

A Challenge to Long Held Assumptions

Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew, by Jonathan T. Pennington. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.

In *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (hereafter, *Heaven*), Jonathan T. Pennington, assistant professor of New Testament interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, explores the often overlooked significance of Matthew's use of heaven language, the heaven and earth theme, and, in particular, his unique use of the striking phrase *the kingdom of the heavens*.¹ The volume, a revision of the author's 2005 Ph.D. thesis, was originally published by Brill in a hardback edition as part of its *Novum Testamentum Supplement Series* in 2007 and was subsequently published by Baker Academic in a softbound version in 2009. The Baker edition will likely find a wider audience among scholars and, consequently, should generate more discussion concerning the important issues that Pennington brings to light. This is welcome news, for *Heaven* convincingly overturns long held and rarely challenged assumptions about Matthew's use of heaven and earth language while making a compelling case that Matthew has a definite and vital theological purpose for using such language. Although the book generally succeeds at making the points that it sets out to make and does so on the basis of thorough and rigorous scholarship, it can also be argued that the conclusions drawn from its assessment of the evidence ultimately do not render full justice to the revelation of the kingdom of the heavens in Matthew. Thus, further discussion is not only welcome but warranted.

Heaven astutely states that "the interpretation of Matthew has been partially impoverished" because scholars have failed to recognize "the centrality of heaven language and the heaven and earth theme" in Matthew (6). *Heaven* seeks to rectify that failure by training its lens on four aspects of Matthew's use of heaven language and the theological implications conveyed in his very purposeful employment of that language:

A detailed study of the Jewish literary context reveals that Matthew has drawn on semi-developed concepts in his heritage to create an idiolectic way of using the language of heaven. This idiolectic usage consists of four aspects: 1) an intentional distinction in meaning between the singular and plural forms of οὐρανός; 2) the frequent

use of the heaven and earth word-pair as a theme; 3) regular reference to the Father in heaven; and 4) the recurrent use of the uniquely Matthean expression, ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν. Each of these uses of οὐρανός is developed by Matthew in such a way that they emphasize a very important theological point: the tension that currently exists between heaven and earth, between God's realm and ways and humanity's, especially as it relates to God's kingdom ("the kingdom of heaven") versus humanity's kingdoms. This tension will be resolved at the eschaton—in the new genesis (παλιγγενεσία, 19:28)—that has been inaugurated through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, only by recognizing the intensity of the tension that currently exists between heaven and earth can we fully appreciate the significance of the eschaton in which the kingdom of heaven will come to earth (6:9-10). (6-7)

The thesis is engaging, and the book, divided into two major sections, is well-organized to cover an impressive breadth of material, ancient and modern, in its almost 400 pages. "Part One: Clearing Ground and Building Anew" is composed of four chapters. In chapter 1, "Challenging the Circumlocution Assumption," *Heaven* counters the widely held belief that *heaven* in Matthew's phrase *the kingdom of the heavens* (where Mark and Luke have *kingdom of God*) is merely a reverential circumlocution inserted by Matthew to avoid saying the name of God in his Jewish context. In chapter 2, "A Survey of Heaven in the Old Testament and Second Temple Literature," the author concludes that "many consistent threads in the use of heaven, both as a cosmological term and in reference to the divine abode" are revealed in the literature, but he also discovers that there are "noticeable streams of development as the semantic flexibility of heaven is appropriated in different ways at different times" (64-65). Thus, the "rich variety of usage" in the period preceding Matthew "provides a multi-colored palette with which Matthew will paint his own distinctive picture of heaven" (65). Chapter 3, "A Survey of Heaven in Matthew," points out that Matthew's usage of heaven language has a "basic continuity with much of the preceding Jewish literature" and, yet, that a survey of the preceding and contemporary literature highlights the fact that "no book has such a concentration of heaven language nor a focus on it as a theme as does Matthew" (75-76). Chapter 4, "Heaven and Earth in the Context of Matthean Studies and Theology," concludes this section by demonstrating the relevance of the heaven and earth

theme in current Matthean studies as that theme relates to seven key topics in Matthew, namely, Matthew's *Sitz im Leben*, Christology, the kingdom, the Fatherhood of God, the fulfillment of the Old Testament/Old Covenant, the new people of God and ecclesiology, and eschatology and apocalyptic.

