relationship between heavenly existence and earthly existence today. (He also grapples with the notion of hell, a universal anxiety, so to speak.) Gilmore, a well-trained Baptist pastor, expresses some typical Protestant (and actually anti-Catholic) anxieties: “Is heaven earned?” “Can we be sure of going to heaven?” But he is also very much interested in the experiences of the

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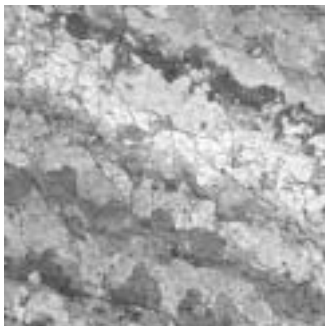
inhabitants of heaven: “Will there be humor in heaven?” (a primarily American anxiety). “Will there be equality in heaven?” (a Baptist anxiety, it seems). “Will there be ownership?” (a capitalist anxiety). “Will there be growth, memory, recognition in heaven?” (basic human anxieties). Questions of these sorts derive not from Scripture, of course, but from human anxieties about an existence which, we are told, will not be completely like the one we enjoy (or suffer) on earth. They are questions that arise when people try to imagine what heaven will be like; hence, they are really driven by imagination and not, contrary to what Gilmore hopes, motivated by a careful reading of the Scripture. I must disagree with Gilmore that what bothers people about heaven (more transparently, their anxiety about heaven) is a good place to start when we consider what our existence in eternity will be. Even well-reasoned responses to questions about what people commonly imagine are nothing more than that, responses to imaginations. What is unfortunate is that what people imagine and what bothers them most do not coincide with what Scripture stresses in its offerings concerning eternal life. The reflex to answer such questions belies the implicit admission that Scripture is mostly uninterested in such matters, and can be justified only by the admission that to get at some answer to these anxieties we must patiently “fit the pieces into a meaningful, faithful, coherent whole” (Gilmore 21). Much the same can patiently be done with other matters not stressed by Scripture, for example, deciding on the appropriateness of many Christian practices or determining the “proper” political stance of the modern Christian. This being the case, Gilmore, Kreeft, and like authors are actually doing little to enlighten us concerning our hereafter (though they may be alleviating some anxieties—imaginatively though not necessarily properly). Instead, they are simply continuing the construction of the heaven of the imagination.

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It is not surprising, then, that many other serious thinkers on the hereafter have taken the low road of agnosticism, admitting the paucity of concrete details regarding heaven as the ultimate destiny of the believers in the Scriptures. Instead, they insist that heaven cannot be known in this life and that we must be content with just knowing that it will be grand. Their views I would like to briefly consider in the next section.

Where the Agnostic Go When They Die

It is probably safe to say that much of the modern agnostic view concerning the hereafter is a reaction and response to Swedenborg’s fantastic visions. Fantastic as his visions may have been, Swedenborg’s presentation offered such demanding substance and rigor that reaction to his works has typically drawn the most capable of thinkers. The first of these was none less than Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who threw himself into a direct attack on Swedenborg’s visionary experiences. Throughout his endeavor and true to the form by which he expressed himself on other matters, Kant relied on and trusted in only what reason could afford, and rejected the emotional and mystical. Left to this one resource, Kant concluded that of the hereafter only three universal and eternal notions can be known today—freedom, God, and immortality. All else, and particularly the fantastic visions of a Swedenborg, are merely sources of hope, not perceptions of genuine knowledge. The influence of Kant on later thought about the hereafter, like his influence on later thought about philosophy in general, should not be underestimated. As McDannell and Lang point out, it is Kant’s skepticism that prevails to this day among the more rigorous treatments of the hereafter (324). The liberal Protestant theologians Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) continued to develop this skeptical and agnostic view, which is difficult to resist as long as one continues to limit oneself to reason, drawn from natural sense perceptions, alone. The latter of these two thinkers actually found Kant’s conclusions too far from what we can really know about the hereafter, and contented himself with the knowledge only that there is a hereafter. Soon it became commonplace in theology to reject the existence of a hereafter altogether as modern philosophical forces began to pressure the thinking of the more radical theologians. Interestingly enough, heaven in their view was a reflex of hope and



belief that responds to the anxieties of earthly existence. This may not be far from the truth since we see so many modern, casual treatments of heaven structured on such anxieties (“Will my pet be in heaven?” “Will there be equality in heaven?” See the previous section.).

