

IS GOD IN HEAVEN?

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1. Introduction

At first glance, this question may seem as silly as the quip “Is the Pope Catholic?” For in the Biblical traditions what is older and more accepted than the idea that God is in heaven? In his prayer dedicating the temple, Solomon says over and over, “Hear in heaven your dwelling place (I Kings 8:30, 32, 34, 36, 39, 43, 45, 49), and many Jewish prayers are addressed to God in heaven. The central prayer of Christians, composed by Jesus, begins, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” Both the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed say that Jesus ascended into heaven, where he is now “seated at the right hand of the Father.”

What I will show, however, is that, far from being an obvious truth, the claim that God is in heaven is logically incoherent, and so necessarily false. I will begin by presenting four features of the traditional concept of heaven, two from the Hebrew Bible, and two from the New Testament and early Christianity. All of these features were developed at a time when God was thought of as a physical being. But, I will then argue, once Christians thought of God as nonphysical, the traditional concept of heaven was no longer acceptable. My argument is that:

1. Heaven is a place.
2. Only what is physical is located in a place.
3. God is not physical.
4. So God is not located in a place.
5. So God is not located in heaven.

At the end, I will reflect on what remains of the traditional notions of heaven and God once we remove the incoherent idea that God is in heaven.

2. The Traditional Concept of Heaven

A. A Place above the Earth

The oldest and most basic feature of the concept of heaven is that it is above the earth. The occurrences of “heaven” and “heavens” in the Bible are almost all translations of the Hebrew *samayim* (always plural) or the Greek *ouranos/ouranoi*. The basic idea behind both words is something which is above us. The sun, moon, and stars are there (Genesis 15:5; Deuteronomy 4:19). From heaven come rain and snow (Isaiah 55:10), thunder and lightning (1 Samuel 2:10; 2 Samuel 22:15; Psalms 18:13-14). The Israelites are fed in the desert by manna falling from heaven (Exodus 16:4).

Because the Biblical writers see heaven as above and earth as below, they can refer to the totality of existence by speaking of “heaven and earth.” While some of them talk simply about “heaven,” others distinguish levels. In some accounts there are three heavens, in others seven, and in others ten. Early Christians seem to have favored seven,¹ an idea that is still with us in such expressions as “She’s in seventh heaven,” meaning “She’s very happy.” Paul writes about someone who “was caught up to the third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).

According to Genesis, heaven was created by God on the second day (1:6-8). Psalm 33:6 says, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made.” Like the earth and like anything created, heaven can also be destroyed. Isaiah 51:6 says that “the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment.” Hebrews 1:10-12 says, “Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing.” Jesus said that “heaven and earth will pass away” (Matthew 24:35). Revelation 21:1-7 speaks of heaven and earth passing away, making way for “a new heaven and a new earth”; and 2 Peter 3:13 looks forward to a new heaven and earth.

B. Where God Lives

The second feature of the traditional concept of heaven is that it is the place where God lives. Isaiah (63:15) asks God to “Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious

¹ Ulrich Simon, *Heaven in the Christian Tradition* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), pp. 41-43.

habitation.” Heaven is often thought of as a city ruled by God, who sits on a throne, with the angels as his courtiers (Psalm 103:19-21, Job 1:6). Height is correlated with power in the Bible, and so God, the ruler of all, is “El Elyon,” the Most High, living in the highest place. “For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place” (Isaiah 57:15).

Being above the earth, heaven is an ideal vantage point for viewing human affairs. “The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind. From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth” (Psalm 33:14). Heaven is also a place from which God does things to people on earth. He sends down fire to show his acceptance of some sacrifices (I Chronicles 21:26; II Chronicles 7:1). To help Israel in a battle with the Amorites, “the Lord threw down huge stones from heaven on them” (Joshua 10:11).