"Part Two: Matthew's Idiolectic Use of Heaven Language and the Theme of Heaven and Earth" consists of eight chapters and, thus, constitutes the bulk of the study. Chapters 5 and 6, "Οὐρανός and Οὐρανοί in the Septuagint and Second Temple Literature" and "Οὐρανός and Οὐρανοί in Matthew," reveal that whereas the use of the plural οὐρανοί is uncommon in the literature preceding the first Gospel, Matthew "intentionally uses singular and plural forms of οὐρανός in an idiolectic pattern" that contributes to "the overall theme of the contrast of heaven and earth" (161). In chapters 7 and 8, "Heaven and Earth in the Old Testament and Second Temple Literature" and "Heaven and Earth in Matthew," the author conveys that "heaven and earth is a very important expression and concept throughout the OT," that it is "quite common in many parts of the Second Temple literature" (189-190), and that it is indicative of a bipartite cosmology. The bipartite cosmology evident in the Old Testament and Second Temple literature continues "by and large intact in Matthew" and "shows his focus on the tension between the two realms [of heaven and earth] as well as the eschatological goal of their reunification" (216). In chapters 9 and 10, "God as Father in the Old Testament and Second Temple Literature" and "The Father in Heaven in Matthew," *Heaven* finds that "the language of divine fatherhood...was quite uncommon in ancient Israel" but that it "became increasingly important in early Judaism and potentially provided contemporary precedent for Jesus' usage" (230). Here *Heaven* makes the case that Matthew further highlights the tension between God and sinful humanity (i.e., between heaven and earth) by referring to God as Father in heaven/heavenly Father in specific heaven and earth contrast pairs, by always using the plural οὐρανός (indicating reference to the heavenly realm) with Father, and by relying on a portrayal of human fathers that is generally negative. Chapters 11 and 12, "The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament and Second Temple Literature" and "Matthew's 'Kingdom of Heaven,'" demonstrate that the Jewish use of the kingdom theme, which was quite common, highlighted God's sovereignty over Israel, His ultimate reign over the whole earth, and the opposition of God's kingdom to the oppression of foreign earthly powers. Furthermore, *Heaven* sees

The book generally succeeds, but the conclusions drawn from its assessment of the evidence ultimately do not render full justice to the revelation of the kingdom of the heavens in Matthew.

Daniel 2—7, with its focus on the kingdom theme and on the heaven and earth contrast, as likely providing the background for Matthew's use of "the kingdom of the heavens" and posits that this special phrase indicates that "God's kingdom, which is in heaven and heavenly, is radically different from all earthly kingdoms and will eschatologically replace them (on the earth)" (330). The volume is rounded out with a helpful concluding chapter that summarizes the findings and offers further insights borne out from the preceding study.

Challenging the Reverential Circumlocution Assumption

Heaven performs a great service to Matthean studies by thoroughly debunking the long held assumption that Matthew uses *heaven* in *the kingdom of the heavens* as a reverential circumlocution to avoid using the name of God. Tracing the source of the misinterpretation to the work of respected nineteenth-century scholar Gustaf Dalman, *Heaven* states,

While it is true that heaven in Matthew does often refer to God in a metonymic way (thus, kingdom of God and

kingdom of heaven have the same referent), close examination reveals that the original circumlocution argument (from Gustaf Dalman) suffers from a faulty methodology and rationale. The historical arguments given for heaven as a reverential circumlocution in the first century rest on very slim evidence. Moreover, there is a better solution within Matthew's own usage. Nonetheless, as is often the case, the scholarly repetition of the same arguments has created a substantial edifice. (14)

Examining the ancient literature, *Heaven* convincingly postulates that there simply is not sufficient evidence to conclude that heaven was used as a reverential circumlocution for God at the time of Jesus, thus weakening Dalman's thesis. Turning to the Gospel of Matthew itself, *Heaven* makes the simple but persuasive observations that Matthew showed "no such aversion [to using the name of God] but in fact uses θεός 51 times, even more often than kingdom of heaven" and that "Matthew also employs the phrase kingdom of God on four occasions (12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43)" (35), thereby further depriving Dalman's thesis of credibility. Therefore, *Heaven* asserts that "heaven as a reverential circumlocution should be jettisoned from our understanding of Matthew" and that the rejection of the idea "opens the door for a clearer understanding of the literary and theological uses of the term" (37). By skillfully deconstructing the scholarly