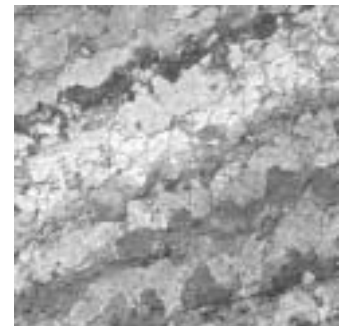
Some modern Christian derivatives of these agnostic developments are seen in the works of such theologians as Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) and Paul Tillich (1886-1965). Both men finally settled on a notion of the hereafter that denied individual immortality, which would seem to contradict even the most basic assumptions of the historic Christian understanding concerning the hereafter. But both men allowed more than mere reason to guide their thinking, recognizing the value of Scripture in coming to an understanding of the hereafter. Scripture for them offered not literal images but symbolic ones of the hereafter. The biblical presentments are not, in their view, pronouncements of a physical reality; rather, they are physical representations of realities that cannot be comprehended in this life because of the very limiting nature of our physical existence. That being the case, we cannot achieve a knowledge of the hereafter to the extent that our natural senses can achieve a knowledge of the physical realm. For these thinkers the symbolic images provided the most basic source of knowledge for their understanding of eternity, and to these reason contributed the limiting factor that finally shaped their views.

In speaking of a symbolic interpretation of Scripture, one cannot pass up the notions of Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), the champion of Scripture as myth. He also gave some effort of thought to the hereafter. Bultmann understood not just the biblical presentments on the hereafter as symbolic but more radically those on historical events as symbolic as well. The incarnation and the resurrection need not be actual events in Bultmann’s system of thought; thus, they are freed from historical scrutiny and require no historical defense. Rather, what is of import to Bultmann is the significance and purpose of the purported events, the principles of God becoming man and of Christ overcoming death. For example, even if it could be historically proved that Christ did not rise from the dead, the principle of resurrection would still stand firm, and it is the principle of resurrection that is important to Christian faith. Of course, not all believers would agree with Bultmann, and ultimately faith in divine principles without reference to literal, historical divine actions was challenged by a number of his own students. Bultmann understood heaven only in the very bare terms of mutuality, love, and trust, which, he felt, are symbolized by the physical presentments of the Scriptures (at least those that have not been editorialized by subsequent correctors).

The influence of Niebuhr, Tillich, and Bultmann on the symbolic approach to the hereafter, like Kant’s influence on the approach based on pure reason, should not be underestimated. In a real sense, both approaches share the common stance of a stark minimalism that suspects all but the bare essentials of thought, and it is this common skepticism that particularly makes them agnostic. While the imaginative and fantastic views of heaven are ultimately driven by anxieties over our present earthly existence, the agnostic views of heaven are motivated by suspicions of all else but what reason can achieve. In the end, both approaches to the hereafter suffer from the same fault, that of a thoroughly human point of view, the former in its more base and physical existence, the latter in its more noble and transcendent (though still purely human) aspirations.

But the agnostic view of heaven is not held by theological rigorists alone. Gilmore laments that “some evangelicals are of this persuasion” (17). He quotes R. T. Kendall, who offers this insight into knowledge of heaven: “I agree with the man who said that we will know a lot more about heaven five minutes after we are there than all the speculation can tell us this side of heaven” (Kendall 134, quoted in Gilmore 17). Gilmore also laments that sermons preached in Christian churches today take heaven as their content less and less, and this, he believes probably rightly, results from a lack of dedication to

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the concept of heaven. Gilmore is no doubt confirming what McDannell and Lang find in their study, that commitment to a detailed and expressive belief in heaven is waning in modern Christianity, even though a basic belief in the hereafter remains firm, at least in American Christianity (307-308). While a substantial number of the Christians still hope in and dream of a Swedenborg-type of heaven, the agnostic view is probably the majority opinion among Christians, and the view is growing. Heaven in its graphic and imaginative incarnation seems to be dying in Christian thought, and a heaven of abstract and bare minimums seems to be growing in its place.

When we reflect on heaven's current state of affairs, we can hardly miss the conclusion that both views held today really owe their existence to Emanuel Swedenborg. His prolific attention to visions of the hereafter, his extensive conversations with angels, and his studied rigor in presenting his mystical experiences have yielded the two notions of heaven that prevail today—the fantastic and the agnostic, the former being his own view and the latter a reaction to his own view. Many modern writers on the subject of heaven fail to see the very pervasive influence of Swedenborg in their own thought.

