

# A New Heaven and a New Earth

Reclaiming  
Biblical Eschatology

---

J. Richard Middleton

---

  
**BakerAcademic**  
*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*  
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

# Contents

List of Illustrations 9

Preface: How I Came to Write This Book 11

1. Introduction: The Problem of Otherworldly Hope 21

## **Part 1 From Creation to Eschaton**

2. Why Are We Here? Being Human as Sacred Calling 37

3. The Plot of the Biblical Story 57

## **Part 2 Holistic Salvation in the Old Testament**

4. The Exodus as Paradigm of Salvation 77

5. Earthly Flourishing in Law, Wisdom, and Prophecy 95

6. The Coming of God in Judgment and Salvation 109

## **Part 3 The New Testament's Vision of Cosmic Renewal**

7. Resurrection and the Restoration of Rule 131

8. The Redemption of All Things 155

## **Part 4 Problem Texts for Holistic Eschatology**

9. Cosmic Destruction at Christ's Return? 179

10. The Role of Heaven in Biblical Eschatology 211

**Part 5 The Ethics of the Kingdom**

11. The Good News at Nazareth 241
12. The Challenge of the Kingdom 263

Appendix: Whatever Happened to the New  
Earth? 283

Subject Index 313

Scripture Index 321

# Preface

## How I Came to Write This Book

I moved from Jamaica to Canada at the age of twenty-two, after completing an undergraduate degree in theology at the Jamaica Theological Seminary. During graduate studies in Canada (while pursuing an MA in philosophy at the University of Guelph) I coauthored a book with my friend Brian Walsh on developing a Christian worldview, titled *The Transforming Vision*.<sup>1</sup> This book was one of the first works in the relatively recent genre of Christian worldview studies that proposed a holistic vision of salvation, with an emphasis on the need to live out full-orbed Christian discipleship in the contemporary world. The book not only advocated a holistic worldview, without a sacred/secular split, but also explicitly grounded this worldview in the biblical teaching of the redemption of creation, including both the physical cosmos and human culture and society.

When Brian Walsh and I wrote *The Transforming Vision*, this holistic emphasis was not an entirely new insight for either of us. We had been students together some years before at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, an interdisciplinary graduate school that grounded its integrative vision of faith and learning in the biblical teaching of the redemption of the cosmos.<sup>2</sup> But even before my time in Toronto I had already become convinced that

1. Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984).

2. For a historical introduction to the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS), see Robert E. VanderVennen, *A University for the People: A History of the Institute for Christian Studies* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2008). On the legacy of Abraham Kuyper, which grounds the vision of the ICS, see Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's*

the Bible taught the new heaven and new earth depicted in Revelation 21–22 as the final destiny of redeemed human beings, rather than an otherworldly life in heaven hereafter. I had become convinced of this holistic approach to eschatology (the doctrine of the end times) as part of a general shift in my worldview during my theological studies in Jamaica.<sup>3</sup>

## Tracking a Worldview Shift

What led to this worldview shift? First of all, there was the basic logic of the Christian faith. It just made sense that the God of love whom I had come to know in Jesus Christ would want to rescue and redeem the world he made—a world deeply affected by human sin and corruption—rather than trashing it in favor of some other, immaterial realm or place. After all, God’s plan was to redeem humanity; why then would God give up on the earthly environment in which he originally placed us?

I remember once, on a climbing trip to Blue Mountain Peak, the highest point on the island, watching a breathtaking sunrise at 7,500 feet above sea level. After some minutes of silence, my friend Junior commented wistfully, “This is so beautiful; it’s such a shame that it will all be destroyed some day.” I still remember the dawning awareness: *I don’t think it will be*. It did not make sense to me that the beauty and wonder of earthly life, which I was coming to embrace joyfully as part of my growing Christian faith, could be disconnected from God’s ultimate purposes of salvation.

This basic intuition or theological insight was confirmed by my study of Scripture during my undergraduate studies in Jamaica. Most contemporary Christians tend to live with an unresolved tension between a belief in the resurrection of the body and an immaterial heaven as final destiny. Many also have in the back of their minds the idea of the new heaven and new earth (from the book of Revelation), though they are not quite sure what to do with it. I too started my theological studies with this very confusion. But as I took courses in both Old and New Testaments and tried to understand the nature of God’s salvation as portrayed in the various biblical writings, it became increasingly clear that the God who created the world “very good” (Gen.