edifice built up around Dalman's thesis, *Heaven* positions itself to state with authority that "kingdom of heaven," a "crucial Matthean phrase," must be "mined for its meaning" and not casually swept aside by demoting "heaven" to a reverential circumlocution (293). There is much more at stake in Matthew's unique *kingdom of the heavens* phrase than is allowed by the traditional reverential circumlocution argument, and students of Matthew owe Pennington a debt of gratitude for his work in clearing the ground of an untenable but popular thesis in order that new building can be done. Having cleared the ground, however, it is still important to build a new understanding in a way that reflects the fullness of the revelation of the kingdom of the heavens in the New Testament. In this regard, *Heaven* sees only in part.

The Kingdom of the Heavens Coming to the Earth

Heaven begins to rebuild a more salient understanding of the kingdom of the heavens by challenging the misguided but common hope that the Christian's destiny is to dwell in heaven for eternity. Affirming the notion that Matthew's use of *the kingdom of the heavens* contains an implied critique of the Jewish hope for an earthly, Jewish-only kingdom, Pennington asserts,

I agree that there was resident in Matthew's expression a critique of the earthly Jewish kingdom hope, but not by being replaced with a heavenly kingdom *rather* than an earthly one. Instead, the critique concerns the *nature* of this coming kingdom in regards to its ethical practicalities, social relationships, and Gentile inclusion. After all, the great Christian prayer is that God's (heavenly) kingdom would come to earth (6:9-10); the Christian hope is *not* for an ethereal, heaven-situated existence, but the consummation of the heavenly realities coming into effect *on the earth*; not for a destruction of the earth and a kingdom that exists only in heaven, but for a *παλιγγενεσία*, a new genesis (19:28). (326-327)

Heaven contends that the kingdom of the heavens with the divine authority must come to the earth, and its affirmation of this fact is significant in an age when many Christians long to escape the sufferings of earth for self-satisfying amusements in heaven above. With well-chosen evidence, *Heaven* establishes that the current contrastive tension between heaven and earth, as expertly portrayed by Matthew, is not only a reality today but that it awaits a full resolution at Christ's parousia (155). That eschatological resolution will be the fulfillment of the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6:9-10 (210). Interestingly, *Heaven*, again persuasively, locates in that "perfect and weighty phrase" *the kingdom of heaven* Matthew's intention "to communicate both a spatial sense of God's kingdom in heaven and from heaven as well as a qualitative sense, that God's kingdom is heavenly" (293, 311). Thus,

Heaven recognizes that God's purpose rests not with a celestial utopia apart from the earth but with the exercise of the divine, heavenly authority on the earth in the kingdom of the heavens. This is an encouraging conclusion. However, *Heaven* falls short of the full New Testament revelation by failing to recognize the crucial distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the heavens and by deferring the coming of the kingdom of the heavens to the day of Christ's return.

Heaven observes that "the vast majority of scholars do *not* understand kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven as having different referents" (306), but we suggest that this is another instance where the opinion of the scholarly majority is wrong, as it was in its deference to the reverential circumlocution argument. The evidence internal to Matthew's Gospel, as well as that of the entire New Testament, points to a distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the heavens that is more significant than is suggested by *Heaven's* comment that "they perform slightly different functions literarily and theologically" (310). At a basic level, the distinction can be detected in the Lord's warning to the Jewish leaders that the kingdom of God would be taken from them and "given to a nation producing its fruit" (21:43) and in the proclamation that the kingdom of the heavens had "drawn near" at the time of John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus, and the disciples (3:2; 4:17; 10:7). These passages signify that the kingdom of God, generally, already existed with the nation of Israel in the Old Testament and could be taken from them, but that the kingdom of the heavens had yet to come at the beginning of the New Testament age. According to Matthew, the Lord gave to Peter "the keys of the kingdom of the heavens" (16:19), and Peter used those keys first at Pentecost for the Jewish believers to enter into the kingdom of the heavens (Acts 2:38-42) and again in the house of Cornelius for the Gentile believers to enter in (10:34-48). Therefore, the kingdom of the heavens began at Pentecost when the church began to be built up, but the kingdom of God had already existed prior to that time. Whereas the kingdom of God is God's general reign from eternity past to eternity future, the kingdom of the heavens is a special section within the kingdom of God and is composed only of the church today and the heavenly part of the coming millennial kingdom, which is also referred to as the kingdom of the Father (Matt. 13:43). Even this small sampling of evidence² demonstrates that there is in fact a crucial distinction to be made between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the heavens that is not properly treated in *Heaven's* examination of Matthew.