In the New Testament, the belief that heaven is where God lives is so well established that “heaven” is used metonymically for “God” dozens of times, in the same way that in newspapers today, “The White House announced . . .” means “the President announced . . .” In Jesus’ story of the prodigal son, for example, the young man confesses to his father, “I have sinned against heaven and before you” (Luke 15:18, 21). Sin is an offense against God, of course, not against a place, but the meaning is clear because God is thought to be in that place. Similarly, “heaven” is a synonym for “God” when Jesus asks, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” (Matthew 21:25; Mark 11:30-31; Luke 20:4-5), and also when John the Baptist says, “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven” (John 3:27). Because of his tendency to avoid the use of God’s name, the author of Matthew uses “kingdom of heaven” thirty-two times and “kingdom of God” only four times. A comparison of all the occurrences of “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” in the Gospels shows their equivalence.²

While heaven is where God and the angels live, they sometimes visit earth. In Job 1:7 and 2:2, when God asks the angel, “Where have you come from?” he answers, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” After God

² Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1986), pp. 11-12; Wilbur M. Smith, *The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), pp. 130-138.

visits Adam and Abraham, he goes up to heaven again. The word for “go up” here, *anabaino*, is the same word as for going from the lower story of a house to an upper story. In 2 Kings 2:11-12 Elijah goes up to heaven in a whirlwind, and in the New Testament Jesus goes up to heaven after his resurrection. Heaven, then, is a place at some distance above the earth which can be reached from the earth. This accessibility is evident in a few hyperbolic expressions in the Bible. When scouts report on the strength of the enemy in Deuteronomy 1:28, for example, they say that “the cities are large and fortified up to heaven.” In Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, the great tree at the center of earth was so tall that “its top reached to heaven” (Daniel 4:11, 20).

After the Bible was written, the word “heaven” acquired other meanings than the place above the earth where God lives. Today, for example, it is sometimes used to mean states of mind such as happiness. It can also be used metaphorically and symbolically. But extended meanings of the term grew out of the original meaning, which in the Bible is a physical place above the earth where God lives.

C. Where Jesus Christ Came from and Is Now

So far I have been tracing ideas about heaven that are shared by the Jewish and Christian traditions. Now we turn to two ideas that originated in the Christian tradition. The first is that, as the eternal son of God, Christ lived in heaven, came down to live on earth, and then went back up to heaven. The second is that heaven is where some human beings will live forever with God. We can examine these one at a time.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said “I have come down from heaven” (6:38), and then, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven” (6:51). Forty days after his resurrection, he went back up to heaven. The Gospel of Luke ends, “While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven” (24:51); and the Acts of the Apostles begins, “As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” (1:9). The First Letter of Peter (3:22) says that Jesus Christ “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.” Paul writes in Hebrews 8:1 that Christ “is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.”

As Jesus Christ ascended from earth to heaven, at the end of the world, he will descend again to earth for the Last Judgment.

Jesus spoke in the third person of this return: the Son of Man, he said, would come “in his glory, and all the angels with him” (Matthew 25:31). Acts 1:11 describes two divine messengers reassuring Jesus’ followers that he would return:

While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul says that “The Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven” (4:16), and he compliments his friends on the good reports he has heard about how they await Christ’s return from heaven (1:10).

D. Where the Blessed Will Live Forever

The fourth feature in the traditional concept of heaven — that it is the location of the afterlife of some humans — follows from the second and the third, that is, from God’s being in heaven and Jesus Christ’s being there.

At the time of Jesus, Jewish belief in life after death was less than two centuries old, and was not universal. The Hebrew Bible has just a few scanty references to the resurrection of the dead, and they are found in apocalyptic visions. The only clear reference is Daniel 12:1-3:

There shall be a time of great anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Less clearly, Isaiah (26:19) foresees a time when Israelites who have been oppressed will be resurrected: “Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy.” In both of these visions, only some of the dead will arise, and nothing is said about where they will live after that.

To these sketchy accounts of life after death, Jesus and early Christians added details and changes. All of the dead, and not just some Israelites, would be resurrected. They would be judged, and then rewarded or punished. Those rewarded would live with God forever. When, shortly before Jesus’ crucifixion, his followers were anxious about his leaving them, he said:

Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward . . . In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also (John 14:1-4).

Similarly, Paul assures his followers in Corinth that death is the gateway to eternal life: "We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Corinthians 5 1-4).

As Christian thought developed over the centuries, these ideas about heaven as the place of the afterlife were refined and enriched. Writers and artists often used imagery from the Book of Revelation, representing heaven as a beautiful city in the sky, with God on his throne and the blessed assembled before him singing hymns of praise.