---

*Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Richard J. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

3. Roger Ringenberg has written an informative study, “A History of Jamaica Theological Seminary, 1960–1992” (DMiss diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1992). For a volume of essays sponsored by the Jamaica Theological Seminary, see Garnett Roper and J. Richard Middleton, eds., *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013).

1:31), and who became incarnate in Jesus Christ as a real human being, had affirmed by these very acts the value of the material universe and the validity of ordinary, earthly life. More than that, I came to realize that the Scriptures explicitly teach that God is committed to reclaiming creation (human and nonhuman) in order to bring it to its authentic and glorious destiny, a destiny that human sin had blocked.

During my third year of undergraduate studies I had begun to read the early works of Francis Schaeffer, which had a profound impact on my developing worldview.<sup>4</sup> One of the things that drew me to Schaeffer was that he grounded many of his early writings on contemporary culture in a view of holistic salvation. Schaeffer was not an academic theologian, but he attempted to work out the implications of salvation for the whole person as a social and cultural being, living in an earthly creation destined for redemption. And while I later came to see serious flaws in Schaeffer's analyses of contemporary culture, he nevertheless helped me catch a vision of life woven of one fabric, in which everything could be integrally related to the creator, who was also the redeemer.<sup>5</sup>

But it was the writings of New Testament scholar George Eldon Ladd that most helpfully clarified for me the interconnectedness of what the Bible taught on the redemption of creation, and he explicitly contrasted this teaching with the unbiblical idea of being taken out of this world to heaven.<sup>6</sup> Ladd's work on biblical theology prompted me to do my own investigation of the biblical theme of God's kingdom in relation to what we euphemistically call the "afterlife," to see what role there is for heaven and/or earth in God's ultimate purposes.

4. Works by Schaeffer that I read included *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968); *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1972); *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968); *Art and the Bible: Two Essays* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973); *True Spirituality* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1971); *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1970). While the first three books involved a critical appraisal of Western culture in light of the lordship of Christ over all culture, the last three books were particularly helpful in showing the implications of a holistic vision for art, spirituality, and care for the earth.

5. There was a significant shift in Schaeffer's approach to culture beginning with *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976). In this book (and its movie adaptation) Schaeffer began to embrace a decidedly unbiblical vision of America as a Christian nation. In *How Should We Then Live?* he seemed to be hankering after a purportedly lost ideal past, while in his writings after this point he began to propose an aggressive cultural takeover of America by Christians who shared his ideals; see especially *A Christian Manifesto* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1981; rev. ed., 1982).

6. Among the many works by Ladd, especially important for me were *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) and *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), both of which stand as worthwhile statements even today. The latter book is the revised edition of Ladd's *Jesus and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

As a result of this investigation, while still an undergraduate student, I came to the startling realization that the Bible nowhere claims that “heaven” is the final home of the redeemed. Although there are many New Testament texts that Christians often read as if they teach a heavenly destiny, the texts do not actually say this. Rather, the Bible consistently anticipates the redemption of the entire created order, a motif that fits very well with the Christian hope of the resurrection, which Paul calls “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23).

It was after this startling realization that I first challenged an adult Sunday school class that I was teaching at Grace Missionary Church (my home church in Jamaica) to find even one passage in the New Testament that clearly said Christians would live in heaven forever or that heaven was the final home of the righteous. I even offered a monetary reward if anyone could find such a text. I have been making this offer now for my entire adult life to church and campus ministry study groups and in many of the courses I have taught (in Canada, the United States, and Jamaica); I am happy to report that I still have all my money. No one has ever produced such a text, because there simply are none in the Bible.

After writing *The Transforming Vision* together, Brian Walsh and I teamed up some ten years later to address the implications of this same holistic vision for postmodern culture in *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*; like the former book, it combined biblical studies with cultural analysis.<sup>7</sup> Since that time the focus of my research has shifted more and more toward biblical studies, particularly Old Testament, the primary academic field in which I teach and write. In all my teaching and writing, the consistent background assumption has been the same basic vision of holistic salvation that I have been working with since my undergraduate days in Jamaica, though in recent years I have been able to flesh this out in much more detail.<sup>8</sup>

## Why This Book?

Having had to explain this background assumption of the redemption of creation in many different settings and to different audiences, I finally decided to write an article that would marshal the central biblical evidence (as I understood it) for a holistic understanding of salvation, with a focus on eschatology.