Heaven focuses its attention on the "eschatological resolution" (ix) of the current tension between heaven and earth, and the point made is certainly valid; however, the kingdom of the heavens is a reality today, not just a future

expectation. *Heaven* rightly states that “the great Christian eschatological hope...which was inaugurated through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection” is that “the present earthly order, including its kingdoms, empires, and current social and political realities, will be superseded and replaced when God’s heavenly kingdom comes to earth” (318). It also links the kingdom with the person of the King, stating, “The coming kingdom...is proclaimed by Jesus and is embodied in himself, the unexpected servant-leader” (330). However, *Heaven* seems content to leave the risen Christ only in the heavens and to posit that His authority, which is both “in heaven and on earth” (28:18), is merely granted to His disciples by the heavenly commission as a distant divine edict. But the New Testament reveals that the Christ in whom the kingdom is embodied (Luke 17:21), and who has become a life-giving Spirit in resurrection (1 Cor. 15:45), has come with the kingdom into the spirits of His regenerated believers (2 Tim. 4:22; Matt. 5:3), thus bringing them under the rule of the heavens. The kingdom, then, is a realm of the divine life in which God reigns in His life for the exercise of the divine authority on earth. The kingdom life today—the reality of the kingdom of the heavens—is a life of “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” in the proper church life (Rom. 14:17). This is the life described in detail in Matthew 5—7, a living out of the divine life according to the principles of the kingdom of the heavens. If we reign in this life over Satan, sin, death, the self, and the world in the present age (Rom. 5:17), surely we will be rewarded with the co-kingship with Christ in the full manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens during the millennium. The kingdom of the heavens, then, has already come to the earth in reality; Christ’s return from the heavens will usher in its full manifestation as the consummation of its growth in the believers in the present age. While *Heaven* certainly is not incorrect to advocate a hope that the kingdom will come to the earth at Christ’s parousia, as the Scriptures themselves do (Dan. 7:13-14; Luke 19:12, 15; Rev. 11:15), it sees only half the picture.

Interpreting Matthew’s Heaven and Earth Language as Having Implications for Ethical Living

Stating that one function of the heaven and earth theme in Matthew is “to undergird the radical nature of the ethics and teachings of Jesus,” *Heaven* further states, referring in particular to the Sermon on the Mount, that Jesus’ followers “are called to live now with a God-hoping ethical standard that is counter-intuitive and counter-cultural”

(346). The “constant refrain of the tension or current disjuncture between the two realms of heaven and earth” is also seen as providing “a tangible vision for the kind of hope that transforms daily living” (347). The points are again valid and well argued, but the living that is worthy of the kingdom of the heavens must transcend mere human ethics to be the living of Christ in humanity. *Heaven*’s shortsightedness on this point is a logical outgrowth of its failure to recognize the reality of the kingdom of the heavens as it exists in the regenerated spirits of believers today.

Entrance into the kingdom of God as the divine realm is revealed by John to be effected by the divine birth (John 3:3), whereby all genuine believers in Christ receive the divine life; but entrance into the kingdom of the heavens requires surpassing righteousness in the believers’ living and is possible only for those believers who become

like little children and do the will of the heavenly Father (Matt. 5:20; 18:3; 7:21). This surpassing righteousness cannot be achieved by natural human effort to maintain an ethical standard of living, and not all believers will achieve such a surpassing righteousness in this age. To be sure, all genuine believers in Christ are justified before God by receiving

Christ as righteousness objectively (1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 3:26), but not all genuine believers cooperate with the indwelling Christ so that He may be lived out as their subjective righteousness in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens today. The overcoming believers who attain to the surpassing righteousness by living out Christ as their subjective righteousness in this age will be qualified to enter into the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7-8) and to inherit the coming kingdom as a reward (Matt. 25:34) because they will have been properly clothed with “a wedding garment” (22:11-12), which is “the righteousnesses of the saints” (Rev. 19:8), to meet the requirement of the overcoming Christ. It is by the growth and development of the divine life with the divine virtues that “the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly and bountifully supplied” to the overcoming believers (2 Pet. 1:11), and it is this life that “transforms daily living” (347) (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). Simply living an ethical human life while awaiting the Lord’s coming will not suffice for a believer to be rewarded with the full enjoyment of the kingdom during Christ’s millennial reign (Rev. 20:6).

