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0521609399 - Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to his Eschatology

Andrew T. Lincoln

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

Questions of immanence and transcendence continue to occupy theologians, the concept of apocalyptic with its transcendent eschatology has been to the fore in Biblical studies and there has been a resurgence of quests for experience of transcendence in contemporary culture. It is not surprising that in this intellectual climate the tension between this-worldliness and other-worldliness should have remained a crucial problem for the Christian life-style. Interest in such broad contemporary issues provided the original context and the initial impulse for a study which might at first sight appear to be a rather obscure angle of approach to Pauline theology.

Before embarking on a consideration of the function of heaven in Paul's thought it is worth briefly placing this consideration in some relation to aspects of the thinking of recent decades about the heavenly dimension or transcendence. If there is an average reaction to the concept of heaven, perhaps it is similar to the anguished but naïve doubts of the squadron chaplain in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.

Did it indeed seem probable . . . that the answers to the riddles of creation would be supplied by people too ignorant to understand the mechanics of rainfall? Had Almighty God, in all his infinite wisdom, really been afraid that men six thousand years ago would succeed in building a tower to heaven? Where the devil was heaven? Was it up? Down? There was no up or down in a finite but expanding universe in which even the vast, burning, dazzling, majestic sun was in a state of progressive decay that would eventually destroy the earth too.<sup>1</sup>

If there is an average belief about heaven among church-goers then it usually remains that which reduces heaven to the vague notion of some place or state to be entered at death. Such popular views are, of course, only part of a much more varied cultural and theological spectrum.

Religious interpreters have been following the swinging pendulum between immanent and transcendent emphases in our culture. While

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Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*,<sup>2</sup> which came to terms with secular people's wholly terrestrial horizon and the disappearance of any supra-mundane reality, was being assimilated, the irony was that these same secular people were undergoing a profound disillusionment with the closed secular system in which they had shut themselves and were beginning to break out in all directions. There had been some truth to the assertion of the religious sociologist, Peter Berger, that the Christian in the modern academic world had felt like a witch doctor in a circle of logical positivists. But then more and more a whole spectrum of visions became available from a counter-culture virulently opposed to the technocratic society. One stream was militant in its declarations about overthrowing the system and bringing in a new public paradise, while others pursued their more 'private heavens', grasping after transcendence in a legion of diverse directions which included astrology, Zen Buddhism, meditation, the occult, drug trips and becoming a 'Jesus freak'. But both revolutionary and mystical streams were at one in their dream of a paradise. The song 'Woodstock' had the repeated line - 'We've got to get back to the garden' and Theodore Roszak could write: 'This . . . is the primary object of our counter-culture: to proclaim a new heaven and a new earth so vast, so marvellous that the inordinate claims of technical expertise must of necessity withdraw in the presence of such splendour to a subordinate and marginal status in the lives of men.'<sup>3</sup> The mood was for a return to Paradise and in the words of Julian Beck's Living Theatre it had to be 'Paradise Now'. Cox was not left behind and responded to the festive breakaway mood with his *The Feast of Fools*,<sup>4</sup> in which he attempted to go beyond both radical theology and the theology of hope in a theology of juxtaposition which relied much on the concepts of laughter, festival and fantasy and which pictured Christ as the Harlequin. These very concepts, play, hope and humour, were seen by Peter Berger in his *A Rumour of Angels*,<sup>5</sup> a discussion of the rediscovery of the supernatural, as some contemporary signals of transcendence.

The new quests for paradise inevitably produced disillusionment. Some involved in the cultural upsurge continued the search for various forms of transcendence, but others accepted their own versions of compromise with the technocratic and bourgeois mentality, while the increasing mood became one of austerity, gloom and doom in the face of world-scale problems of the environment and natural resources. The feeling of a number of religious interpreters at this juncture was that what was needed to speak to this situation was a rediscovery of the Bible's apocalyptic themes which, while relating to the threat of global disaster, provide a transcendent perspective on history.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile the theological debate about transcendence continued. In

