

## Concerning Afterlife

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Whether there is an afterlife, heaven or hell, or otherworldly realms of existence, is an issue unique to modern times. People in earlier times, especially the ancient Mediterranean culture, never questioned the reality of otherworldly realms of existence. Questions concerning heaven and hell, life after death, the destruction of the world, and the end of time have always intrigued man. The formal theological study of these themes is called "*eschatology*," a word taken from two Greek words: *eschatos*, meaning: "the end, the final or concluding event," and *logos*, meaning: "reasoning or investigation." Hence, our word, *eschatology*, "the study of last things."

The very concept of the end of time is disturbing, yet fascinating. Time is a creation of God. In Gen 1:1-3 we are told that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Three assumptions are set out in these opening lines: there was **God** (the cause, source, or power/energy behind creation), **the beginning** (time, beginnings and endings are time concepts), and the realm of existence we know as **the heavens and the earth** (space and matter - the universe). Of special interest to our study is idea that time was a creation of God. God existed before the creation of time and thus stands outside or beyond time. This must be so in that he must, of necessity, transcend that which he created. He existed before the creation of this space-time realm of existence and will exist after it is no more.

One of the things that will end with this universe is "time." Such a concept is impossible for us to imagine, because we can only think in terms of the past, present and future - time! As beings locked into a space-time dimension of existence, we will naturally have great difficulty grasping anything we are told concerning events or happening which involve the end of time, and even more, after that!

If heaven and hell are realms of existence where people dwell after the end of this space-time dimension of existence, how can we understand anything about them? How are we to think of what these places they are, where they are, or what they will be like?

We cannot think about such concepts as we think of our present existence. We must, somehow, think differently about these eschatological matters than we do matters with which we are familiar. For example, rather than trying to think of heaven and hell as places located somewhere within space and time, we must learn to think of them as existing in other realms, or perhaps, other dimensions of existence.

This immediately presents a problem. If eschatological concepts must be thought of differently than concepts of our present existence, what, are we to do with all of the Biblical imagery describing heaven and hell in terms of places common to our present world? For example, heaven is described as a place in outer space (the third heaven), as an emperor's garden (Paradise), a celestial city (the new Jerusalem), and a new or another universe (a new heaven and a new earth). Hell is described as a place within the heart of the earth (*Hades*), as a valley of desecration and destruction outside the city of Jerusalem (*Geenna/GeHinnom*), as well as a place of outer darkness, a bottomless pit, and a lake that burns with fire.

It is obvious that all of these descriptions of heaven and hell cannot all be describing the same place. Too many contradictions or inconsistencies are present. How, then, are we to understand the Biblical language with reference to heaven and hell? One possibility is that when Jesus and the Biblical writers speak about end time events or places, they are using concepts of human experience to communicate to us something that is beyond human experience. Is this not what Paul is doing in 2 Cor 12:3-4? When writing about being caught up in a vision into the third heaven or paradise he says that he saw and heard things in that realm of existence that could not be told or expressed. The Greek word Paul uses here is *herma* (speech, oration, to explanation, description), with an alpha prefix, which means, "without explanation or description." Liddell & Scott's *Greek*

*Lexicon* defines this word as, "things of such a mysterious or esoteric nature that they may not be told, things that are indescribable." So, literally, Paul is saying that he saw things in this otherworldly realm of existence that were indescribable.

When there are no words to describe something, how do you talk about it? The best you can do is what most writers, especially poets, throughout the centuries have done. You use figures of speech, symbols, poetic metaphors, analogy, etc. This is, in all probability, what Jesus and the Biblical writers did. The New Testament language used to describe these otherworldly places and events is most likely figurative. Symbolic imagery and poetic metaphor were very popular forms of figurative language found in the writings of the first century Mediterranean world. Especially is this the case in describing concepts of otherworldly existence such as heaven and hell. This type of language is present in the teachings of Jesus and the Biblical writers.

## Biblical Descriptions of Heaven

### *Heaven as a Realm Beyond Outer Space*

In Jewish tradition there were three heavens (i.e., the universe was three-storied). There was a **first heaven** (terrestrial heaven) consisting of the atmosphere surrounding the earth. This was taken from Gen 1:6-8, the firmament or expanse that divided the waters above (rain clouds) from the waters below (seas, lakes, etc.). **The second heaven** (celestial heaven) was the abode of the sun, moon, and stars (outer space). This concept was taken from such texts as Gen 1:14-19 and Psalms 8:3. **The third heaven** was the dwelling place of God and his heavenly host. In Hebrew this was called *Shama Ha Shamayim* (the heaven of heavens); see: Deut 10:114; 26:15; 2 Chron 6:18; Neh 9:6; Psalms 102:19; 115:16. His dwelling place was also called "his chambers" (Amos 9:6) and "his Holy Temple" (Psalms 11:4). This concept of heaven is also carried over into the New Testament; cf., 2 Cor 12:1-4; Mark 16:19; Eph 4:10; Heb 4:14; 7:26; also seen in Matt 21:9 and Luke 2:14.