The Gospel of Matthew certainly provides much encouragement to believers that the age we live in is not eternal and that the kingdom of the heavens³ will come to the earth to replace all earthly kingdoms, as *Heaven* rightly

The kingdom of the heavens has already come to the earth in reality; Christ’s return from the heavens will usher in its full manifestation as the consummation of its growth in the believers in the present age.

contends. But there is evident in Matthew another motivation for believers to seek the coming kingdom, and that is the fear that they may forfeit the right to participate in it if their living in this age falls short of the surpassing righteousness. The evil slave (24:45-51), the foolish virgins (25:1-13), and the unfaithful slave (vv. 14-30) all signify genuine believers who suffer the loss of the enjoyment of the coming kingdom for their failure to live faithfully according to the divine life in the kingdom of the heavens in the present age. If we are to be rewarded with the full manifestation of the coming kingdom, then it is incumbent upon us to live in the light of the judgment seat of Christ today and to walk the constricted way that leads to life (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10; Matt. 7:14). Here again *Heaven* cannot be said to be in error; rather, it presents only half of the full picture.

Conclusion

Heaven is not intended for a popular audience but for academics with a particular interest in New Testament studies and the Gospel of Matthew in particular. It is a notable work of scholarship and should be received as an important contribution to the study of Matthew. The points that it makes are well chosen, well reasoned, and well supported, and any serious student of Matthew will be enriched by a careful study of its contents. The matters highlighted for critique in this review, while crucial to the divine revelation, are seldom recognized in studies of this nature and are rarely appreciated in the broader scope of Christian theology today. Although *Heaven* can be counted as largely a success at the level at which it intends to operate, that is, as an academic study of the heaven and earth theme in Matthew, the conversation is not over. Hopefully *Heaven* will motivate among scholars a serious reconsideration of the crucial place that the kingdom of the heavens occupies in Matthew's Gospel, and that the centrality of the divine life and its growth in the believers will command due attention in that reconsideration. May the conversation continue.

by Tony Espinosa

Notes

¹*Heaven* translates the Greek plural τῶν οὐρανῶν as "of heaven."

²For a fuller treatment of our teaching concerning the kingdom of the heavens, see "The Word of Righteousness: The Kingdom of the Heavens" by John Campbell in the April 2001 issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, 58-68.

³This is not, however, to suggest that regenerated believers can lose their eternal salvation. Our concern here is with the coming kingdom as a reward to those who have lived an overcoming life in Christ in the present age. Ultimately, all of God's

redeemed, including those who have been defeated in this age, will enjoy His salvation for eternity as constituents of the New Jerusalem.

The Wonder of Heaven: Far from Biblical Truth

The Wonder of Heaven by Ron Rhodes. Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2009.

Due to the commonly held belief in an afterlife in heaven, Ron Rhodes in *The Wonder of Heaven* (hereafter *Wonder*) attempts to present the blessing and splendor of heaven as the eternal dwelling place of the believers. This is done with the intent that knowledge of our future in heaven would influence the way that we live today and motivate us to wholly and unreservedly commit ourselves to living for Christ daily, serving Him with joy, and walking with Him in fellowship. In support of this goal, Rhodes arranges his book in thirteen chapters and addresses three main points: the certainty of the believers' entrance into heaven upon death and their existence after death until their future resurrection; the splendor and the blessings of the eternal city, the New Jerusalem, for the believers (and those who cannot believe); and the rewards of living Christ-honoring lives. While these points may seem laudable, they ultimately fall short of the truth as revealed in the Scriptures.

By teaching that the believers are taken into heaven upon death, by interpreting the New Jerusalem as a physical city, and by relegating God's judgment to near inconsequential rewards, *Wonder* deadens the desperation of the Lord's children to be well pleasing to Him and distracts them from the goal of God's salvation, thereby diminishing its worth.