But more intrinsically, and this is perhaps the lesson to be learned in studying the history of heaven as a cultural concept, the notion of heaven in every age is a reflection of the age, not a truth that persists in time and yet transcends history, unlike the basic tenets of Christian faith. The fantastic views of heaven so commonly held since the church's early centuries and through the Reformation, both in their theocentric and anthropocentric manifestations, reflect the age of thought at the time. By the same token, the modern agnostic views mimic agnosticism in modern culture in general. This is probably what Gilmore is getting at in the essence of his argument. But the fault in almost every defense of how the hereafter will be is a failure to identify how the current intellectual forces not only shape but more significantly determine what is being said about the subject.

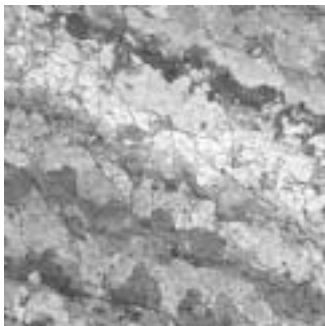
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The long tradition of thought on heaven as the ultimate destiny of the believers has certainly provided a rich assortment of choices for our enjoyment. As Kant said, these have value only insofar as they provide hope for us who live an anxious earthly existence. Kant and many following his lead have abandoned all expectations for actual knowledge regarding the hereafter. But, as Gilmore tries to explain, are we really left without anything substantive on the hereafter? The Kantian perspective necessarily rejects Scripture as a valid source of proper knowledge, but like Gilmore, I think we need not put our trust only in the God-given gift of reason; we can and should also respect the God-given gift of Scripture. Yet unlike Gilmore, I do not think that Scripture emphatically and indisputably speaks of heaven as the ultimate destiny of the believers. Rather, I think that Gilmore, like all the imaginative heaven writers, assumes from culture and history that heaven is the goal and then finds in the Scripture something that “must refer” to the preconceived notion. My task in the next section, not an admirable one I admit, is to demonstrate the absence of evidence in the Scriptures for going to heaven, in either its imaginative and agnostic sense.

The Biblical Data, “Going to Heaven,” and *a Priori* Assumptions

In modern times it has fallen mainly to evangelical writers to “prove” that the believers will go to heaven when they die. To their credit, at least they try to prove the belief. A great many other writers on heaven take the belief as a given and proceed from there to expand voluminously on the wonders of heaven. But those who seek to prove the notion of going to heaven have yet to prove what they set out to prove; instead, they bring to their many “proof texts” *a priori* assumptions, and most notably they often assume the very point they are trying to prove.

Again, I feel it necessary to first offer a disclaimer. I am not denying the biblical



doctrine of heaven. Though I will not repeat the evidence here, it is clear from Scripture that heaven exists, that heaven is the dwelling place of God, that Christ was taken into heaven in ascension, and that from heaven today God in Christ influences, indeed rules, the affairs of earth. I do not dispute these matters at all. But I must confess that in what ways these matters really are is beyond our comprehension. Heaven does exist, but where and in what form? God does dwell in heaven, but how can an incorporeal being, who also exists outside of and beyond nature, dwell in any place at all? Christ ascended bodily into heaven—I believe the report of the early disciples—but how did He actually get there (if *there* is the right term)? Heaven today is as real as earth, probably even more real, and the God of heaven affects our everyday existence in more ways than we suspect, but how exactly does heaven today relate to earth? These kinds of questions depend on very physical concerns and are probably defective even in the asking by virtue of the perspective from which they are asked. Gilmore spends an entire chapter on the question of where heaven is, but in the end he is no closer to an answer than he was at the beginning. He concludes, “Therefore, the answer to the question ‘Where is heaven?’ boils down to two further questions: Where is Christ? and, just as importantly, What is our relationship with him?” (105). The point of the exercise, if I understand him correctly, is that heaven is to be characterized less as a place (though he keeps asserting throughout the chapter that heaven is indeed a place) than as a relationship to Christ. I do not fault Gilmore for his lack of clarity on the “whereness” of heaven. The Bible itself is not much help on this sort of inquiry. Further, throughout the ages Christian doctrine has been all but silent on the specifics of heaven, and this, I believe, is also very significant. If the Scriptures and the history of doctrine have offered us so little on these questions, is there not the strong hint that the how’s of heaven are, if not beyond comprehension, not really appropriate to the reality of what heaven actually is?

The reality of heaven is not in dispute here. Rather, the notions of heaven as the final destiny of the believers and, specifically, of dying and going to heaven are. Gilmore is less concerned with proving these latter points, choosing instead to take them as givens in the Christian faith (which strictly speaking they are not) and moving directly to descriptions of what existence in heaven will most certainly be like. He is not unlike many writers of his genre. Other authors, however, have given attention to texts in the Bible that they feel point to our going to heaven. My concern in their work is the persistent use of *a priori* assumptions.