The most important idea to emerge in medieval theology about the afterlife was "the Beatific Vision" — that the primary happiness of heaven consists in a direct experience of God. The Biblical understanding of directly experiencing God had been visual, because in the Bible God is described as a physical being with face, mouth, and hands, who speaks, walks, sits, and so on. Because of his extraordinary power, God is no ordinary physical being — he is so radiant that anyone looking at him directly would die instantly — but he is physical. In Exodus (33:18-23), when Moses asks God, "Show me your glory," God agrees, but warns, "you cannot see my face; for no one can see my face and live." So Moses has to look at God with most of the light screened out. "I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by," God says, "then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen." In the New Testament, it is in heaven that humans will see God, and there, apparently, there is no need for such filtering of God's radiance. Jesus says simply, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8); and Paul, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). The First Epistle of John 3.2) says, "We shall see him as he is."

In Patristic and then medieval thought, the direct experience of God in heaven is increasingly understood intellectually rather than visually. Where phrases like "see God" are used, they are usually metaphorical for non-sensory, "spiritual" awareness of God. This change arises largely from the influence of Platonic

philosophy on early Christian thought, and it has profound implications for how heaven should be understood.

3. The Platonic-Christian Rejection of Divine Physicality, and Its Implications for the Concept of Heaven

Early Christian theological discussions were conducted mostly in Greek, using Greek philosophical categories. One tenet which Christian theology adopted from Greek philosophy, specifically, Platonism, was metaphysical dualism, the distinction between the sensible physical world associated with the body, and the intelligible, nonphysical world associated with the soul, mind, or spirit. While the physical world was the realm of limitation and imperfection, the nonphysical world included God, who was unlimited and perfect. Adopting this dualism involved a major shift from the Biblical worldview. Hebrew had words for “soul” and “spirit” such as *nefesh* and *ruah*, but they were the words for air or breath, and they meant the part of human beings that makes them be alive. These words did not identify the soul with the mind, as their Greek counterparts did, and did not refer to a non-physical substance.

Without a dualism distinguishing the intelligible, nonphysical realm from the sensible, physical realm, not only did Biblical writers not describe human beings as souls contained in bodies, the way Platonists did, but they had no difficulty describing God himself as having a face and hands, sitting on a throne, walking in the garden of Eden, and so on. The second- and third-century Greek thinkers who started Christian theology, however, accepted the Platonic distinction between the inferior physical world and the superior nonphysical world,³ and so thought of God as radically different from “corporeal,” that is, physical, creatures.

One difference often mentioned by early Christians was that God is invisible.⁴ A more sophisticated difference was that anything physical is limited or contained, but God is unlimited or uncontained. This idea is found in a few places in the Bible, such as in 1 Kings 8:27: “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you” (cf. 2 Chronicles 2:6). The most basic way a physical

³ Indeed, Paul had encountered it in Corinth, where his teaching about the resurrection of the dead got such a poor reception that he had to tell the Corinthians that it would not be in their *earthly* bodies that they would live again, but in new “spiritual bodies.”

⁴ See Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

thing is contained is by its location, its existing in a place. In ancient thought, as in medieval thought and modern thought before Einstein, space was a three-dimensional grid or container for the things in the world. Something has a *locus*, a place, by extending over a certain portion of space. We locate anything, establish its place, by observing its boundaries, where it stops occupying space, and we do this most often by relating that thing to other things around it. Its place is understood relative to their places. Establishing where something is, then, also establishes where it is not. Even in Einstein's physics, where space is not absolute, the place of anything is relative to other things, so that a thing is "contained" by the things around it. In either the older absolute conception of space or the modern relativistic conception, everything which has a place is limited. But God is not limited, so God does not have a place.