A Summary

In chapter 1, "Entering Death's Door," *Wonder* states that "death is *the* great enemy of *all* human beings" (27). Thus, man has a natural fear of death. Then it establishes the premise that since the believers enter into the Lord's presence in heaven at the moment of death, "the prospect of heaven does much to reduce the...fear of death itself" for the believers (28). In chapter 2 *Wonder* proceeds to list different phrases that the Bible uses in portraying death and suggests that "the Bible talks about death so that it can instruct us about life and teach us how to have an eternal perspective during our brief time on earth" (40).

In chapter 3, “Life in the Intermediate State,” *Wonder* seeks to address two main points: how the believers exist and where they reside in the intermediate state and the period between death and the future resurrection. As to their existence in the intermediate state, *Wonder* lists two opposing views: that they exist either with temporary bodies or as disembodied spirits. It immediately affirms that according to verses such as Acts 7:59, where Stephen commends his spirit to the Lord Jesus, Christians will exist in the intermediate state as disembodied spirits in the presence of God (47).

Regarding where the believers are located in the intermediate state, *Wonder* presents two arguments concerning the believers being either in Hades or in heaven. Based on verses such as Psalm 16:10-11 and 2 Corinthians 5:8, *Wonder* asserts that the believers go to heaven upon death. Thus, it concludes that in the intermediate state the believers exist as disembodied spirits in heaven and that unbelievers experience torment in a temporary place of suffering while awaiting their final judgment there.

In chapter 4, “Alive Forevermore: The Future Resurrection,” *Wonder* speaks concerning Christ’s resurrection and seeks to prove Christ’s resurrection by furnishing biblical and historical events and by using the existence of the Christian church as evidence for His resurrection. Then this chapter concludes that the believers’ resurrection is certain, based upon the certainty of Christ’s resurrection. In chapters 5 and 6 *Wonder* responds to common questions concerning the resurrection and heaven, based on views that it presents in the first four chapters and in the final seven chapters.

In chapter 7, “The Splendor of the Eternal City: The New Jerusalem,” *Wonder* reinforces the premise that Christians go to heaven immediately after death and suggests that “the *present* heaven” where the Christians go upon death and where God presently dwells should be distinguished from “the *future* heaven” where the Christians will dwell in eternity (115). Then *Wonder* proceeds to interpret the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and 22 as a physical city where the believers will dwell in eternity.

In chapter 8, “The New Heavens and the New Earth,” *Wonder* begins with a discussion of the present heaven and the future heaven. It points out that the future heaven will encompass the new heaven and the new earth and that heaven and earth will be merged. In this context the book presents two views concerning how the heavens and earth

are made new—the replacement view and the renewal view. The first view suggests that the universe will be annihilated and replaced with another universe, and the second view, that the new heavens and the new earth are the present cosmos “renewed and renovated” (133). *Wonder* supports the renewal view.

In chapter 9, “The Blessing of Heaven for Believers,” *Wonder* lists more specific blessings enjoyed by the believers in heaven, such as the absence of death and mourning and the believers’ fellowship with Christ. In addition to these blessings, the book lists some activities of the believers in heaven and things that are not done in heaven.

Chapter 10, “Heaven for Those Who Can’t Believe,” suggests that for those who are unable to believe, such as children who have not reached the age of accountability and people with mental disabilities, the benefits of Jesus’ atoning death are applied to them at the moment of their death, based on God’s salvation being a gift, Jesus’ attitude toward children, and the attributes of God.

The teaching that the believers are taken up into heaven immediately after death is an erroneous teaching that cannot be substantiated by the Scriptures.

Chapter 11, “Rewards for Faithful Service,” presents the matter of the believers’ gaining or losing rewards at the judgment seat of Christ. In this chapter *Wonder* explains that the judgment that takes place at the judgment seat of Christ immediately after the church is “raptured” is related not to the matter of eternal salvation but to the service of the believers. According to their level of commitment to the Lord, the believers will be rewarded, or they will forfeit rewards and suffer shame. It also points out that this teaching concerning rewards can and should motivate the believers to live faithfully for Christ while on the earth, and the chapter lists different crowns as the rewards that the believers will receive for their faithfulness.

Chapter 12, “Helping Those Who Grieve,” points out that even though the believers have a wonderful destiny, they are not immune to grief. Then, *Wonder* explains the way to minister comfort to one another in times of grief.

Chapter 13, “Looking Toward Eternity,” *Wonder* encourages the believers to set their mind on the heavenly things in order to gain an eternal perspective so that they no longer need to fear death. For the believers, death is “a transition, not a final condition” (214). Thus, they should rejoice when other Christians pass through death’s door.

