

A Brief History of
Heaven

ALISTER E. MCGRATH

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A Brief History of
Heaven

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Preface

The purpose of this short book is easily stated. It sets out to explore a few aspects of the development of the idea of heaven in Western culture, and the inspiration it has brought to Western literature and personal faith. It is a subject that has long fascinated me, both academically and spiritually, and I hope its readers will find themselves sharing at least something of my excitement as I wrote it.

Unlike some other excellent recent studies of the history of heaven,¹ this book does not attempt to offer a chronological overview of the development of the idea of heaven, but looks at the ways in which Western literature – both Christian and secular – understands this notion, and the difference it makes to human life and thought. Its approach is thus primarily thematic, rather than historical.

¹ The best studies currently available in English are Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang. *Heaven: A History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988, and Jeffrey Burton Russell. *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

The origins of the book lie in research I undertook to expand the final chapter of my widely used textbook *Christian Theology: An Introduction*,² which deals with the concept of heaven. As I researched this theme, I became aware of two major difficulties. First, there was no way I could include any more than a fraction of that research within the severely limited confines of that chapter. It called out for a book in its own right. And second, the exploration of the idea of heaven in the field of Western literature was far more interesting than anything I found in works of systematic theology. Although care has been taken to ensure that the theological foundations of the ideas are carefully explained, this book therefore focuses on the depiction and discussion of heaven in works of literature, rather than technical works of theology.

Alister McGrath
Oxford, May 2002

² Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 3rd edn. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.

Chapter 1

The City: The New Jerusalem

“I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem” (Revelation 21:2). These words from the final book of the Bible set out a vision of heaven that has captivated the Christian imagination. To speak of heaven is to affirm that the human longing to *see* God will one day be fulfilled – that we shall finally be able to gaze upon the face of what Christianity affirms to be the most wondrous sight anyone can hope to behold. One of Israel’s greatest Psalms asks to be granted the privilege of being able to gaze upon “the beauty of the Lord” in the land of the living (Psalm 27:4) – to be able to catch a glimpse of the face of God in the midst of the ambiguities and sorrows of this life. We see God but dimly in this life; yet, as Paul argued in his first letter to the Corinthian Christians, we shall one day see God “face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

To *see* God; to *see* heaven. From a Christian perspective, the horizons defined by the parameters of our human existence merely limit what we can see; they do not define what there is to be seen. Imprisoned by its history and mortality, humanity has had to content itself with pressing

its boundaries to their absolute limits, longing to know what lies beyond them. Can we break through the limits of time and space, and glimpse another realm – another dimension, hidden from us at present, yet which one day we shall encounter, and even enter?

Images and the Christian Faith

It has often been observed that humanity has the capacity to think. Perhaps it is still better observed that we possess the unique capacity to *imagine*. Our understanding of the universe, God, and ourselves is primarily controlled by images, rather than concepts. The concept of heaven is an excellent example of a Christian idea that is fundamentally imaginative in provenance, and that demands an imaginative mode of encounter with the reality that it mediates. This insight lies behind the Orthodox emphasis on the important role of icons in the Christian life, which – when rightly understood and used – act as “windows into heaven.” Perhaps this is nowhere so evident as in human reflection on heaven, which is controlled and stimulated by a series of powerful images – supremely, the image of a city and of a garden.

Human language finds itself pressed to its limits when trying to depict and describe the divine. Words and images are borrowed from everyday life, and put to new uses in an attempt to capture and preserve precious insights into the nature of God. The Christian understanding of both the divine and human natures is such that – if it is right – we are unable to grasp the full reality of God. Can the human mind ever hope to comprehend something that must ultimately lie beyond its ability to enfold?

A story is told concerning the great Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (354–430), who is particularly noted for a massive treatise on the mystery of the Trinity – the distinctively Christian understanding of the richly textured nature of God. Perhaps in the midst of composing this treatise, Augustine found himself pacing the Mediterranean shoreline of his native North Africa, not far from the great city of Carthage. Not for the first time, a theologian found his language and imagery challenged to the utmost, and his intellectual resources exhausted, in his attempt to put into words the greater reality of God. While wandering across the sand, he noticed a small boy scooping seawater into his hands, and pouring as much as his small hands could hold into a hole he had earlier hollowed in the sand. Puzzled, Augustine watched as the lad repeated his action again and again.

Eventually, his curiosity got the better of him. What, he asked the boy, did he think he was doing? The reply probably perplexed him still further. The youth was in the process of emptying the ocean into the small cavity he had scooped out in the hot sand. Augustine was dismissive: how could such a vast body of water be contained in such a small hole? The boy was equally dismissive in return: how could Augustine expect to contain the vast mystery of God in the mere words of a book?