In the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr wrote that "God is uncontained either in one place or in the whole universe, since he existed before the universe came into being."⁵ Clement of Alexandria (145-212) insisted that God is not circumscribed in place, but "is beyond place."⁶ Around 180 Theophilus of Antioch said that "It belongs to God, the highest and almighty and the truly God, not only to be everywhere, but also to overlook all things and to hear all things, and yet, nevertheless, not to be contained in space."⁷

As indicated in this last quotation, these early theologians were not denying the traditional notion that God is everywhere, but were denying that God is located in all places. They were especially concerned to distinguish their belief in a nonphysical God from the Stoic pantheism of the day in which God was a finely dispersed ether diffused throughout the universe.⁸ God is omnipresent, they believed, not by filling all of space, but by having power over all things. In section 5, we will say more about this distinction.

The shift from the Bible's physical conception of God to the Platonic nonphysical conception was often problematic, especially since the Bible was authoritative in a way that Platonic metaphysics was not. But as more Christian thinkers adopted Platonic

⁵ Justin Martyr, *Dialogus*. 127.2.

⁶ Clement, *Stromateis*. 7.6, 30.1, 5.11, 71.5.

⁷ Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad. Autolycum*, 2.3 .

⁸ G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1959), p. 27.

dualism, the nonphysical conception of God came to be authoritative, as did other nonbiblical ideas such as the immortality of the human soul. We can see this development by comparing Augustine with two sixth-century thinkers, Pseudo-Dionysius and Boethius.

Augustine (352-430) is famous for his Platonism, but, as he explains in his *Confessions*, it was difficult to wean himself from thinking of God physically and spatially.

I did not, indeed, O God, think of you under the figure of a human body. From the moment I began to know anything of philosophy, I had rejected that idea. . . . But whatever I tried to see as not in space seemed to me to be nothing, absolutely nothing . . . Thus I was so gross of mind—not seeing even myself clearly—that whatever was not extended in space . . . I thought must be nothing whatsoever. . . . I conceived of you, Life of my life, as mighty everywhere and throughout infinite space, piercing through the whole mass of the world, and spread measureless and limitless every way beyond the world, so that the earth should have You and the sky should have You and all things should have you . . . This I held because I could think of nothing else. But it was false. For if it were so . . . the body of an elephant should contain more of You than the body of a sparrow simply because it is larger and takes up so much more room.⁹

As he came to read more “books of the Platonists,” Augustine saw the necessity of God’s being nonphysical and nonspatial. A physical being is divisible, Augustine said, and divisibility cannot be attributed to God.¹⁰ In works such as *De Libero Arbitrio* and *Contra Epistulam Manichaei*, too, Augustine identified God with truth or wisdom, realities which are clearly not physical and spatial. He criticized the Manicheans for attributing limitation and materiality to God, something absurd to those who understand “the nature of wisdom and truth as not extended or scattered in space.”¹¹ Eventually, Augustine overcame his difficulty in thinking of God nonspatially:

And I said “Is truth then nothing at all, since it is not extended either through finite space or infinite space?” And You did cry out to me from afar: “I am who am”¹²

⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 17, 1.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.1; cf. 7.5.

¹¹ Augustine, *Contra epistulam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti*, 15.20.

¹² Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.10.16.

By the early sixth century, the time of Pseudo-Dionysius and Boethius, the idea that God is nonphysical and nonspatial had become well-accepted. Pseudo-Dionysius wrote that

The cause of all is above all . . . It is not a material body, and hence has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity, or weight. It is not in any place and can be neither seen nor touched. It is neither perceived nor is it perceptible.¹³

Boethius agreed, and further contrasted God and creatures with his distinction between God's eternity, which is a "single Present," and human time, which has parts before and after other parts.¹⁴ He also showed how well-accepted the idea was that nonphysical things are not in a place, when he used "Incorporalia non esse in loco" as an example of a self-evident statement in his *On the Hebdomads*.¹⁵ He said that the statement "Nonphysical things are not in a place" is a "common conception of the mind," found in any person intelligent enough to have the concept of the nonphysical.

4. Reinterpreting Biblical Passages about God in Heaven

As they embraced Platonic ideas about God, many Christian theologians understood the tension between those ideas and the physical descriptions of God in the Bible. Their standard response was to say that those passages were not to be read literally. In his homily on the Epistle to the Hebrews (2:3), for example, John Chrysostom (345-407) said that the statement that Christ "sat down on the right hand of the Father," just means that the two are equal in dignity.