Two authors that take somewhat similar approaches to the matter are Wilbur M. Smith in his *The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven* and John F. MacArthur in *The Glory of Heaven*. In the whole of each author’s works, there is no actual attention given to the very basic claim that heaven is our destiny. I am certain that they do not feel that the claim needs to be established from the Scriptures, since it is so pervasively held in modern Christian thought. What is of more interest to them is what is termed the intermediate state, that period between the death of the believer and the final resurrection at the end of the age (John 11:24; Acts 24:15). What is important to both writers is not whether or not the believer will go to heaven (that is assumed to be the case), but whether going to heaven is immediate after death or postponed until the final resurrection at the end of the age. In other words, the question they are addressing is not, Are we going to heaven when we die? but, When are we going to heaven after we die, immediately (the position of both men) or later, after some intermediate state (the contraposition)? Their proofs are not insignificant and deserve a careful analysis and critique, but this is certainly not the place to do such a thing. Our concern here is not on the timing of entry into heaven as our eternal destiny but more basically on the actual fact of heaven as our eternal destiny.

Making a general observation regarding the biblical data on this matter, Smith says that the Bible rarely refers to the state of the soul between death and resurrection, and that

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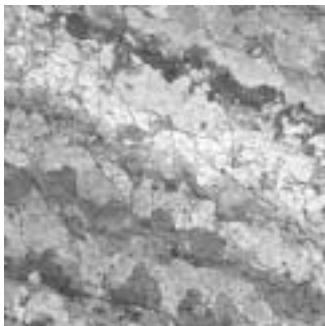
the data on this are “fragmentary and, as it were, incidental” (155). Remember that both Smith and MacArthur are dealing with the critical juncture between our earthly existence and our eternal one, that is, the believers’ “going to heaven.” Their contention is that we go to heaven directly after we die and that the time between death and the final resurrection of the body is time in heaven. But Smith concedes that the biblical data are rarely found, fragmentary, and incidental. The one point that we should expect to find substantive biblical evidence for is this matter of going to heaven, since that is the crux of the traditional hope. But the data are just not there, and, as we shall see below, what rare, fragmentary, and incidental data can be marshaled for this defense are in reality being made to fit the *a priori* assumption that heaven is our eternal destiny. Smith claims that the scriptural data regarding the life of the believers in heaven are abundant, but even this claim, as we shall see a little later, is again dependent on the same *a priori* assumption. This general observation on the biblical data being made, let us examine each author on some specifics of their claims.

MacArthur is less circumspect in his assertions regarding the intermediate state (70-78) than Smith, owing perhaps to the nature of his endeavor, which is less academic and more pastoral. There is no problem with pastoral treatments of issues such as these. On the other hand, such treatments generally manifest their assumptions more easily. He tells us that “everything in Scripture indicates that the believer’s entrance to heaven occurs immediately upon death” (76). Here the fact of the believer’s entrance to heaven is assumed and the timing of it is given defense. In another place, commenting on Psalm 23:6 (“I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever” KJV), he states in an aside that the house of the LORD “can refer only to heaven” (77). It may so refer to heaven only if heaven as the final destiny of the believers is assumed, as the case is here. Nowhere does MacArthur prove the assumption that underlies his treatment of every proof text in his book. At the beginning of his book, he declares that “it is the inerrant biblical truth about heaven that should grip our hearts and minds” (41), but where is a presentation of this inerrant truth? Rather, I contend, what he calls an inerrant biblical truth is more a widely-accepted traditional concept. Throughout the work, all passages are made to refer to heaven as the ultimate destiny of the believers but no effort is made to give that basic assumption some scriptural foundation.

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Smith’s repudiation of an intermediate state (155-170) is somewhat more rigorous and historically sensitive than MacArthur’s, but then again the academic genre of Smith’s book dictates this. Yet the same flaw exists: There is no formal presentation of evidence in support of the traditional notion of going to heaven. What Smith does do is equate biblical utterances with the traditional view. For example, he says, “Surely the idea that the soul goes immediately into the presence of the Lord upon death is implied in the famous words of the apostle: ‘But I am in a strait betwixt the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ; for it is very far better: yet to abide in the flesh is more needful for your sake’ (Phil. 1:23-24)” (161).