The story illuminates one of the central themes of Christian theology and spirituality alike – that there are limits placed upon the human ability to grasp the things of God. Our knowledge of God is accommodated to our capacity. As writers from Augustine to Calvin argued, God is perfectly aware of the limitations placed upon human nature – which, after all, is itself a divine creation. Knowing our limits, such writers argued, God both discloses divine truths

and enters into our world in forms that are tempered to our limited abilities and competencies. Familiar images from the world around us become windows of perception into the nature and purposes of God. The parables of Jesus are perhaps the most familiar example of this: an everyday event (a sower sowing seed in the fields), or a keenly observed event (a woman's joy on finding a lost coin) become the means by which deeper spiritual truths are disclosed. The woman's joy becomes a powerful symbol of the delight of God when wayward humanity returns home to its tender creator and redeemer. Yet this is not an arbitrary association or connection; it is one that Christians hold to be divinely *authorized*.

This is perhaps best seen in the Old Testament images of God, which are developed and given still greater impact in the New. As the Oxford scholar and theologian Austin Farrer argued, Christianity represents a "rebirth of images," both in terms of the importance assigned to images in conceiving and sustaining the Christian life and the new impetus given to the religious imagery that the church inherited from Israel. To speak of God as "king," "shepherd," or "mother" is to draw upon a richly textured biblical tradition, which authorizes its users to speak of God in this manner, and whose imagery engages both mind and imagination in a sustained process of reflection and internal appropriation. Such analogies were drawn from the ancient Near Eastern world of everyday experience; they nevertheless possessed the capacity to point beyond themselves, signifying something of a greater reality lying beyond them and the world that contained them.

Christian writers have always appreciated the importance of these images, not least because they appealed to both the human reason and imagination. Romanticism may be

singled out for its emphasis on the imagination as a faculty of spiritual discernment, and a correspondingly high emphasis on the role of religious imagery. “Vision or Imagination is a Representation of what Eternally Exists, Really and Unchangeably” (William Blake). Where reason, the Romantics argued, kept humanity firmly anchored to the realities of this world, the imagination liberated humanity from bondage to the material order, enabling it to discern transcendent spiritual truths. “While reason is the natural organ of truth, imagination is the organ of meaning” (C. S. Lewis). Yet Romanticism differed merely in its *emphasis* at this point; such insights have nourished Christian theology and spirituality down the ages.

Heaven is perhaps the supreme example of a Christian concept that is mediated directly through images. To speak of “imagining heaven” does not imply or entail that heaven is a *fictional* notion, constructed by deliberately disregarding the harsher realities of the everyday world. It is to affirm the critical role of the God-given human capacity to construct and enter into mental pictures of divine reality, which are mediated through Scripture and the subsequent tradition of reflection and development. We are able to inhabit the mental images we create, and thence anticipate the delight of finally entering the greater reality to which they correspond. Marco Polo (1254–1324), having returned to Italy from the court of Kublai Khan, was able to convey some of the wonders of China by asking his audience to imagine a world they had never visited, but which he could recreate, if only in part, by his narratives and descriptions. The unknown could be glimpsed by comparisons with the known – through *analogies*.

Biblical writers imagined – that is to say, pictured and invited others to picture – heaven in terms of certain types

of earthly spaces – spaces that possessed distinct qualities capable of disclosing the unique nature of heaven itself. Three such images are of critical importance: the kingdom, the city, and the garden. Each of these analogies of heaven models an aspect of the greater reality to which they point, however haltingly. Yet analogies are at best imperfect accounts of their referents, modeling only part of a greater whole. They possess an inbuilt propensity to break down, misleading those who press them beyond their intended limits. Above all, these three images mislead us if we regard them as irreducibly spatial or geographical in nature, and thus conveying the notion that heaven is merely a place or region. A spatial analogy does not imply that heaven is a specific physical location, any more than the use of social analogies for God – such as “father” or “king” – implies that God is a physical human being.