"He sat" (says he) "on the right hand of the Majesty on high." What is this "on high"? Does he enclose God in place? Away with such a thought! But just as, when he says, "on the right hand," he did not describe him as having figure, but showed his equal dignity with the Father; so in saying "on high," he did not enclose Him there, but expressed the being higher than all things. . . . For the "sitting together" implies nothing else than equal dignity.¹⁶

¹³ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, Chapter 4.

¹⁴ Boethius, *De Trinitate*, 4, 60-78.

¹⁵ Boethius, *On the Hebdomads* (PL 64, 1311).

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, Homily II on Hebrews. In *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 14, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), p. 373.

Pseudo-Dionysius, as we saw, said that God was not perceptible. Nonetheless, he saw a place for traditional biblical descriptions of God. He said that the use of physical terms for God could help us reach toward an understanding of God. Symbols of perceptible things can move us toward accurate concepts of higher things. God uses such symbols in the Bible, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, “so that he might lift us in spirit up through the perceptible to the conceptual.”¹⁷ We must constantly remind ourselves, of course, that the application of physical words to God is not literal but symbolic.

Three centuries earlier, near the beginning of Christian theology, Origen (185-255) had issued similar cautions about reading physical descriptions of God in the Bible, and had referred specifically to descriptions of God in heaven. In his work *Prayer*, Origen interpreted the opening of the Lord’s prayer in this way:

Now when He is said to be the Father of the saints in heaven, we must not suppose that He is circumscribed by any corporeal shape and dwells in heaven. The reason is that God would be found contained as something less than heaven, since heaven would contain Him; and it is necessary to hold the conviction that everything is contained and held together by Him, through the ineffable power of his divinity. And generally speaking, the literal expressions of Scripture, which are supposed by the simple to say that God is in a place, must be understood in a sense suitable to lofty and spiritual ideas about God.

I think it was necessary to add this distinction to the consideration of “Our Father in heaven” in order to refute the lowly notion about God held by those who suppose that He is in heaven in a spatial fashion and to say that no one should allow that God is in a corporeal place, since it would follow that He is Himself corporeal.¹⁸

Taking Biblical passages about God in heaven literally, Origen continues, would be as foolish as reading Genesis 3:8 literally, where it says that Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden and then hid themselves from him. “It does not even say that they *wanted* to hide themselves,” Origen comments, “but that they actually hid themselves.”¹⁹ Surely, no intelligent

¹⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, 1, 124A, 147.

¹⁸ Origen, *On Prayer*, 23. 1, 3.

¹⁹ Origen, *On Prayer*, 23. 3.

person could believe that the Creator of the universe was contained in a garden or that anyone could hide from him!

5. Presence by Location vs. Presence by Power

I said earlier that in rejecting God's being located anywhere, early Christian theologians still maintained the traditional idea that God is everywhere, found, for example, in Jeremiah 23:24: "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" To understand this point, we need to distinguish between two kinds of presence — by location and by power. We have seen how treating God's omnipresence as location in all places would be absurd, and we can add another reason. In occupying a place, a thing prevents anything else from occupying that place: two things cannot be located in exactly the same place at the same time. So if God occupied all places, there would be no place for anything else!

What does it mean, then, to say that God is present everywhere? The basic Christian answer is that God is present wherever his power exists, and that is everywhere. This understanding of God's omnipresence was hinted at in many passages of the Bible, and was developed by Christian thinkers such as Boethius:

"He is everywhere" does not mean that He is in every place, for He cannot be in any place at all—but that every place is present for Him to take (*ad eum capiendum*), although He Himself can be received by no place, and therefore He cannot anywhere be in a place, since He is everywhere but in no place.²⁰

When Boethius says that "every place is present for Him to take," he obviously does not mean that God takes up space, for he denies that in the next phrase. Rather he means that God can take any place, in the sense of "take it over," dominate it. God, that is, can be active anywhere.

