

Heaven – An Orthodox Perspective

Most, if not all Christians, at one time or another contemplate the concept of Heaven. We hear the Protestant pastor refer to the departed saying, “*and now they reside in heaven with the Lord.*” Interestingly at an Orthodox funeral the priest is not allowed to say this and can only say that “we pray that our Lord receives [the departed] into His kingdom.”

So, this raises the question, “*What do we believe about heaven?*” Does Scripture provide a description, and can we go there? Some claim that heaven is a state of being, communion with God or an actual physical place.

Often the term heaven is used interchangeably with the term Kingdom of *Heaven, Kingdom of God or Paradise.*

A place to start is to repeat the same concept we discussed when discussing Hell. That there is no place where God is not.

“*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*”

Psalm 139:8

Following the same path we did when we examined Hell, we can see Heaven as one of several possibilities.

- a) [Heaven is a physical realm or place separate and apart from our present reality.](#)
- b) [Heaven, while not a physical place, is a “state of being” in the presence of God.](#)
- c) [Heaven is Paradise.](#)
- d) [Heaven is a Renewed Earth.](#)

However, before we examine each of these let’s look at the evolution of the concept of heaven.

Jewish Concept

The first chapter of the Book of Genesis speaks of heaven in the plural; שָׁמַיִם giving rise to the idea of multiple or a layered heaven. Genesis (1:7,8) speaks of heaven as water above water.

⁷ So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault מֵתַתְּחַת הַמַּיִם from the water above it מֵעַל הַמַּיִם.

⁸ And God called the vault sky. (שָׁמַיִם) Note that the root of the word for “sky” is water.

However, this is only two heavens, specifically the 2nd and 3rd Heaven. The Talmud¹ does speak of *Gan Eden* (Garden of Eden), referring to the original peaceful existence of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before the “Fall.” The use of the term Gan Eden or Paradise to describe “heaven” could be interpreted as the First Heaven.

¹ (literally, “study”) is the generic term for the documents that comment and expand upon agreed upon rules of interpretation of the Torah and was published around the year 200 CE

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Ancient Greek View

The ancient pagan Greek view, later adopted by the Romans, was that heaven was a physical place up in the sky. The Greek word for heaven (ουρανός) was used interchangeably with the sky both in ancient texts and in the New Testament. In both cases their thinking was that when you look up and see the objects of the sky (heavenly bodies), you are observing the dwelling place of the gods or God.

This is an echo of Scripture which we read in Psalm 8

“You have set your glory in the heavens... When I consider your heavens, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place.”

This carries over into Christianity as seen in the Book of Acts 1:11

“...τι εστηκατε εμβλεποντες εις τον ουρανον ουτος ο ιησους ο αναληφθεις αφ υμων εις τον ουρανον...”

‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven.

There was no distinction made between these two views in the earliest writings. In Greco-Roman mythology, except for rare instances of heroes who were immortalized in the stars, Heaven was reserved only for the gods. Mortals, after death spent eternity in Hades (*which is not to be confused with the Jewish Sheol*).

Dante’s Paradiso

Italian for “Paradise” or “Heaven”, Paradiso is the third and final part of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, following the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*. Dante’s descriptive journey through multiple heavens certainly exceeds the three heavens discussed already. Although Dante seems to indicate a physical realm, his description of the final two levels makes reference to heaven as a *state of being*.

In the Ninth Sphere (The Primum Mobile) Dante sees God as a point of light and is the abode of the angels and is the last sphere of the physical universe which is moved directly by God. The final ascent into the *Empyrean*² is a region beyond physical existence and is the abode of God.

“This heaven has no other where than this: the mind of God, in which are kindled both the love that turns it and the force it rains. As in a circle, light and love enclose it, as it surrounds the rest and that enclosing, only He who encloses understands.”

OK, so let’s talk about heaven.

Heaven, in both the Old and New Testaments is referred to as *The Dwelling Place of God* which supports the view of heaven as a **physical realm** or place separate and apart from our present reality.

This is brought clear when in Deuteronomy (10:14) Scripture reads:

“To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.”

In Psalms heaven is called the *dwelling place of God* and the Hebrew and Greek (Septuagint) words used support a physical place.

² An Ancient Greek *term* (ἐμπυρος), meaning “in or on the fire”. Empyrean was thus used in Christian writings indicated the dwelling-place of God and the celestial beings so divine they are made of pure light, and the source of light and creation.

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¹³ *From heaven the Lord looks down and sees all mankind; ¹⁴ from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth.*

Psalm 33:14

When addressing the Jews in his Epistle to the Hebrews St Paul again supports this idea of a multiple heavens when speaking of Christ as the high priest.

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into the heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.”

The phrase “*ascended into heaven*” (*διεληλυθότα τους ουρανούς*) is better translated “passed through to the heavens” which implies passing through multiple regions of heaven.

Finally, St Paul in his Epistle to the Corinthians again makes reference to physical, multiple heavens.