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the course of it the American New Testament scholar, N. Q. Hamilton, wrote *Jesus For A No-God World*.<sup>7</sup> He stated that it is the 'traditional heavenly - or otherworldly - association of God that is the greatest obstacle to the creation of an adequate theology for our time' and then attempted a reconstruction of the Biblical material which would lead away from apocalyptic and support his declared project of devising 'a form of Christianity without another world'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly British theologian, Alistair Kee, devised *The Way of Transcendence: Christian Faith Without Belief in God*<sup>9</sup> in which he claimed to have moved beyond the work of Ogden, Altizer and van Buren. Belief in God, Kee asserted, was a cultural impossibility but the 'way of transcendence', a life-style of freedom and suffering, was still a viable option. The 'infinite qualitative distinction' was thus seen as a 'way' rather than as a 'being'. Numerous attempts such as these to do theology without reference to any transcendent ontological reality called forth a protest by others, reflected in the Hartford Declaration which affirmed the transcendence and reality of God over against the secular assumptions behind much of the contemporary theological enterprise,<sup>10</sup> and fresh attempts to express the reality of divine transcendence.<sup>11</sup>

The discussion of this-worldliness and other-worldliness is of crucial importance for thinking about the church and its mission. W. H. Capps in *Time Invades the Cathedral: Tensions in the School of Hope*<sup>12</sup> illustrated this by outlining two 'religions of Christianity' which, he believed, stand in irreducible dialectical tension. On the one hand there exists a dominant other-worldly viewpoint in which individual salvation is fostered through hierarchical institutions and the vertical projection of this type of Christianity can be represented by cathedral imagery. On the other hand there is a this-worldly, corporate and horizontal viewpoint and the projection of this variety of Christianity is best symbolized by the ship. The 'cathedral' image pinpoints a view of the church in the classical nature-grace framework where a sense of other-worldliness, of being on the periphery of earthly life, is nourished, a view which could sometimes result in embarrassment at the humanists' charge of 'pie in the sky' escapism. More in line with modern thought has been the 'ship' model where the church is seen as a movement in history which in its demonstration of community shows itself to be the servant of God's concern for all humanity, not as a separate sphere related to the heavenly realm but simply as that part of the world that is discovering the servant life within the structures of society.

At the individual level there had been quite a transition from the tradition of piety, associated particularly with the Puritan heritage, which was distinguished by its assurance of heaven and awareness of heavenly things. Some Christians found new freedom, wholeness and motivation for

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cultural and political activities in the realization that Christ is the Lord of all of life, while others were still uneasy about how wholehearted affirmation of this life was to be reconciled with the Pauline passages which emphasize the believer's other-worldly orientation, a commonwealth in heaven, or issue commands to seek the things that are above. The latter were suspicious that not a little in the shift in the style of Christian commitment had been dictated by intellectual pressures and fashions.<sup>13</sup>

The issue of a transcendent dimension still plays a major role in the cultural and religious scene, is integral to contemporary theological debate and is crucial for determining the life-style of both the church and the individual Christian. And whether the talk is of paradise or apocalyptic, transcendence or other-worldliness, the concept of heaven is supremely relevant. Yet to move from these issues to the Biblical material about heaven and in particular to a detailed study of how the heavenly dimension functions in Paul's writings involves a gigantic leap. Those for whom the Bible functions in some way as canon do however look to its various strands of thought to inform their perspective on such issues. But particularly with the concept of heaven they immediately discover that the vehicle of revelation concerning the transcendental dimension is limited groping human language, full of symbols which point beyond themselves, language which uses categories of space and time in an attempt to witness to realities which it claims transcend space and time. There is also the obvious difficulty that the writers speak of concepts such as heaven in terms very much bound up with their own cosmological framework clearly different from that of the twentieth-century interpreter. The hermeneutical problem is stated in its classic form by Bultmann in his essay 'The New Testament and Mythology'.

We no longer believe in the three-storied universe which the creeds take for granted . . . No one who is old enough to think for himself supposes that God lives in a local heaven. There is no longer any heaven in the traditional sense of the word . . . And if this is so, the story of Christ's . . . ascension into heaven is done with. We can no longer look for the return of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven or hope that the faithful will meet him in the air (1 Thess. 4: 15ff).<sup>14</sup>

Volumes could be and have been written on this. Here is not the place to indulge in lengthy exposition or justification of a personal stance. As will become evident in the last chapter Paul's presentation of God's action in history for human salvation can be seen in terms of a cosmic drama. His depiction of this cosmic drama provides the concepts in which the modern interpreter needs to be 'remythologised'. It is not a question of whether