One of the richest explanations of the omnipresence of God by power is that of Thomas Aquinas:

God exists in everything . . . as an agent is present to that in which its action is taking place. . . . Now since it is God's nature to exist, he it must be who properly causes existence in creatures, just as it is fire itself sets other things on fire. And God is causing this effect in things not just when they begin to exist, but all the time they are maintained in existence, just as

²⁰ Boethius, *De Trinitate*, 4, 54-59.

the sun is lighting up the atmosphere all the time the atmosphere remains lit. . . . Now existence is more intimately and profoundly interior to things than anything else . . . So God must exist and exist intimately in everything.²¹

Before leaving the traditional notion of God's omnipresence, we should note that it gives us another reason to deny that God lives in heaven. The idea of heaven as the abode of God is that God is in a place above the earth *rather than* in a place on the earth. But if God is everywhere, and is in everything in the most intimate way possible — as the cause of its very existence, then talk of God as existing more in the sky than on the earth is utterly puzzling. For God is active and so present wherever there are creatures.

Some have argued here that God is more present where God is more active, and God is more active in heaven than on earth, because God interacts with the angels in heaven. Peter Toon, for example, describes heaven as “the place of his hosts, the company of created beings we normally call angels.”

Heaven is the place where God is specially present, in that he works there more richly and revealingly, bestowing his presence by a more obvious and visible providence than on earth, by a more abundant grace, causing those present to be transparent to his glory and love.”²²

This argument could make sense of God's being more in a place above the earth, only if we could locate the angels in that place above the earth. But we cannot do that, since angels, like God, are not physical, and so do not exist in a place any more than God does. Whatever interactions God has with angels, they do not occur in a place.

Using *either* the idea of presence by location, then, or the idea of presence by power, I conclude, it does not make sense to say that God is in heaven!

VI. What Remains of the Concept of Heaven?

The traditional concept of heaven, as we have seen, had four main features: 1) a place above the earth 2) where God lives, 3) where Jesus Christ came from and is now, and 4) where the blessed will live forever. Of these features, the second is central, and the others get their significance from it. As a

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 8, 3.

²² Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), p. 52.

location above the earth (feature 1), heaven is important only because God is said to live there — there is nothing intrinsically holy about the sky. If the Bible had said that after creating the world, God decided to dwell at the bottom of the ocean, then Biblical writers might have written about *depth* with the same awe they write about *height* in the actual Bible, and heaven in the Bible would be just another part of the world. Similarly, it is because God is thought to be in heaven that Jesus Christ is said to have come from there and to have returned there (feature 2), and that the blessed are said to spend their afterlife there (feature 3). If the Bible had said that God dwelt at the bottom of the ocean, it would not say that Jesus Christ came from heaven and is there now, nor that some humans will spend eternity there.

Unless God is in heaven, then, heaven loses its significance in Christian theology. But if the argument presented so far is correct, then the claim that God is in heaven is not just false but incoherent — that is, *necessarily* false. And so Christianity needs to revise its theology of heaven.

In the twentieth century, several Christian thinkers did re-examine the place of heaven in theology, but, surprisingly, none of them pointed out the incoherence of the idea that heaven is a place where God lives. Most of the critiques focused instead on the first feature of the concept—a place above the earth — and argued that it is scientifically outdated. They accepted the incoherent idea of a place where a nonphysical God is located, that is, but disputed the spatial coordinates of that place. Early in the century, William R. Inge, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, put the critique this way:

The discovery that the earth, instead of being the center of a finite universe, like a dish with a dish-cover above it, is a planet revolving around the sun, which itself is only one of millions of stars, tore into shreds the Christian map of the universe. Until that time the ordinary man, whether educated or uneducated, had pictured the sum of things as a three-storeyed building, consisting of heaven, the abode of God, the angels, and beatified spirits; our earth; and the infernal regions, where the devil, his angels, and lost souls are imprisoned and tormented. . . The Copernican astronomy, and all the knowledge about the heavens which has been built upon this foundation, leave no room for a geographical heaven. Space seems to be infinite . . . and among all the stars, planets, satellites, and nebulae which are sparsely scattered over its vast empty distances we can hardly imagine that one has been

chosen as the abode of the Creator and the site of the heavenly Jerusalem.²³

Rudolf Bultmann later argued along the same lines that modern Christians must “demythologize” the New Testament to eliminate its outdated cosmology.²⁴ Bishop John A. T. Robinson repeated the argument in the 1960s in *Honest to God*.²⁵ When our spacecraft and astronauts have orbited the earth, and have looked in every direction, he said, they have not seen anything answering the Biblical descriptions of heaven, an argument also made, incidentally, by Nikita Khrushchev.