*“I know a man in union with Christ who, fourteen years ago—whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know; God knows—was caught up to the **third heaven**.”*

2 Corinthians 12:2-4

However, in his *Dissertation on the Gospels*, George Campbell³ observes that the original Greek text does not use the word “up” but rather *αρπαγεντα...εως τριτου ουρανου*. The root word of *αρπαγεντα* is *αρπάζω* meaning to “be grasped by” which does not necessarily indicate a transport to a physical place but rather into **a state of being**, similar to what Dante referred to as the Empyrean.

Heaven as a House of Many Mansions

Supporting the idea of a physical place, there is also the reference to heaven as a **house of many mansions**. In John (14:2) Christ speaks of this when He says;

“In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.”

“The term for mansion is Greek is *μοναι* which is a term only twice and both times by Christ.

Charles Ellicott⁴ offers an alternative understanding with respect to an actual home or mansion when he comments that;

He [Christ] says moreover that in His Father’s house are many mansions, teaching them thereby that heaven is wide enough for all, and that the world He has created needs no enlargement at all to make it capable of containing those who love Him. And it seems likely that in speaking of the many mansions He wishes also to indicate the different grades of honor, implying that each one who desires to live a life of virtue will receive as it were his own peculiar place, and the glory that is suitable to his own individual acts.

³ Rev George Campbell 18th century minister and professor of the Scottish Enlightenment.

⁴ Charles John Ellicott was a Christian theologian, professor and Bishop of the Church of England in the See of Gloucester and Bristol.

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Heaven as Paradise

In the New Testament this term is used three times; once by Christ in Luke when He is answering the repentant thief on the cross, once by St Paul, when addressing the Corinthians and once in Revelation. In each case "paradise" is an allusion to the paradise of Gan Eden where the souls of the blessed enjoy happiness.

Paradise is also a reference to the bosom of Abraham. This is referenced in Luke (16) in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus where Lazarus "died and was carried by the angels into the Bosom of Abraham."

St Paul addressing the Corinthians

In the verse immediately following the earlier referenced verse about the third heaven, St Paul tells how he "...was caught up into **Paradise**, and heard unspeakable words..."

2 Corinthians 12:4

The term used in this verse (ἠρπάγη) where the root word again is ἀρπάζω which does not necessarily indicate a transport to a physical place and rather into a state of being.

Christ addressing the Penitent Thief (Luke 23:43)

⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. ⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in **paradise**."

The first point to make here is the question of when would the thief be with Christ in paradise? The second question is, *this paradise heaven?*

Since New Testament text did not use punctuation (see figure 1) the Early Church needed to interpret how Scriptural writing would be punctuated, meaning that this verse could be read one of two ways;

Truly I tell you today, you will be with me in paradise."

or

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

In answer to the question of "Paradise", Christ could be saying to the penitent thief on the cross that today shalt he would be in the state of the blessedness that is the presence of God.

Our Trisagion prayer that we recite in the funeral and memorial services reflects this idea of residing in Paradise.

"Give rest to the soul of Your departed servant a place of light, in a place of green pasture, in a place of refreshment, from where pain, sorrow, and sighing have fled away...Grant them the dwelling place of the righteous; grant rest to them in the bosom of Abraham."



Figure 1

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Heaven as a Renewed Earth

On the celebration of Earth Day, Pope Francis said:

“We are called to renew our sense of sacred respect for the Earth, for it is not just our home but also God’s home. This should make us all the more aware that we stand on holy ground!”

The Book of Isaiah (chapter 65) seems to contradict this idea of a renewed earth:

For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the first ones shall not be remembered, neither shall they come into mind.

This is supported by Revelations 21 which states:

¹Και ειδον ουρανον καινον και γην καινην ο γαρ πρωτος ουρανος και η πρωτη γη παρηλθεν

¹Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...

However in the Greek language of the New Testament there are two words that can be used to describe something as new; νεος and καινος.

The word νεος is used to describe something that is new in time. This is what is referred to in Mark 2:22 when Christ speaks of pouring new wine into old wineskins and this is the word used to describe “new”

²² και ουδεις βαλλει οινον νεον εις ασκους παλαιους. (Mark 2:22)

²² And no one pours new wine into old wineskins.

However the word used to describe the new heavens and the new earth in revelations is καινον. *Kainos* also means new but describes something that is renewed.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, the word *kainos* is used by St Paul to describe a person in Christ as a new (*kainos*) creation. This implies that the individual has not been annihilated and newly created, rather the old (*archaios*) has passed away, and he/she is renewed in perfection as was adam and Eve in Gan Eden.

¹⁷ ωστε ει τις εν Χριστω καινη κτισις τα αρχαια παρηλθεν ιδου γεγονεν καινα.

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come!

This is why we as Orthodox insist on treating the deceased body with respect as this body will be renewed. Therefore, the passages can be interpreted not as a heaven and earth that will be destroyed and then replaced by a brand-new heaven and earth but as the current heaven and earth passing from the old and becoming renewed to their full original glory.

Our own Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew supports this as the Green Patriarch when he says ⁵:

*“...a fundamental dogma of our [Orthodox] faith is that the world was created by God the Father. The human person is the prince of Creation endowed with the privilege of freedom. Being a partaker simultaneously of the material and spiritual world, **humanity was created in order to refer creation back to the Creator, in order that the world may be saved from decay and death.**”*

⁵ Page 24, *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*