

CHRISTIANS AND HEAVEN

by Anthony Buzzard

“Heaven in the Bible is nowhere the destination of the dying.” — Cambridge biblical scholar, J.A.T. Robinson

“No Bible text authorizes the statement that the soul is separated from the body at death.” — the celebrated *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 803)

Why do we Christians talk such nonsense about our Christian destiny? On every hand we hear talk of “going to heaven when you die,” “gaining kingdoms in the sky” and “passing away” or “passing on” at death. With all this familiar language we comfort ourselves with the belief that the dead have departed to be with God in His heavenly realm. We hope to survive death and join them there.

Shouldn’t we pause a moment and ask ourselves reflectively: Where does all this “heaven-going” language come from?

Certainly not from the Bible. What, for example, did the prophet Daniel, one of the heroic, faithful men of God, expect at death? The angel told him:

“Go your way to the end of your life; then you will *enter into rest* and rise again for your allotted portion at the end of the age” (Dan. 12:13).

Death for Daniel was to be a rest in the dust of the ground (see Dan. 12:2, where the same divine messenger described the condition of the dead as “sleeping in the earth”) followed by a rising, that is, resurrection “at the end of the age.”

There is no word here about Daniel’s soul going to heaven to be conscious in heavenly bliss. Instead Daniel was to repose in death and eventually, *at the end of the age*, to arise to new life. But for what purpose?

“You shall rise again for your allotted portion” (Dan. 12:13). So the angel described the hope of the faithful. What, then, was Daniel to expect?

The standard lexicon of the Hebrew Bible tells us that the “allotted portion” expected by Daniel was “a share in the Messianic consummation,”¹ the glories of which had been extolled by all the Hebrew prophets. The Messiah’s kingdom was indeed to be set up upon the earth, “under the whole heaven,” in the words of a vision granted earlier to Daniel (7:27). The promise was that “the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven [would be] given to the people of the saints of the Highest One” (Dan. 7:27). Those faithful would then rule supreme in the renewed earth.

Inheriting the Earth

From Jewish literature, both biblical and extra-biblical, we see how this passionate hope for a part in the Messianic Kingdom on earth burned within the hearts of God's people. The glory of the Messiah's coming rule, in which the saints were promised a share, sustained the persecuted believers when affliction was most intense.

Exactly the same destiny is promised the faithful of the New Testament times: "[Jesus] has made them [the faithful] kings and priests and they shall reign upon the earth" (Rev. 5:10).

For centuries churches have been busy dismantling the biblical hope and replacing it with the vaguest prospect of disembodied life in heaven, removed from man's home on earth. Nothing would have seemed more nonsensical to the writers of the Bible. Nothing is more destructive to God's grand design for our planet. The earth had been given to man as his everlasting dwelling. "Inheriting the earth" was the longing of every faithful Israelite and it was expressly confirmed by Jesus in his famous beatitude (Matt. 5:5): "Blessed are the humble for they are going to inherit the earth." He takes up the refrain of Psalm 37 (vv. 3, 11, 22, 27, 29, 34) when he promises the gentle that "they shall inherit the earth," that is, attain to the Messianic salvation which Daniel had treasured. What's more the Psalmist had promised not only that the faithful would "inherit the earth" but that they would "dwell in it *forever*" (Ps. 37:29).

But churches have thrown away these precious promises. As if to reinforce a long-standing tradition of uncomprehending treatment of the Scriptures by Gentiles, the Good News Bible loses the point of Jesus' cheering hope for the future. It renders Matthew 5:5 in such a way as to have the gentle "inherit what God has promised." Is this a sop to its audience who would supposedly make little of the promise of inheriting the earth, since all it knew was the cherished tradition about going to heaven? There is no reason to hide plain statements under a fog.