First, he must admit that going to the presence of the Lord is implied, not stated, and this is probably a safe implication to make. But the text is being used to make the point that after death the believers go to heaven, and the point depends on the equation of Christ’s presence and heaven. After all, Christ has been in heaven since His ascension thereto, and if we are to be in His presence, will we not be in heaven where He is? But is the equation really solid? Before He ascended into heaven, Christ told the disciples that He is with us all the days until the consummation of the age (Matt. 28:20). Does this not also imply the presence of the Lord? There seems then to be some variation of quality in our enjoyment of the presence of the Lord. Paul was certainly enjoying the presence of the Lord in the sense of Matthew 28:20 before his departure, but can we say that he was also in heaven in the sense traditionally understood? I appreciate Witness Lee’s comment on Paul’s words *be with Christ*: “To be with Christ is a matter of degree, not place. Paul desired to be with Christ in a higher degree, although he was already with Him constantly.



Through his physical death he would be with Christ to a fuller extent than he enjoyed in this earthly life” (Phil. 1:23, note 1).

If there is some variation of quality in the enjoyment and experience of the presence of Christ, how can we be certain that the presence to be enjoyed immediately after our death equals heaven? The jump in logic is too great, I suspect. Rather, we are safer in saying that Paul longed to be with Christ in a higher degree, a degree that death affords a believer immediately. But that this is the ultimate degree of the enjoyment of being with Christ, the eternal degree, cannot be asserted with any degree of certainty. And that the ultimate degree of the enjoyment of the presence of God in Christ is equivalent to the traditionally held notion of heaven is an even more difficult point to make. At most, we could, like Smith, MacArthur, and a host of other writers, accept the tradition as inerrant truth, but, of course, we will not.

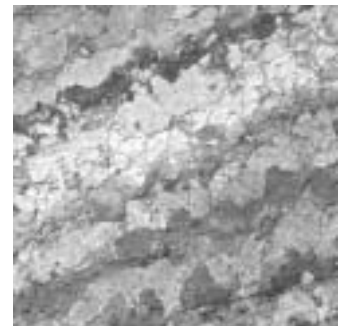
Common to both writers and to writers on heaven in general is a confusing of biblical statements about heavenly existence and heaven as our eternal goal. The New Testament contains many statements that describe our future existence as heavenly. For example, Paul speaks of our resurrectional bodies as heavenly in 1 Corinthians 15:48-49: “As the earthy is, such are they also that are earthy; and as the heavenly is, such are they also that are heavenly. And even as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly.” But do descriptions like this really indicate that heaven itself is our destiny? Paul did not confine his descriptions of the believers as heavenly to their future existence alone. In Ephesians 2:6, for example, he says directly that the believers have already been seated in the heavenlies with Christ. We are “in heaven” already, if we understand Paul correctly. If we are seated in the heavenlies now, which sounds strongly locative and yet can only be understood as being qualitative, how can we be certain that descriptions of our future state as heavenly are indeed locative and not qualitative? We can only if we assume *a priori* that heaven is our goal. I can understand how easy it is to draw from the many passages on heaven in the New Testament the conclusion that heaven is our destiny, but when we press a little deeper to ask what heaven in these many passages means, we are left with the same kind of questions that I raised at the beginning of this section (Where is heaven? etc.). And like Gilmore, we eventually find ourselves defining heaven not as a place but as an indication of our relationship with Christ. It seems that terms like *heavenly*, *heavenlies*, *heaven*, and *heavens* are not locative as much as qualitative in their descriptive senses. They do not refer to place as much as they do to the quality of being with God, and certainly there are varying degrees of this as we change from our present existence and are transformed to our eternal one.

I must not conclude a critique of Smith and MacArthur without pointing out that both writers give extensive attention to what the Bible itself puts forth as the eternal destiny of the believers, the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth. However, each relates the biblical image at the end of the Bible to the notion of heaven differently. MacArthur commences a chapter on New Jerusalem with this declaration:

Eternal heaven will be different from the heaven where God now dwells. As we noted in chapter 2, in the consummation of all things, God will renovate the heavens and the earth, merging His heaven with a new universe for a perfect dwelling-place that will be our home forever. In other words, heaven, the realm where God dwells, will expand to encompass the entire universe of creation, which will be fashioned into a perfect and glorious domain fit for the glory of heaven. (89)

If I understand MacArthur correctly, heaven today is not the heaven of eternity future. Thus, heaven as it exists today is really not the goal and ultimate destiny of the believers. I do not think that MacArthur is saying that heaven will change; it seems that he is claiming that in eternity the term *heaven* applies to a larger domain, to the