7. J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995).

8. Looking back, I realize that I have gravitated toward writing on creation texts and themes as a way of addressing the grounding of holistic salvation in God’s intent from the beginning. See, for example, J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

The article, titled “A New Heaven and a New Earth,” was published in 2006.<sup>9</sup> Soon after its publication Rodney Clapp, then senior editor at Brazos Press/Baker Academic, suggested that I turn the article into a book. “The time is ripe,” he said, over a spicy dinner of Thai food, “for an accessible and clear book-length statement of holistic eschatology.” This book is my attempt to respond to Rodney’s eschatological-sounding challenge. Since then Rodney has moved on to another publishing company, and I am grateful for Jim Kinney’s shepherding of this book to publication. I am also grateful for his patience as the book’s completion—like the eschaton—was delayed.

Whereas earlier centuries have tried to clarify theological topics such as the incarnation, the Trinity, or justification by faith, the twentieth century has seen more intense focus on eschatology than ever before. Yet much of this eschatological reflection has been confused and inchoate, conflating an unbiblical impetus to transcend earthly life with the biblical affirmation of earthly life. This is true among both professional theologians and church members, and also among Christians of differing theological traditions.

The time is ripe, therefore, for a clearly articulated Christian eschatology that is rooted in responsible exegesis of Scripture and also attuned to the theological claims and ethical implications of the Bible’s vision of salvation. This eschatology will also need to be serviceable for the church, pointing the way toward faithful living in the here and now.

This book is one small contribution toward such an eschatology. Its primary purpose is to clarify how New Testament eschatology, rather than being a speculative add-on to the Bible, actually coheres with, and is the logical outworking of, the consistently holistic theology of the entirety of Scripture. As Donald Fairbairn puts it, “Eschatology’s significance lies in the way it testifies to the unity of Scripture, the unity of God’s purposes, and ultimately the unity and goodness of the God we worship.”<sup>10</sup>

The primary purpose of this book is to sketch the coherent biblical theology (beginning in the Old Testament) that culminates in the New Testament’s explicit eschatological vision of the redemption of creation. But this book has two subsidiary purposes, both flowing from its primary orientation. First, I explore some of the ethical implications of a biblically grounded holistic

9. J. Richard Middleton, “A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Case for a Holistic Reading of the Biblical Story of Redemption,” *Journal for Christian Theological Research* 11 (2006): 73–97, [http://www.luthersem.edu/ctrf/JCTR/Vol11/Middleton\\_vol11.pdf](http://www.luthersem.edu/ctrf/JCTR/Vol11/Middleton_vol11.pdf).

10. Donald Fairbairn, “Contemporary Millennial/Tribunational Debates: Whose Side Was the Early Church On?,” in *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to the Left Behind Eschatology*, ed. Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 130.



eschatology for our present life in God's world. And second, I investigate, at least in a preliminary way, what happened to the biblical vision of the redemption of the earth in the history of Christian eschatology.

Given my desire to make the Bible's vision of the redemption of creation available to a wide audience, I have endeavored to write a book that is accessible to those who do not specialize in biblical studies, yet without dumbing anything down. Over the years I have found that Christian laypeople can be theologically astute and that teachers need to respect the ability of their students to think through difficult concepts.

In light of this, this book does not shy away from addressing the interpretation of passages throughout the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) whose meaning is often disputed and, indeed, affected by the assumptions that we bring to the text. I have tried to uncover some of these assumptions and to lead the reader on a tour of Scripture understood (as far as possible) in terms of its own (ancient) worldview. In doing this, I have tried to avoid overly technical discussions of the matters at hand, and I have sought to explain complex issues in clear prose. I have also used a variety of charts and diagrams to clarify some of my analyses, especially to illustrate patterns that can be discerned throughout different biblical texts.

Although I have carefully considered many alternative points of view, including arguments against my own position, I have often omitted reference to them from my exposition if I judged that including them would sidetrack the reader from the issue at hand. Nevertheless, for those interested in following up on such matters, I have provided numerous footnotes, some of which address alternative points of view, further grounding for my argument, or resources for further study.