The Bible knows only of the Messianic salvation foreseen by the prophets, which Jesus came not to destroy (Matt. 5:17). To dwell in "the land of the promise" was the aim of the holy people of Israel since that oath-bound, covenanted promise had been given to Abraham. Jesus confirmed these grand promises (Rom. 15:7), spurring the disciples on to their glorious destiny — and assignment with Daniel in Messiah's Kingdom at the end of the age (Dan. 12:13).

How much better it would be if Christians abandoned the non-biblical language about going to heaven and replaced it with Jesus' words about inheriting the earth, coming from the east, the west, the north and the south and reclining with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of the coming age, taking their places at the great feast in Jerusalem (Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:28, 29, based on Isa. 25:6).

The Bible is a book which deals in reality, offering a realistic hope that Christians will rule the earth with Christ when he returns. The angels celebrate this sparkling prospect for redeemed humanity: "You [Jesus] purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests [cf. Ex. 19:5, 6] to serve our God and they will reign on the earth."

Throughout the New Testament Christians are described as heirs of a great future inheritance — the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is a matter of promise and expectation, an inheritance to be taken up in the future. James says: “Listen, my brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the Kingdom which He has promised to those who love Him?” (James 2:5).

“We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Messiah” (Rom. 8:17), “heirs according to the promise” (i.e., of the Kingdom, James 2:5, above) (Gal. 3:29). The Gentiles can be “heirs together with Israel...and sharers together in the promise [of the Kingdom, James 2:5] in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:6).

At the present time, and upon baptism into the Messiah, the Spirit of God is given us as pledge or down payment of our future inheritance. In the excellent language of the NIV, the spirit is “the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance” (Eph. 1:14). Obviously then, we have not yet entered the Kingdom of God. The spirit is the pledge of a *future* inheritance — of the Kingdom which is promised us (James 2:5) but not yet ours.

Two fundamental distortions in our thinking cast a shadow over our attempts to read the Bible intelligently. Firstly we seem to imagine that we have already inherited the Kingdom of God. This sort of thinking detracts from the glory of the future and disintegrates the great hope on which love and faith are built (Col. 1:5). Emphatically Paul states that “flesh and blood [humans in their present bodies] *cannot* inherit the Kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 15:50) and that the “reward of the inheritance” lies in the future (Col. 3:24). Secondly, we speak of achieving glory at the moment of our death, when the New Testament everywhere bids us wait until the Coming of Jesus. The traditional “heaven at death” teaching diminishes, if not reduces to nothing, the New Testament excitement about the return of Jesus to resurrect and reward the faithful — then and not before: “For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and *then* he will reward each person according to what he has done” (Matt. 16:27).

The Promise to Abraham

A flood of brilliant light will be shed on the New Testament when we stop uprooting it from its Hebrew environment in the Old Testament. The promise to Abraham was that he would be the progenitor of the Messiah and that he (and the Messiah) would take control of the land and possess it forever: “The whole land of Canaan where you are now an alien, I will give to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God” (Gen. 17:8).

For every pious Israelite the horizon was bright with this grand covenant promise. So it was that Isaac’s parting words contain the ultimate blessing for his son, Jacob: “May God give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham” (Gen. 26:4).

Two thousand years later, when the New Testament was written, Abraham had not personally come into possession of the promised land (literally, “the land of the promise [made to Abraham]”). Stephen, shortly before he was martyred, explained that “God gave Abraham no

inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land” (Acts 7:5).

The writer to the Hebrews knew well that Abraham had been “called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance” (Heb. 11:8), residing in the promised land only as an alien. What Abraham looked forward to was permanent possession of “the land of the promise.” The land in question was of course located on our planet and it was this land which “he would later receive as his inheritance” (Heb. 11:8). It is a “heavenly” land since it is divinely ordained by the God of Heaven and will be blessed with the presence of the Messiah himself as God’s supreme agent. But the inheritance guaranteed on oath to Abraham is definitely to be on earth. Had he not been invited to look to the north, south, east and west (Gen. 13:14)? God’s covenant assured him that “I will give all the land you see to you and your offspring forever” (Gen. 13:15).