## *Heaven as Paradise: the Garden of Eden*

The term "Paradise" is thought to have come into Hebrew theology from Near Eastern thought (Persia) during Israel's captivity period in Babylon. Paradise is believed to be a lost or hidden garden (forest) somewhere in the Mesopotamian basin where the Garden of Eden was thought to have been originally located. This concept appears in much of the Apocalyptic literature of the first century Jewish Pseudepigraphal writings. The Greek word *paradeisos* is used in used in this literature to describe a magnificent garden (e.g., the emperor's garden or a king's forest). The Jews and Christians possibly adopted this term to speak of the Garden of Eden of Gen 1-3. It is used in this sense by Jesus (Luke 23:43), by the Apostle Paul (2 Cor 12:4), and by the Apostle John (Rev 2:7).

## *Heaven as a Celestial City: New Jerusalem*

This imagery is taken primarily from Rev. 21-22. The Hebrews epistle also uses this imagery (cf. Heb 11:10, 15-16; 12:22; 13:14). In John 14:2, Jesus makes a comment that may have reference to this concept of heaven, "In my Father's house there are many dwellings." The Greek word for "dwellings" here in this text simply means "a dwelling place" (*mone*, from the verb *meno* - to dwell). Jesus is not promising a colonial mansion to his faithful followers; he is simply saying that in the otherworldly realm called heaven, there is room for everyone.

The city of God, described in Rev 21-22, provides us with the most elaborate description or discussion of such an otherworldly realm in the whole of Scripture. It is described as **a city of incomprehensible grandeur and beauty**. It is an ancient city, a city of great magnificence and magnitude, and of great beauty and splendor. It is also described as **a city wherein exists unspeakable happiness and joy**. The inhabitants experience the very presence of God, salvation has become a completed reality, and all things have become different and new. It will also be **a city filled with worship and service to God** and those within the city will reign with him into the ages (eternally). This whole descriptive piece of apocalyptic

imagery is a classic example of what we are laboring here to present. The imagery found throughout is not that of a literal city to be constructed somewhere in Palestine at the end of the ages. Rather, the descriptions given here are most likely for the purpose awakening our imaginations with the indescribable nature of otherworldly existence.

## Biblical Descriptions of Hell

As it is possible to interpret the Biblical imagery of heaven as figurative rather than literal, so also is it with the Biblical imagery of hell. There are several descriptions of hell given in the writings of the New Testament.

### *Hades: the Unseen Realm of the Dead*

The Greek word *hades* literally means "unseen" or "to see not." It is the designation of the god of the underworld in Classical Greek mythology. This underworldly realm is the domain of the god Hades and is thus named after him. In Greek mythology the realm of Hades was believed to be a region beneath the surface of the earth somewhere in Achaia (ancient Greece) where the spirits of the dead dwelt. This region consisted of caves and caverns called *Tartarus*, which were filled with darkness, fires, and demonic beings. The river *Styx* ran through Hades and, in Classical myth, a special class of gods and goddess called "the Immortals" lived in the Elysium (a garden of pleasure) located somewhere in Hadean realm. Only the most favored gods and goddesses knew its exact location. The most dominant concept of the realm of Hades, however, was that it was a place of shadowy type existence and was the destination of those who had displeased the more powerful gods of the Greek Pantheon.

Other cultures of the first century Mediterranean world had similar mythological deities and similar underworldly realms of existence. In Egyptian mythology, Osiris was the god of the dead who ruled over the shadow realm. In Roman myth, Pluto reigned over the realm of the dead, which was called by the Greek term *Aidoneus* (the unseen) as well as *Hades* (to see not). With the

Hellenization of the Mediterranean world by Alexander the Great, these Greek concepts seemed to have become well known and used throughout to describe the underworld in most belief/disbelief systems of the religious world.

The Greek term *Hades* appears to have been used interchangeably with the Hebrew *Sheol*, (the shadow realm of the dead) in Jewish writings of this period. Jesus and the New Testament writers also appear to use this Greek term in the same sense; cf., Matt 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; 1 Cor 15:55; Rev 1:18; 6:8; 20:13-14.

### *Gehenna: the Valley of Desecration*

Outside of Jerusalem there was a valley where the dead bodies of animals and executed criminals were left to decay. In Hebrew it was called *GeHinnom*, the valley of the son of Hinnom. The Greek word for this place was *Geenna*, or the translated *Gehenna*. This was a place of historic desecration. In ancient Israel's history, human sacrifices were offered to the pagan god Moloch (cf., 2 Chron 28:3; 33:6; Jer 7:31, and 32:35).