To explore the Christian vision of heaven, it is therefore necessary to engage with its controlling images. We shall begin by considering perhaps the most familiar of all: the image of heaven as a city – more specifically, as the New Jerusalem. Many sections of the Old Testament resound with the praise of the city of Jerusalem, which is seen both as a tangible image of the presence and providence of God within its sturdy walls, and also as a pointer to the fulfillment of messianic expectations. The New Testament gives a new twist to this focus, not least in the remarkable reworking of the theme of the “city of God” found in the Revelation of St. John. For this biblical writer, the fulfillment of all Christian hopes and expectations centers upon the new Jerusalem, the city of God within which the risen Christ reigns triumphant. This image has stimulated intense reflection on the part of Christian theologians. For Augustine of Hippo, the conflict between the “city of God” and the

“city of the world” underlies the quest for responsible Christian political and social action. The reformer John Calvin (1509–64) saw the city of Geneva as the ideal Christian republic, embodying the core values of the kingdom of God on earth. The early Puritans, founding settlements in the Massachusetts Bay area, found inspiration in the biblical image of the city on the hill. Boston was to become the American Geneva, the city of God which would draw all comers to its powerful and purifying light.

So how did this association between heaven and Jerusalem develop?

The City of Jerusalem in the Old Testament

In turning to consider how a city came to be an image of heaven, we must appreciate that the ancient world saw the city as far more than an aggregate of streets and buildings. A city offered security; its gates and walls protected its population against their enemies, whether these took the form of marauding wild animals or invading armies. One of the great prayers of ancient Israel was that there should be no breaches in the walls of the city of Jerusalem (Psalm 144:14). The security of the city’s population depended on the integrity of its walls, towers, and gates.

Yet a city is more than a place of safety. In the ancient world, the “city” designated a community of citizens, united by common origins and sharing common concerns, rather than the physical buildings that they occupied. Greek cities were often destroyed in times of war, but were reconstructed or resettled elsewhere. The core identity of the city – what was transmitted from one generation to another – rested in its citizens, not its physical structures. Cities were understood

to be cohesive corporate entities, rather than aggregates of individuals, defined by a definite set of beliefs and values, which in turn determined those of its members.

Yet for Israel, there was a third aspect of the city which was of particular significance. A city was a *settlement*. Where once Israel had been a nomadic people, wandering in the wilderness of Sinai for 40 years, it finally came to settle down in cities. The period of wandering was over; a period of permanent inhabitation of a definite geographical region had begun.

In the Old Testament, one city towers above all others in significance. To the Israelites, Jerusalem was simply “*the city*.” The rise of the prominence of Jerusalem is directly linked to David’s decision to establish his throne within this ancient Jebusite city, and to make it the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant. These deeply symbolic actions led to Jerusalem being viewed as the chosen habitation of God, “for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord” (1 Kings 8:10–11). The pilgrim who made the long journey to the city could do so in the sure knowledge that God truly dwelt within Jerusalem’s sturdy walls (Psalms 9:11, 74:2, 135:21).

This highly idealistic view of Jerusalem was tainted by the prophetic insistence that sin and corruption within its walls would lead to the city losing its unique status. The siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians, culminating in its capture and the destruction of its temple in 586 BC, was a devastating catastrophe, both for the social and political history of the city and for the hopes and beliefs of its population. Had Jerusalem lost its special status in the sight of God? The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of the “glory of the Lord” departing from the Jerusalem Temple. Would it ever return? It was against this background of despair that the prophetic vision of the New Jerusalem began to take shape.

A new city of God would arise, in which the throne of God would be established, and within which the “glory of the Lord” would once more dwell. The glory of this renewed temple would exceed that of the former temple, destroyed by the Assyrians (Haggai 2:9).

Initially, this prophetic vision of a New Jerusalem was understood to apply to a future earthly city – a reconstructed city of bricks and mortar, which would rise from the ruins of the old city with the return of its people from their exile in Babylon. The Old Testament books of Nehemiah and Ezra document attempts to restore Jerusalem to its former glory, and fulfill the hopes of a renewed presence of the glory of the Lord. Yet with the passing of time, Jewish hopes began to crystallize around the idea of a heavenly Jerusalem – a future city, beyond this world, filled with the “glory of the Lord,” in which God is seated on a throne. The city is filled with eternal light, which draws people from afar to the safety and rest that it offers.

The future hopes of Israel, which had once centered on the earthly city of Jerusalem and its temple, now underwent a decisive shift in focus. The calamitous history of Jerusalem led many to look to a future heavenly city, which was somehow represented or foreshadowed in its earthly counterpart. This trend, which was already present in the centuries before Christ, received a massive stimulus as a result of the Jewish revolt of AD 66 against the occupying Roman forces in Palestine. The Roman emperor Titus, in ruthlessly putting down this revolt in AD 70, destroyed the temple at Jerusalem, leaving only small segments of the original edifice standing (such as the western “wailing wall,” still a site for Jewish prayers). With the destruction of the earthly focus of Jewish hopes, it was perhaps inevitable that a heavenly alternative would be found. The “New