God’s formal arrangement to give the land to Abraham is celebrated as the bedrock foundation of the divine plan for mankind. In times of distress the faithful comfort themselves with the assurance that:

“God remembers His covenant for ever, the word He commanded for a thousand generations, the covenant He made with Abraham, the oath He swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant: To you I will give the land of Canaan as the portion you will inherit” (Ps. 105:8-11).

At the birth of Jesus, Mary sings of the magnificent blessing of God who has “remembered to be merciful to Abraham and to his descendants forever, even as He said to our fathers” (Luke 1:54-55). Zechariah takes up the song of praise to God who has “shown mercy to our fathers and remembered His holy covenant, the oath He swore to our father Abraham” (Luke 1:72-73). The promise was for worldwide dominion through Jesus Christ, a theme beloved by the Apostles when they eagerly inquire of Jesus, after a six-week intensive training in the “affairs of the Kingdom” (Acts 1:3), “Lord, has the time now come for you to restore the Kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). This episode, which caused such joy to Luke, has embarrassed commentators whose interests are far removed from those of Messiah’s chosen disciples.

The promise to Abraham that he would be “heir of the world” (Rom. 4:13) awaits fulfillment at the Return of Christ. Meanwhile God has graciously allowed the Gentiles who believe the Gospel about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 8:12), and who undergo baptism, to become fellow-heirs with Abraham and Christ. “If you are Christians,” says Paul triumphantly, “you are Abraham’s descendants and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29). And what is the promise?

The promise guarantees that the “blessing given to Abraham” will come upon the Gentiles in Christ (Gal. 3:14). We have already seen what that blessing was in Genesis 28:4: to gain permanent possession of the land in which Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were aliens.

Through the death of Messiah we are redeemed by his covenant blood. Our sins are forgiven. Through faith in God’s covenant to Abraham and David, ratified by the death of Christ and brought to fulfillment by him, we must now strive to gain possession of the promise made to

Abraham. Our hope is to rule the world with Christ when he intervenes to assume his Messianic role as first and only successful world ruler. Until that time we must “live lives worthy of God who is calling [us] into His Kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:12).

“When the world is reborn,” Jesus promises, “when the Son of Man comes to sit on his throne of glory, you too will sit on twelve thrones to administer the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28). “If we suffer with him we shall rule as kings with him,” Jesus says through Paul to his Church (2 Tim. 2:12). The Apostle repeats the message to the Corinthians: “Don’t you know that the saints are going to manage the world?” (1 Cor. 6:2). Jesus reaffirms the Christian goal: “To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations; he will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery, just as I have received authority from my Father” (Rev. 2:26, 27). Then Jesus adds: “He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:29).

Heaven at Death?

Despite this and much more biblical teaching, the traditional dogma of “heaven when you die” clings to a few verses. Did not Jesus promise “treasure in heaven” (Matt. 6:20) and a “reward [which is] great in heaven”? (Matt. 5:12.) Is not our hope “stored up in heaven”? (Col. 1:5). Yet Jesus encourages the meek with the prospect of inheriting the earth (Matt. 5:5). How is the apparent contradiction to be resolved?

The clue is given us by Peter. He speaks of an imperishable inheritance “kept in heaven for you...ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:4-5). All the good things of the future, say the rabbis and the New Testament, are laid up for us with God. This does not however mean that we go to heaven to acquire them any more than one who retires goes to live in the bank where his hard-earned savings have been invested. When Jesus returns he will grant entrance into the Kingdom of God on earth and possession of the world to all the faithful. That reward is at present in heaven and will be brought to the earth with Christ at his Second Coming. Thus the Psalmist sings:

“[God has] installed [His] King on Zion [His] holy hill. [God] said to me [the Messiah], ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter’” (Ps. 2:6-9).