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modern people will interpret their lives by symbols or myths but rather the question is which symbols or myths they will accept or choose. Will it be those rooted in the Biblical perspective or those originating in some other world-view? If the vision involved in Pauline eschatology is not dismissed simply because it employs symbolic language to speak of transcendent realities, it may well be found to offer pointers to present-day concerns. Since much of the message of salvation in Paul's writings is presented through the vehicle of the language of a cosmic drama and cannot be separated from it in the way one would separate a kernel from its husk, the modern reader needs to become so much at home with this symbolic language and its function that the message of salvation which the symbols convey can have its intended effect.<sup>15</sup> This involves a continuing dialogue where the reader questions the text about the function of its language and symbols and then expects a response as the text is allowed to interact with his or her own imagination and intellectual constructs. In this way the gulf between ancient symbols and modern times can be bridged by what Gadamer has called a fusion of horizons.<sup>16</sup> The initially strange world of meaning of the text when appropriated through the fusion of horizons can illuminate and expand the horizon of the modern reader. A. N. Wilder writes of the power of Biblical archetypes to mould the imagination 'in ways that relate to new language-situations and in ways that correct inherited distortions'.<sup>17</sup>

Only two further elementary observations about the language of eschatology will be made here. First of all, this language involves both vertical and horizontal referents, spatial and temporal categories. In other words eschatology involves heaven as well as the Last Day. All too often in treatments of eschatology the latter pole is given all the attention and the former is virtually ignored. Both sorts of language are to be given their full weight. All too frequently also, and sometimes subconsciously, twentieth-century presuppositions about space and time as a closed continuum have been brought to bear on the New Testament so that anything which transcends space and time is automatically considered unreal. Far greater flexibility is needed in interpreting writings which are themselves rooted in the belief that the God who created space and time is by no means limited by his creation. Such flexibility will enable the reader to avoid the simplistic approach of those who would reduce the possibility of definition to two options by asserting that these eschatological realities are *either* in time *or* timeless, they are *either* in space *or* spaceless.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, the key to this flexibility in interpreting eschatological language is to be found in allowing for both continuity and discontinuity. The model here must be the resurrection of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul's analogy of the transformation

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of the seed into the plant suggests that there can be both an element of identity and an element of difference in the relation of the present body to the resurrection body. Since for Paul what will happen to Christians is what has happened to Christ and the resurrected bodies of believers will be like that of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15: 20; Phil. 3: 20f), it is legitimate to infer a similar continuity and discontinuity in Paul's conception of what had happened to Christ's body in his resurrection. Paul's insistence in verse 38 of the analogy that 'God gives it a body as he has chosen' places the emphasis on discontinuity but in his argument 'the fundamental continuity is underlined by the fact that it is precisely the mortal, weak man who exists now who undergoes the transformation'.<sup>19</sup> Since, according to Paul in Romans 8, redemption will affect the cosmos in a similar way to the human body, it is also fruitful to apply this same interplay between continuity and discontinuity to the space-time continuum. Thus, contrary to Oscar Cullmann,<sup>20</sup> the age to come should not be viewed as simply continuous with time and in terms of endless time. Nor, contrary to Wilbur Smith in his book *The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven*,<sup>21</sup> should heaven be conceived simply as a place somewhere billions of miles away in this cosmos. On the other hand these eschatological concepts are not part of a Platonic ideal spiritual world and therefore completely a-temporal and a-spatial. It must be stressed again that the language of space and time is being employed for realities which transcend space and time and the paradox which arises from applying the language of continuity to the fact of discontinuity cannot be avoided.<sup>22</sup>

The only scholarly studies of recent date which focus specifically on the topic of heaven are H. Bietenhard, *Die himmlische Welt im Urchristentum und Spätjudentum*,<sup>23</sup> U. Simon, *Heaven in the Christian Tradition*<sup>24</sup> and C. Schoonhoven, *The Wrath of Heaven*.<sup>25</sup> The last work deals almost exclusively with the theme of evil and heaven. Bietenhard provides some valuable Jewish background and Simon some interesting, though often fanciful, insights but neither can be said to have given detailed NT studies but rather a broad overview of the theme arranged topically. The present study is limited to Paul and even then makes no claims to be exhaustive. It focuses on passages where the term *οὐρανός* or a functional equivalent plays a significant role in an extended discussion. This selectivity means that topics such as angels or principalities and powers which would have to be given fuller treatment in any comprehensive discussion of the heavenly dimension are mentioned only in passing. Few scholars would dispute that there is a tension between the present and the future in Paul's eschatology, but there is far less agreement about the precise nature of that tension. The relation of present and future elements in Paul has been