After the return of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity of 586 BC, the Valley of Hinnom was considered a place of desecration. No Jew would enter the valley lest he become ceremonially unclean. It had become the common cesspool of the city. Since carcasses of dead animals and humans were left there, constant fires were kept burning to keep down the pestilence. It thus became known as "the place of fire." From this imagery the writers of the Jewish Apocalyptic literature used this term for the place of punishment for those who stand under the wrath of God. Jesus appears to use the term in a similar way (cf., Matt 5:21-22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43-48; Luke 12:5; also James 3:6). There are also those where the imagery is present even though the term *Gehenna* is not used: Matt 25:41-46; Luke 16:23-25; John 5:24-29).

## *The Lake of Fire and Place of Outer Darkness*

These images may be associated with the Jewish usage of *GeHinnom*; especially as seen in the Jewish Apocalyptic literature. As mentioned above, this imagery is found in passages where the term *Gehenna* does not appear; they are listed here separately. In Matt 8:11-12, Jesus speaks of a realm of **outer darkness** where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (i.e., a place of great anguish); this same imagery is repeated in Matt 25:30. In the great judgment scene of Rev 20:11-15, Satan, death, and all those whose names are not written in the book of life are thrown into **a lake of fire**. In Rev 20:3, the Satan is cast into a bottomless pit (the Greek word here is *abussos* meaning, "without bottom").

A curious consideration here is that all of this imagery relates psychologically to many or most of the basic fears of man. The **fear of pain** is rooted in the imagery of the *Gehenna* of fire and the lake of fire. The **fear of the unknown** is rooted in the imagery of Hades, the realm of the unseen, the shadow world, or the place of outer darkness. The **fear of falling** (i.e., loss of control) is rooted in the imagery of the bottomless pit.

### Conclusion

What conclusions may we draw from all this? It would appear that what we have before us in these images of afterlife has to do with a way of speaking about things we could not understand without the use of such semantic devices. How can we think about realms of existence that transcend space and time? This is what eschatology is about. Its topics have to do with concepts such as the end of time and the end of the world as we know it. We must allow for the possibility that there are other dimensions of existence transcending this realm of existence, and these can only be described or discussed in the language of our present realm of existence. The idea with which we are struggling here is very well presented in the following quote:

When the biblical writers or Jesus himself talk about the end of

the world or what happens after death, they use the concepts of human experience to talk about something that is beyond all human experience. They try to express in the categories of time and space truth which lies beyond all temporal and spatial categories. Not only that, they do this in terms of human experience and understanding of space and time which belong to an ancient culture quite different from ours. Therefore, we cannot take the images and pictures they use literally. Rather, we must try to understand the truth they are trying to convey with the images and pictures. (Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine*, 385.)

One thing that must be made very clear here, we are talking about "realities" of other or another realm or dimension of existence. We are not saying that heaven and hell are not real when we say that the Biblical imagery of heaven and hell may be understood figuratively or metaphorically. Heaven and hell are spoken of in Scripture as realities of life after death. Even if spoken of in figures, one must remember that figures always stand for a reality. We must take the language of condemnation and alienation from God seriously, as well as the language of salvation and life eternal seriously, and attempt, in all our efforts at Biblical interpretation, to hear the message this imagery is intended to convey.

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### Questions For Discussion

1. Do you think the language about heaven and hell as contained in the New Testament is to be understood literally or figuratively? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think people are afraid to take the Biblical language of heaven and hell as figurative?
3. When one says that the language describing heaven and hell in Scripture is figurative, does that mean that he does not believe in the reality of heaven or hell? Why or why not?

4. When discussing such concepts as "the end of time," why is such a topic so difficult to grasp? How can we think or talk about what lies beyond the end of time or the end of the world?

5. If heaven and hell are realms of existence where people will dwell after the end of this space-time universe, how can we understand what these realms of existence will be like?

6. Is it possible that there are other dimensions of existence that lie beyond the realm of existence we know? If such is not possible, where does one place God if he is beyond our space-time dimension of existence?

7. If heaven and hell are realms of existence lying outside this realm of existence, how can anything about such realities be revealed to us?

8. Why do you think heaven is portrayed so diversely in the New Testament; e.g., a realm in outer space (the third heaven), and emperor's garden (Paradise), a celestial city (the New Jerusalem)?

9. Why do you think hell is described so diversely in the New Testament; e.g., an unseen realm beneath the earth (*Hades*), a valley of desecration outside the city of Jerusalem (*Gehenna*), a place of outer darkness and a lake of fire?

10. When Paul says in 2 Cor 12:4 that he could not describe what he experienced when he was caught up into the third heaven in a vision, why do you think such an experience was so difficult to put into words?