Now this critique of heaven is not false but it is highly misleading, because it presents the question of whether there is a place above the clouds where God lives, as an *empirical* issue, when it is fundamentally a *conceptual* one. If God is not physical, and only physical things are in a place, then God cannot be in a place — neither below the clouds nor above them. That conclusion emerged not from the new astronomy of Copernicus in the sixteenth century, but from the theology of the third to sixth centuries. Even if Ptolemaic astronomy were true, it would still be contradictory to talk of a nonphysical God being located anywhere. And even if astronauts did discover a golden city on a planet somewhere that closely matched the Book of Revelation or Dante’s *Paradiso*, it is still logically impossible for a nonphysical God to live there! The modern critique that God’s abode is not to be found in the sky presupposes that “God’s abode” names a possible place, which, we have seen, it does not.

But if the idea of God living in heaven is incoherent, why, fifteen hundred years after Boethius, is it still so popular, even among theologians? I suggest that there are two main reasons. First, for all their talk of God as spiritual, Christians, as human beings, think most easily about physical things. And when they think about physical things, they naturally think of them as in a place. Further, they think of persons as having habitual places,

²³ William R. Inge, *The Church and the Modern World* (London: 1927) pp. 156-157.

²⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation,” in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, tr. Schubert M. Ogden (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994).

²⁵ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), ch. 1.

homes. If asked whether God is a man who lives in the sky, most Christians would say no; but that is the way they usually think, and often talk, about God. If we recall how hard it was for Augustine to think of God as nonphysical and nonspatial, we can understand how lesser minds find that difficult.

The second reason for the endurance of this incoherent idea is that most Christians imagine themselves as “going to heaven” when they die. And so they imagine heaven as a place, where they will see, hear, touch, taste and smell things just as they do on earth. Few Christians even remind themselves that immediately after their death — and perhaps for millennia after that, they will not have bodies — they imagine “going to heaven” with all their parts intact, and even wearing clothing. Nor do they ask themselves what the point would be of having a body with sense organs when the afterlife consists of a direct awareness of a nonphysical God who cannot be seen, heard, touched, tasted, or smelled.²⁶

Now while both of these reasons for holding an incoherent concept of heaven are understandable, neither is praiseworthy. One way in which Christianity and the other monotheistic religions are supposed to be superior to, say, ancient Greek and Roman religions, is in transcending anthropomorphism. While using sensory imagery in thinking about God is a time-honored way of striving toward a more adequate representation of the divine, as Pseudo-Dionysius suggested, it is quite another thing to use only such imagery all one’s life, and to not even acknowledge the problems inherent in doing so.

If, like Augustine, we want to think more carefully and accurately about God and heaven, we might begin by reflecting on the following four points.

First, there is no necessary connection between God and heaven. As Justin Martyr pointed out, God existed before there ever was such a place. Even the Bible, the source of the idea that heaven is the abode of God, says that heaven did not exist until the second day of creation. And, as we saw, Isaiah, Jesus, and the authors of Revelation and two epistles said that heaven will be destroyed, though God, obviously, will not be destroyed.

²⁶ I explore this problem in John Morreall, “Perfect Happiness and the Resurrection of the Body,” *Religious Studies* 16/1 (1980), 29-35.

Secondly, for those habituated to thinking of the saints as spending eternity *above* the earth, we should remember that a few centuries ago the damned were believed to spend eternity *below* the earth. Virtually no one today believes the latter, so there is no need to believe the former.

Thirdly, even if we feel compelled to think of the afterlife as a physical state occurring in a place — and above I hinted at reasons for not thinking that way — there is nothing special about the sky as that place. In Judaism, for example, there is a long tradition of believing that the life to come will be on a restored planet Earth, a belief shared by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Fourthly, and most importantly, the central concept in Christianity is not heaven, but the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom of God is not something limited to life after death, nor to events above the earth. It is a reality found wherever God's plans for creatures are fulfilled. And that plan is every bit as much concerned with how we live on earth, today, as it is with any future life.