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investigated in studies of such concepts as resurrection, righteousness, the Spirit and inheritance, but no thorough study has been undertaken from the perspective of the spatial concept of heaven.<sup>26</sup> The focus of the exegetical and contextual studies which follow will therefore be on the relations between realized<sup>27</sup> and future, spatial and temporal elements in Paul's eschatology. This focus enables the work to contribute substantially to two further areas of debate in NT scholarship. The first is the matter of the relation of the New Testament, and here Paul in particular, to apocalyptic<sup>28</sup> and the second is the question of development in Paul's thought, particularly as this bears on judgment about the status of Colossians and Ephesians in the Pauline Corpus.

As the study progresses it will emerge that three main factors contribute to the general picture of the concept of heaven that it is possible to trace in Paul. The first is Paul's conceptual background and his knowledge of OT and other Jewish traditions about heaven. But then what had previously been just part of the conceptual world he had inherited became an integral element in the startlingly dramatic event of the apostle's meeting with the resurrected and exalted Christ and in his later visions and revelations of the heavenly Christ. The third main influential factor in Paul's thinking about heaven arises from his apostolic task of moulding the thought and practice of converts in the churches for which he felt responsible. He frequently had to deal with distorted views about salvation and the heavenly life which appeared in these churches and his task often involved clashes with opponents, interaction with what he considered to be unsatisfactory alternatives and rejection of false options. This study is therefore set firmly in the context of such apostolic work and sets out to determine how the concept of heaven functions in the particular settings of the various letters. Comparative history-of-religions investigation has been limited to material directly relevant to the passages being studied.

Chapter 1 treats the role of the reference to the heavenly Jerusalem in the polemic of Galatians, examining its implications for Paul's views about the history of salvation and the place of Jerusalem in the development of the early church. In chapter 2 Paul's description of Christ and believers as heavenly in 1 Corinthians 15 is considered as part of his discussion of the resurrection of the dead and related to the problems about heavenly existence and the body in the Corinthian church. Paul's assertions about the heavenly body and about being in Christ's presence after death in 2 Corinthians 4: 16ff and the mention of his rapture to the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12 are examined in chapter 3 as part of his defence of his apostleship against mounting opposition led by agitators who had come to Corinth. The reference to the heavenly commonwealth in Philipians

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3: 20f in the context of the polemic of that passage provides the focus for our fourth chapter, while chapter 5 - Colossians and heavenly-mindedness - discusses the prominence of the heavenly dimension in Colossians, concluding with a detailed evaluation of Colossians 3: 1-4. Chapter 6 deals with the passages concerning heaven in Ephesians and considers why this theme and realized eschatology in general are so pervasive in this letter.

The problem of the sequence of the Pauline letters is a complex one. I shall proceed in what I hold to be the most probable chronological order, considering it slightly more likely that Philippians comes from a Roman than from an Ephesian imprisonment. Colossians is held to be Pauline. Ephesians has been included both because it contains the most extensive treatment of the heavenly dimension in the Pauline Corpus and because, though there are more serious considerations against authenticity in other areas,<sup>29</sup> in regard to its treatment of heaven and eschatology, as the study will show, I find much greater continuity than discontinuity with the undisputed Pauline letters.

The broader questions in relation to Paul's thought are taken up again in the concluding chapter of the study. Heaven is related to the two age structure in Paul's eschatology and it is argued that Paul's spatial language about heaven in contexts of realized eschatology has closer ties with apocalyptic than has been recognized and that this has important implications for various theories about the development of eschatology within the Pauline Corpus. In addition, this chapter shows the role of the concept of heaven in Paul's view of salvation as cosmic in scope, in his perspective on the destiny of humanity and in the tension between this-worldliness and other-worldliness in his assertions about Christian existence.

From this sketch of the contents it should be clear that this study makes no grand claims to break totally new ground in the discipline of New Testament. It is hoped rather that its contribution will be seen to lie in its treatment of a neglected topic which has allowed a new approach, the possibility of looking at aspects of Pauline eschatology from a different angle. The study may also serve as a contribution to the initial stages of the hermeneutical process described earlier whereby an exploration of the Pauline vision of paradise now and not yet can lead to a recognition of the power of this language for moulding our own imagination and intellectual sensitivities.