Throughout its chapters *Wonder* propounds at least three major lines of errant teachings: the believers' entrance into heaven upon death, the New Jerusalem being a physical city, and the judgment seat of Christ being a matter only of receiving or forfeiting rewards in heaven.

Errantly Teaching that Believers Enter into Heaven upon Death

In presenting its claim that the believers go to heaven immediately after death, *Wonder* uses as scriptural basis for its claim Psalm 16:10-11, Genesis 5:24, Hebrews 11:5, 2 Kings 2:1, Psalm 23:6, Matthew 8:11, Luke 23:43, 2 Corinthians 5:8, and Philippians 1:22-23. However, many of these verses are either misapplied or taken out of context.

Psalm 16:10-11 says, "You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, / Nor let Your Holy One see the pit. / You will make known to me the path of life; / In Your presence is fullness of joy; / At Your right hand there are pleasures forever." Concerning this verse *Wonder* says, "The psalmist believed he would be directly in the presence of God upon the moment of death" (51). When Peter quoted these same verses in Acts 2:27, he said, "David did not ascend into the heavens" (v. 34) but "spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that neither was He abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption" (v. 31). Peter's word indicates that this portion of Psalm 16 should not be applied to the believers but to Christ. Furthermore, Christ's not being abandoned to Hades implies that He went to Hades but was not abandoned there.

Genesis 5:24 says, "Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him," and Hebrews 11:5 says, "Enoch was translated so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had translated him. For before his translation he obtained the testimony that he had been well pleasing to God." Neither of these verses suggests that Enoch was taken into heaven, according to *Wonder's* claim. To use these verses to establish such a claim forces a natural concept of the believers' being taken into heaven after death upon the Bible.

Psalm 23:6 says, "Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me / All the days of my life, / And I will dwell in the house of Jehovah / For the length of my days." *Wonder*, quoting another author (51-52), suggests that *the house of Jehovah* in this verse must refer to heaven, even though this verse speaks of the psalmist's desire to dwell in the temple, the house of Jehovah, while he is alive. This clearly is not a reference to heaven, much less to the errant concept of "going to heaven," since the psalmist is already in the house and desires only to remain.

Second Kings 2:1 says, "When Jehovah was about to take up Elijah by a whirlwind into heaven, Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal." This is the unique verse that speaks of a person being taken up into heaven. However, *heaven*, as used in this verse, can also refer to the sky or the atmosphere. To be sure, neither Elijah nor any of the Old Testament saints were taken up into heaven. This is made clear by the Lord's word in John 3:13, which says, "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended out of heaven, the Son of Man."

Luke 23:43 says, "He said to him, Truly I say to you, Today you shall be with Me in Paradise." *Wonder* equates the Paradise in this verse to heaven (52-53). This is wrong because the Lord ascended only after spending three days in the lower parts of the earth, Hades (Eph. 4:9). Thus, the Lord and the thief were present together not in heaven but were together in the pleasant side of Hades on the first day following His death on the cross. Luke 16:19-31 presents a clear picture of Paradise being the pleasant side of Hades, where Lazarus went following his death.

Second Corinthians 5:8 says, "We are of good courage then and are well pleased rather to be abroad from the body and at home with the Lord," and Philippians 1:23 says, "I am constrained between the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for this is far better." Concerning being with Christ, a footnote to verse 23 says,

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. (Recovery Version, note 1)

The teaching that the believers are taken up into heaven immediately after death is an erroneous teaching that cannot be substantiated by the Scriptures. According to the New Testament some believers are raptured to the heavens, but those who are raptured are not raptured immediately after their death but before the great tribulation (Rev. 12:5; Phil. 3:10-11; Rev. 14:1-5; 3:10; Luke 21:36; Matt. 24:39-42). As such, *Wonder's* teaching should be repudiated by all the Lord's children.

According to the truth of the Scriptures, all persons, both the lost and the saved go to Hades when they die (Job 24:19; Luke 16:24-26). *Sheol* in the Old Testament is equivalent to *Hades* in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, Genesis 49:33 and 37:35 indicate that when Jacob died he went to Sheol where his fathers were. In the New Testament, Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16 were in Hades after they died. In Hades there are a section of comfort—Paradise—and a section of torment. The disembodied spirits and souls of the believers are in the section of comfort, whereas the disembodied

spirits and souls of the lost are in the section of torment. In the account in Luke 16, Lazarus was in the pleasant section while the rich man was in the section of torment.