TERMS LIKE HEAVENLY, HEAVENLIES, HEAVEN, AND HEAVENS ARE NOT LOCATIVE AS MUCH AS QUALITATIVE IN THEIR DESCRIPTIVE SENSES. THEY DO NOT REFER TO PLACE AS MUCH AS THEY DO TO THE QUALITY OF BEING WITH GOD.



entirety of the new heaven and the new earth. I have some difficulty in identifying the source of this observation. I can only imagine that he is trying to make the traditional notion of heaven as our destiny fit in with the biblical data, which makes a clear distinction between heaven and the eternal dwelling place of the saints (more on this below). It is as if he were saying, We know we are going to heaven (everybody knows that!), so the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth must be merged with heaven. But I find the observation unnecessary and suspicious.

Smith is less intimidated by the long-standing assumption when he comes to deal with the holy city, New Jerusalem: “Basically we should state at the beginning of this study that the Holy City is not to be identified with heaven. It is seen coming down from heaven, but inasmuch as it is the most detailed account of the ultimate home of the redeemed, it certainly belongs in any treatise of the general subject of Heaven” (240).

For anyone who holds that heaven is where we are going when we die, Smith’s statement will come as a bit of a disappointment. According to Smith—and my point precisely—what the Bible offers as the eternal home of the believers is not to be identified with heaven. Obviously, Smith and MacArthur have parted ways. But Smith, again probably owing to the more academic nature of his work, stays closer to the facts of his sources and recognizes what is assumed by culture and tradition. Yet though the facts indicate that heaven is not our eternal destiny, Smith feels compelled, no doubt because of the power of the traditional concept, to subsume the proper understanding of our eternal destiny under the rubric of the traditional concept. It is as if he were saying, We won’t exactly go to heaven, but because we have always been led to believe that we would, we can say that our actual eternal existence will be the heaven that we were led to believe in.

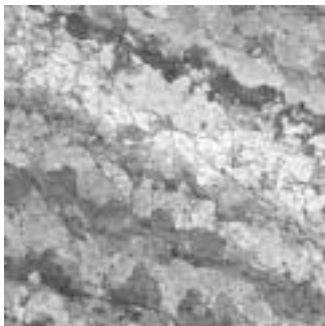
As I have said above, I can understand how readers of the New Testament could draw the conclusion that heaven is the ultimate destiny of the redeemed. But the actual description of our eternal existence is strikingly at odds with this conclusion. MacArthur offers one solution to the dilemma, and frankly, his solution fully answers the discrepancy. The problem with it, however, is that this solution relies on a notion—a heaven that encompasses the entire new universe—that is difficult to validate, and ultimately seems too *ad hoc* to accept. Hence, the solution, as appealing as it may seem, fails. Smith recognizes and admits the incongruity between the traditional conclusion and the final biblical description, but he sees no reason to reject the conclusion. Smith perpetuates the misconception, and if I read him correctly, condones it.

I suspect that my reader is particularly nagged by one point and has possibly been irritated with me from the start because of it. What difference does it make, one could ask, if we speak of our eternal destiny as heaven, even though it will not be in heaven at all? What problem is there in referring to our future existence as being in heaven if it really may only be heavenly in nature? Aren’t we really quibbling over terminology when actually we are saying much the same as all others? But in my own defense, I must say that we are not quibbling over like matters, that heaven as it is understood today is not at all the same as the biblical vision of our eternal existence. This is the point to be made in the next and final section.

“Heaven” versus the Biblical Vision of Eternity

What are Christians referring to when they claim heaven as their final destiny? This, I feel, is the crux of the problem with “heaven.” My primary sources for this study have treated the popular Christian concept of heaven in two distinct ways. The confessedly Christian writers understand that Christians frequently understand heaven incorrectly, and part of their intention in writing in the first place is to clear up the many misconceptions regarding heaven. MacArthur opens his volume with this point.

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Because human nature is so tainted by the effects of sin, people left to their own instincts will inevitably corrupt *every* spiritual truth. Subjects like heaven, angels, and eternal life are certainly no exception to this rule. People lacking a biblical perspective always think wrongly about heavenly things. Either they ignore the spiritual realm altogether, choosing instead to live for this temporal world—or they become so absorbed in fantasies about the spirit world that they forfeit the truth. (9)

Likewise, Gilmore gives a similar warning about the popular Christian concept regarding heaven.

Tragically, in our adulthood not enough attention has been devoted to this subject [of heaven] to which we were introduced in our toddler years. And, sadly, our original acquaintance with the topic may have prejudiced us to retain comfortable conceptions which fail to agree with and take into account the full range of Scripture.