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## 1

## GALATIANS AND THE HEAVENLY JERUSALEM

Paul's reference to ἡ ἄνω Ἱερουσαλήμ in Gal. 4: 26 turns his readers' attention to the heavenly dimension. Elsewhere in the NT the term ἄνω, most characteristic of the Fourth Gospel, is virtually synonymous with heaven and often its purely spatial and its more religious connotations cannot be separated. Here its attributive use is equivalent in meaning to ἐπουράνιος.

### 1. The polemical setting

In refuting the attacks of the proponents of 'another gospel' (1: 6f) who are intent on making capital out of the tensions which existed between the apostle to the Gentiles and the Jerusalem church, Paul in Galatians 1 and 2 sets out the origins of the gospel which he taught and reviews the history of his apostleship as it relates to the 'pillar apostles' of the Jerusalem church. In the central section of the letter in chapters 3 and 4 he takes up in a more systematic but nevertheless highly polemical fashion the main issues under debate. He gives his perspective on God's actions in the history of salvation and focuses on the question, 'Who are the true heirs of Abraham?' It is to this question that Paul returns in the pericope 4: 21 - 5: 1 which presents in a novel way the insistence throughout the letter that his is a gospel of grace and freedom. Paul believed this theme to be of vital importance in the Galatian situation where false teachers were attempting to draw away his converts. Who were these men?<sup>1</sup> Despite the various identifications that have been proposed<sup>2</sup> the evidence of the letter favours the traditional view of the Judaizers as Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who were concerned about what they considered to be Paul's liberalism with regard to the law.<sup>3</sup> In sketching the position of these opponents from Paul's passing comments it should be remembered that the characterization the apostle provides often operates in terms of pushing his opponents' arguments to their logical conclusion. He is passionately involved, and, as with many who argue presuppositionally, sometimes gives his opponents' position in its extreme form so that the sharpness of the

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antitheses – Christ or the law, freedom or slavery – which he believes to be involved will become apparent. The opponents obviously may not have been as consistent as he holds them to have been. Something of the force of this observation can be seen in the way Paul interprets Peter's drawing back from eating with Gentiles as *compelling* the Gentiles to live like Jews (2: 14).<sup>4</sup>

The Judaizers were clearly advocating that the Galatians accept circumcision (cf. 5: 2–12; 6: 12f, also 2: 3f) and follow the law (cf. 3: 2, 10ff; 4: 21; 5: 4). In so doing they claimed to represent the official position of the Jerusalem church. This hypothesis best fits the interplay in chapters 1 and 2. We may infer from Paul's anathema on even an angelic messenger if he were to bring 'another gospel' (1: 8, 9) that the agitators came claiming high qualifications. In 1: 22 – 2: 10 the apostle makes a point of denying that his gospel was dependent in any way on the Jerusalem apostles and claims that in fact the apostles themselves recognized his independent apostolic authority. It can only be supposed that this was intended to counter the attack of those who were alleging that because the Jerusalem apostles were the source of Paul's gospel he must follow their approach. In recounting the Antioch incident (2: 11–21) Paul obviously considered that it provided a close parallel to the issue and situation in the Galatian churches and in that incident the circumcision party feared by Peter are closely linked if not identified with *τινας ἀπὸ Ἰακώβου* (2: 12). It is likely that the Galatian agitators were just such strict law-abiding members of a group from the Jerusalem church associated with James.<sup>5</sup> As a pressure group within that church they took a more extreme line than James himself and yet were able to claim to be spokesmen for the mother-church and its apostles.<sup>6</sup> Paul's mention of the one who is troubling the church 'whoever he may be' (5: 10) could be a reference to his opponents' claim to represent those 'who are reputed to be pillars', especially James.<sup>7</sup>

The Judaizers insisted that if a Gentile wished to become a Christian he must also become a Jew and in this way Christianity would have had to remain a movement within Judaism. They seem to have attempted to put forward this position in its most attractive form by offering the Galatian converts a more complete version of the Christian message (cf. the use of *ἐπιτελεῖν* in 3: 3 where Paul asks his readers, 'Having started with the Spirit, are you now finishing up with the flesh?').

This view of the opposition provides the best explanation for the theological discussion of chapters 3 and 4 where Paul deals with the place of the law in the history of salvation in the context of addressing himself to the question about the true seed of Abraham. It could well be that *σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ* (3: 16) was a self-designation of the opponents<sup>8</sup> and that it was