Popular ideas about the Christian destiny are in collision with the Bible. Scripturally speaking, Christians do not go to heaven. Heaven is where their inheritance is now deposited. Jesus comes back to us to bestow “the reward of the inheritance” (Col. 3:24) which is possession of the earth renewed and purified under the direction of Messianic government. “Heaven must retain the Messiah,” says Peter, “until the time comes for the restoration of all things about which the prophets spoke from long ago” (Acts 3:21). It hardly needs to be said that no prophet envisioned future bliss in a place other than a regenerated earth, blessed by the just rule of Messiah and his assistants:

“The government will be upon [the Messiah’s] shoulders...Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his Kingdom, establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever” (Isa. 9:6-7). “See, a king will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice” (Isa. 32:1). “In love a throne will be established; in faithfulness a man will sit on it — one from the house of David — one who in judging seeks justice and speeds the cause of righteousness” (Isa. 16:5). “Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High” (Dan. 7:27). “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time, I will make a righteous Branch [the Messiah] sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right *in the land*. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. At that time they will call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the Lord. No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts. In those days the house of Judah will join the house of Israel, and together they will come from a northern land to the land I gave your forefathers as an inheritance” (Jer. 33:14-16; 3:17-18).

In the light of these thrilling promises of peace and international justice on earth, Christians should raise a protest against the “heaven” presented by leading evangelists. For Billy Graham heaven is a place far removed from this planet, in which, however, conditions will be like the most beautiful things we know on earth. Our function in heaven, according to this popular teaching, will be “to prepare heavenly dishes,” “play with children, “tend gardens” or “polish rainbows.”² But why doesn’t he take his information from the Bible? This “evangelical” heaven is a far cry from the restored earth foreseen by the prophets and anticipated by Jesus. Jesus never spoke about rewards to be enjoyed in a heaven removed from the earth — much less about disembodied souls. He promised that “in the New World, when the Son of Man sits on his throne of glory, you too will sit on thrones to govern the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28) and he graciously extended this administrative function to all the faithful (Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 5:10; 20:1-6).

It was Plato who promoted so successfully the idea of the soul as a conscious entity escaping the body at death for a trip to heaven. But philosophy is the great enemy of Christian teaching (Col. 2:8). Just as the Israelites of old were unable to resist the lure of pagan religion, so the Church after the death of the Apostles fell into the clutches of Greek philosophy from which it desperately needs to be rescued. A step in the right direction will be taken when a moratorium is called on all preaching about “going to heaven,” “departing souls” and “going to be with Jesus” prior to his Return.

The shift from Hebrew to Hellenistic ways of thinking spelled disaster for the Apostolic faith. A progressive paganization ate away at the fabric of Truth. There was a time when Christian spokesmen sounded the alarm at the influx of pagan philosophy masquerading as Christian doctrine. So Justin Martyr in 150 AD warned: “If you meet some who say that their souls go to heaven when they die, do not believe that they are Christians.”³

Today original heresy has become entrenched orthodoxy. The truth of the Bible sounds alarmingly alien to Hellenized believers who read the Scriptures with one foot in the biblical text

and the other planted in the world of Platonism. The return to the Bible (i.e., the study of the Bible to “examine all things carefully”, rather than just owning a Bible) will be under way when the words of noted scholars are taken to heart, not as dry academic observations, but as prophetic calls for a radical return to the Christian documents:

“The difference is obvious between the mental patterns of the New Testament and most of our accustomed Christian thinking... The explanation of this contrast lies in the fact that historic Christian thought... has been Greek rather than Hebrew. Claiming to be founded on the Scripture, it has, as a matter of fact, completely surrendered many scriptural frameworks of thinking and has accepted the Greek counterparts instead.”⁴

“The hope of the early Church centered on the resurrection of the Last Day... This understanding of the resurrection implicitly understands death as also affecting the whole man... Thus the original Biblical concepts have been replaced by ideas from gnostic hellenistic dualism... The difference between this and the hope of the New Testament is very great.”⁵