The danger for an adult is to drift back to those sketchy and unsubstantiated views passed on by an early teacher whose understanding was distorted by his/her own lack of biblical conformity. (14-15)

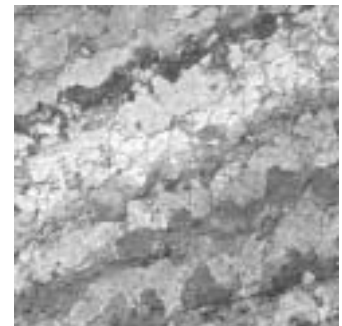
Gilmore is apparently warning us against childhood notions of heaven, but notice that he attributes the source of these childhood concepts to the adult teacher who himself or herself held the immature concept. It is not childhood concepts that we are dealing with at all; it is Christian fantasies about heaven that these writers are warning us against.

On the other hand, McDannell and Lang are not trying to clear up misconceptions; rather, they are attempting to describe the developing notion of heaven in modern culture and to identify its chain of historical sources. By far, McDannell and Lang are the most scholarly in their approach, and for their purposes the most persuasive. They are not arguing for a biblical basis of the Christian hope but are reporting on a cultural phenomenon. What is so striking is how accurate they are in identifying the components of the popular notions concerning heaven. I think it is safe to say that what McDannell and Lang report is what Christians have believed and now believe concerning heaven; it is what Christians think they will enjoy in eternity. It is also the very thing that my Christian sources are warning against, the very thing that is popularly held by the Christian public.

Hence, “heaven,” as understood by many Christians today, is a cultural concept that has been developed over time by a steady parade of artists, architects, musicians, mystics, poets, and other literati. The theologians have for the most part shied away from anything more than generalities, and it appears that when they do attempt some description of “heaven,” it is always in response to the cultural phenomenon, either disputing the fantastic or affirming the minimums. The problem is then not merely a semantic quibble. What people commonly believe concerning heaven and what Christian leaders casually concede to in perpetuating the concept is as mythological as any number of ancient belief systems concerning the realities of existence now and to come. “Heaven” just will not be, in the sense that most Christians understand it, and that is reason enough to take issue with it.

But on a more important level, there is a biblical view on the hereafter, which all my Christian sources adamantly assert. And even though some persist in understanding it as heaven, at least Smith admits that it is not heaven after all that we are destined for. MacArthur and Gilmore never come to the realization that heaven and the biblical view on eternity do not coincide, but I do feel that they are taking a pastoral stance on the issues, and that this forces them to accept heaven as a given. The problem is that the sheep have a cultural concept as reference, and MacArthur and Gilmore condone at least the very existence of it, even if they do try to dismantle some of its particulars.

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AND TO COME.

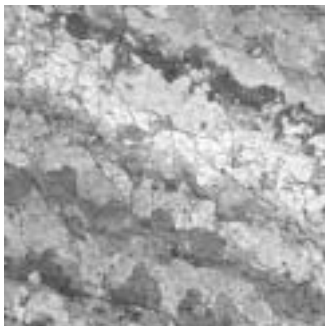


The biblical view on the final destiny of the redeemed, found in Revelation 21 and 22, comes to us as a symbolic vision, which may be disconcerting to some. Clear descriptions would have better satisfied a great number of inquisitive minds. But in reality the biblical view could have come to us in no other way, since our eternal destiny is not to be construed in terms of the current physical universe. Only the highly visionary and the highly symbolic could properly communicate the intrinsic qualities of our future. Much of the lore regarding heaven results from a persistent failure to respect the symbolic nature of the vision in Revelation 21 and 22. Rather than recognizing the inherent admission, which underlies a symbol, that direct language cannot properly render the intended concept of the symbol, many read the symbol as direct description and comprehend physical and natural qualities, quite mistakenly. The symbolic vision is not meant to obfuscate; there is no proprietary information, available to a select few, on eternity here. The vision is open and available to all, and that is why it was recorded in the first place. The purpose of it is to make manifest our eternal destiny, but we must respect its obvious symbolic nature.