According to God's original creation, God created a body for man as his covering (Gen. 2:7). When man fell, sin entered into man, bringing in death (Rom. 5:12). Through death, man's spirit and soul are separated from his body, causing him to be naked (2 Cor. 5:3). Thus, upon death man is in an incomplete, abnormal, and even shameful state and cannot enter into the presence of God (cf. Exo. 28:42-43; 20:26). As a result, man's spirit and soul are kept in Hades until the resurrection, when God will clothe the believers with a resurrected and glorified body (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thes. 4:16; John 5:28-29; 1 Cor. 15:35, 42-44, 53).

Errantly Teaching That the New Jerusalem Is a Physical City

Wonder presents a "heaven" that includes a physical New Jerusalem, the new heavens, and a new earth. However, the New Jerusalem is not a physical city into which the believers will enter but a reality that they are becoming. To interpret the New Jerusalem as a physical city not only goes against the entire book of Revelation being a book of signs (1:1), but it also devalues God's operation in the believers throughout the Bible.

God's salvation does not save us merely to transfer us from one physical place, the earth, to another physical place, heaven. God's salvation is spiritual, and it constitutes His believers into a spiritual counterpart for Christ, the church as the bride of Christ, that the book of Revelation identifies as the New Jerusalem. God's salvation involves God's making Himself one with man through the progressive steps of justification, sanctification, renewing, transformation, conformation, and glorification (Rom. 3:24; 6:19, 22; Eph. 4:23; Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29-30, 19). The New Jerusalem is a corporate constitution of the redeemed, regenerated, sanctified, transformed, and conformed, and glorified believers as a bride to Christ. In keeping with the process of God's salvation, this city is the ultimate union of God and man, in which God dwells in man and man dwells in God (Psa. 90:1; Deut. 33:27; Ezek. 11:16; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; John 14:20-21; 17:21). As the tabernacle of God (Rev. 21:3), the New Jerusalem is a composition of God's elect as His dwelling place, and there is no temple in it because the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple, which signifies that the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb will be the place where the believers serve God (v. 22).

The holy city as the tabernacle of God is for God to dwell in, and God and the Lamb as the temple are for the

redeemed saints to dwell in. In the new heaven and new earth, the New Jerusalem will be a mutual dwelling place for God and man for eternity. (Recovery Version, v. 22, note 2)

Errantly Teaching concerning the Judgment Seat of Christ

Concerning the judgment at the judgment seat of Christ, *Wonder* says that this judgment "has to do only with the reception or loss of rewards" (178) and lists as rewards various crowns in the Bible, such as the crown of life, the crown of glory, and the crown of righteousness. The implication of this erroneous teaching is that the judgment seat of Christ is related only to receiving rewards in heaven. This view ignores the truth that this particular judgment of all believers is related to their ruling and reigning with Christ in the millennial kingdom or to suffering punishment in outer darkness, not to receiving some reward in heaven (Rev. 20:4-6; Matt. 13:43).

According to the New Testament, after His return but before the millennial kingdom, all the resurrected and raptured believers will be judged by Christ at His judgment seat to determine whether their life and living qualify them for participating in the millennial kingdom. This judgment will take into account the living and work of the believers, and those who are approved, the overcoming believers, will reign with Christ in the millennial kingdom, whereas those who are disapproved will suffer loss and punishment (7:21-23; 8:12; 25:30).

Wonder's mistaken teaching concerning "going to heaven" immediately after death reinforces the already prevalent "ticket to heaven" concept, which causes the believers to be loose concerning God's present salvation in their daily living. *Wonder's* attempt to remedy this problem by presenting a skewed view of the judgment seat of Christ fails since it lacks the truth, the seriousness, and the weight of this matter as it is presented in the Bible. Finally, *Wonder's* interpretation of the New Jerusalem as a physical city turns the believers' attention away from cooperating with God's present operation within them, of which the New Jerusalem is the issue, to things like the fantasy of a home in heaven. As such, *Wonder* is short of the scriptural revelation in the Bible and distracts to the believers from being serious and sober concerning their eternal destiny.

by Joel Oladele

Works Cited

Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the Bible. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2003.