Conclusion

The words of Jesus promising the meek that they will “inherit the earth” provide a salutary reminder of how far we have removed our hearts from him. We may share Jesus’ Messianic outlook by understanding that the rule of Messiah and all his saints has not yet begun. David is dead (Acts 2:29, 34), as are all the saints. They await resurrection into the Life of the Coming Age (Luke 14:14; 20:35; 1 Cor. 15:23; Dan. 12:2) which will be the manifested worldwide reign of Jesus and the faithful on the earth renewed and purified. May that biblical “heaven” on earth be proclaimed everywhere as the heart of the New Covenant (Luke 22:28-30⁶) and the goal of God’s oath-bound promise to Abraham in Christ.

Appendix: What the Experts Say

Some remarkably challenging statements about death in view of what is commonly taught:

The celebrated *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*: “No biblical text authorizes the statement that the soul is separated from the body at the moment of death” (Vol. 1, p. 803).

Isn’t the separation of soul from the body at death taught by nearly every church?

Well-known British theologian and Bible scholar J.A.T. Robinson, says: “It is an almost universally cherished belief that the immortality of the soul is a tenet of the Christian faith, despite the fact that it rests on assumptions which are fundamentally at variance with the Biblical doctrine of man” (*In the End God*, Collins, Fontana Books, p. 91). “Heaven, in fact, is nowhere used in the Bible as the destination of the dying” (*Ibid.*, pp. 104-5).

But isn’t “heaven” the term used by millions of churchgoers as the place they hope to go to at death?

The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*: “We are influenced always more or less by the Greek Platonic idea that the soul is immortal. Such an idea is utterly contrary to the Israelite consciousness and is nowhere found in the Old Testament. The whole man dies, when in death the spirit goes out of the man. Not only his body but also his soul returns to a state of death [*this is true of the faithful dead as well as the wicked--they all fall asleep in death*]. Therefore the Old Testament can speak of the death of one’s soul. Death is a place of darkness, cut off from the land of the living...Death is also a place where God is no longer praised or thanked (Ps. 6:5; 115:17). Death is where the dead are unconscious, do no more work, take no account of anything, possess no knowledge or wisdom...The dead are asleep (Job 26:5; Prov. 2:18; 9:18; 21:6; Ps. 88:11; Isa. 14:9)” (Eerdmans, Vol. II, p. 812).

The *Word Biblical Commentary* on Daniel: “The Old Testament’s standard way of envisaging dying and coming back to life is by speaking of lying down and sleeping, then of waking and getting up. The former [dying] is an extreme form of the latter [lying down to sleep] which thus provides the metaphor for it (2 Kings 4:31; 13:21; Isa. 26:19; Jer 51:39, 57; Job 14:12). Further, dying means lying down with one’s ancestors in the family tomb, with its non-material equivalent Sheol; so coming back to life would mean leaving such a 'land of earth' (cp. Ps. 49; 73). The image presupposes a restoring to life of the whole person with its spiritual and material aspects” (John Goldingay, Word Books, 1987, p. 307).

This way of understanding death is also a prophecy (Dan. 12:2) of what happens when we die in the NT period and onwards until today. There has been no change in the meaning of death. In Jesus only is there a promise of resurrection from the state of death. This will happen when he comes back to establish the Kingdom of God on earth (1 Cor. 15:23 —“those who are Christians will be resurrected at his coming”).

Popular ideas promoted in church have disregarded this biblical understanding of death and resurrection.

1 *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Brown, Driver and Briggs, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, p. 174.

2 “What Heaven Is Really Like,” *Hope for the Troubled Heart*, Word Pub. Co., 1991.

3 *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 80.

4 H.E. Fosdick, *A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, Harper Bros., 1938, p. 93.

5 Dr. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Fortress Press, 1966, pp. 143, 414.

6 Note the word “covenant” and the fact that God here is said to have made *a covenant with Jesus* to give him the Kingdom of God. Thus the Jesuanic covenant fulfills the promises and covenants made with Abraham, Israel and David.