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That the biblical view is visionary and symbolic is not a point of contention for many modern thinkers on heaven. But certainly there are some who would disagree, and these I see no need to try to persuade otherwise. MacArthur, for example, believes that there will be literal, big pearls for gates, not “pearls from some giant variety of oysters, but perfect pearls created by God’s own hand” (109). And, he says, the gold of the vision is more likely “a variety of the precious metal so pure that it is translucent” (108). Smith, however, is less certain of the physicality of the elements of the holy city. In his chapter on it, he offers little discussion about the city in a physical way. In one place where he veers in that direction, regarding the size and shape of the city, he refers to the popular physical opinion of C. E. Luthardt that the city is a pyramid, but Smith himself does not confess agreement or disagreement on the idea. What Smith does do is elaborate on the *signified* components of the city, not on the physical qualities of the *signifiers*. He is interested in the principle of newness, glory, sovereignty, illumination. When he comes to comment on the abundance of gold, he is less concerned with how gold can be transparent and more interested in the symbolic quality of gold. He lends us G. M. Mackie on this point, who recognizes gold as “the representation of the Godhead” and observes that it “renders its last *symbolic* service in providing a pavement for the feet of the saints” (Smith 251, emphasis added). I am not certain that Smith (or Mackie, for that matter) is accepting the purely symbolic quality of gold in the New Jerusalem, but even if they affirm a physicality for it, they both understand that it represents God somehow. The same ambiguity exists in the remainder of Smith’s discussion. On the symbolic nature of the vision, eternity itself will vindicate the proper position. I do not deny that there will be a physical component of eternity, only that we are not made to grasp it in our current physical situation. For that reason, it seems more appropriate to come to the biblical vision for its symbolic message, not for a purported physical one.

There is no doubt that a symbolic reading of Revelation 21 and 22 opens up a hermeneutical “can of worms.” I must admit that a physical reading is much simpler and more clear-cut. (The big pearls may be hard to imagine, but “God’s own hand” could surely craft them. If He could create oysters, He can surely create pearls of any size without oysters. Yet when we begin to speak like this, aren’t we betraying our realization that big pearls are a bit ludicrous? MacArthur feels compelled to confess a belief in physical big pearls, but he just cannot go the extra mile of confessing a belief in eternal big oysters because the notion is so ridiculous. But then that begins to call into question the notion of the big pearls in the first place.) A physical reading, however, can hardly match the deep longing in the believer for more than a physical existence, a longing that we hopefully nurture in our shepherding today. Only a symbolic reading of the vision in Revelation will answer this longing and dignify the goal of God’s work throughout time. In other words, is my destiny big pearls and golden streets, and is this what God has been working toward in all His deep and mystical work within the believers and in the



Body of Christ? The physical reading just does not fit what God has put in the heart of every believer or the very nature of His work on and in the believers. And for the same reasons, the entire mythology of heaven is unbecoming to the spiritual qualities of God's work. My colleague Ron Kangas fully develops this notion in his article "‘In My Father's House’: The Unleavened Truth of John 14" in this issue.

What then am I suggesting as the proper hope of Christian faith? If it isn't heaven, then what is it? Here is where the beauty of the symbol fully manifests, for the symbol opens to us the eternal "vistas" of our future with God. It is beyond the scope of this article to fully interpret the symbols in the vision of the new heaven and new earth and of the holy city, New Jerusalem. Instead, I commend my reader to Ed Marks's article in this issue: "The New Jerusalem—A Corporate Person," which fully exposes the vision-symbol in all its intricacies. This, I believe, is a reading of the biblical vision that rightly respects the divine qualities of God our Redeemer, the spiritual existence of the believers, and the mystical work that the Triune God has been doing in time according to His eternal purpose. But, lest I come across as shirking a responsibility to my reader, I will make these few observations on some of the symbolic values of the visions. The New Jerusalem is above all a corporate person, not a place. The city is a bride to Christ as His eternal counterpart (Rev. 21:2, 9), and it is the final and eternal tabernacle to God (v. 3) for His rest and enjoyment. Further, in the city God Himself is the temple (v. 22), that is, the eternal dwelling place (no longer merely a meeting place; cf. Psa. 90:1; 23:6) for the redeemed to be with and enjoy God (Rev. 22:4). The central focus of our dwelling with God for eternity will be the enjoyment and supply of Christ as the divine life—in symbol, the tree of life (v. 2; cf. John 15:1; 6:48; 11:25)—flowing within the believers as the Spirit—in symbol, the river of water of life (Rev. 22:1; cf. John 7:38-39)—proceeding from God as the Administrator in the new heavens and new earth—in symbol, the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. 22:1, 3). It is these kinds of realizations regarding the intrinsic nature of our eternal destiny, as symbolized by the final vision of the Bible, that give our Christian hope a truly spiritual and genuinely divine quality. Anything less is a mockery of what we are in Christ and of what God is doing in His grand economy. AFC

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