## **The Plan of This Book**

The book contains twelve chapters and an appendix. Chapter 1, "Introduction: The Problem of Otherworldly Hope," sets up the basic problem that the book addresses, first by explaining what is wrong with the traditional Christian view of heaven as final destiny, and then by sketching the historical origins of this otherworldly idea in the innovative teachings of the Greek philosopher Plato (427–347 BC). This historical analysis is continued in the appendix, "Whatever Happened to the New Earth?," which examines the broad sweep of church history in order to understand how the biblical expectation of the redemption of the cosmos came to be compromised by a Platonic otherworldly vision. The introduction and the appendix thus function as bookends for the main content of the study.

The in-between chapters focus on biblical theology, first by attempting to clarify how the Bible's consistent teaching about holistic salvation grounds its explicit eschatology, and then by exploring some of the ethical implications of this eschatology. This means that we need to delay our look at the New Testament's expectation of the "end times" (what most Christians think of as eschatology) in order to examine how this expectation is deeply rooted in the overall vision of the Bible. New Testament eschatology is not some sort of ad hoc jigsaw puzzle of crazy ideas appended to the rest of Scripture. Rather, New Testament eschatology is simply the logical and appropriate culmination of the consistent biblical vision of redemption, and it is vitally important for Christian living.

### *From Creation to Eschaton*

Our foray into biblical theology begins in chapters 2 and 3 with the overarching story that the Bible tells. Chapter 2, "Why Are We Here?," focuses on the beginning of the biblical story: God's original intent for humans in the context of the created world and how that intent was impeded by sin. Contrary to the popular notion that we are made to worship God, the Bible suggests a more mundane purpose for humans made in God's image, involving the development of culture and care for our earthly environment. But human sin (understood as rebellion and violence) has blocked God's original intent for the flourishing of earthly life.

Chapter 3, "The Plot of the Biblical Story," is an overview chapter, sketching the panoramic sweep of the biblical story of redemption. Our primary interest here is to discern the basic plot structure of the biblical metanarrative from creation to eschaton, which clarifies God's unswerving purpose to redeem earthly creation (rather than take us out of earth to heaven).

### *Holistic Salvation in the Old Testament*

With this overview in mind, chapters 4 through 6 address holistic salvation in the Old Testament and uncover some of the ways in which this ancient text portrays God's ongoing commitment to the flourishing of earthly life. Chapter 4, "The Exodus as Paradigm of Salvation," foregrounds the biblical story of God's deliverance of his people from bondage in Egypt and their concrete restoration to new life; the chapter suggests how this paradigmatic event functions as a pattern for understanding salvation in both Old and New Testaments.

Chapter 5, "Earthly Flourishing in Law, Wisdom, and Prophecy," then examines how Israel's laws and wisdom traditions, together with prophetic

oracles of judgment and anticipations of restoration beyond exile, testify to a consistent, holistic vision of God's desire to bring shalom and blessing to ordinary human life on earth.

Yet the Old Testament is brutally honest about the presence of sin and corruption in God's world. Chapter 6, "The Coming of God in Judgment and Salvation," therefore addresses those texts that portray God's coming as a vivid theophany, accompanied by a shaking or melting of the world, as a prelude to salvation. These texts make the point that judgment is an inescapable reality for those who resist God's will. Nevertheless, God's ultimate purpose beyond judgment is to accomplish his original intent for the flourishing of humanity and the nonhuman world. This Old Testament vision thus functions as the essential theological background to the New Testament understanding of salvation.

Chapters 7 through 12 then turn to the holistic vision of the New Testament. First, chapters 7 through 10 focus on the New Testament's theology of cosmic redemption (including possible objections based on texts that do not seem to fit). Chapters 11 and 12 then address some of the ethical implications of this theology.

### *The New Testament's Vision of Cosmic Renewal*

Chapter 7, "Resurrection and the Restoration of Rule," explores the inner logic of the hope of resurrection and its connection to the restoration of human rule of the earth, beginning with late Old Testament texts and on into the New Testament. The connection of resurrection and rule in the New Testament (first in the case of Jesus, the second Adam, and then for all those who follow him) is central to the biblical vision of God's coming in victory to conquer death and the corrupt powers of this age.

Chapter 8, "The Redemption of All Things," in order to illumine a cosmic vision of redemption, brings together various strands of the New Testament expectation that sin and evil will be reversed. It becomes clear from the New Testament that salvation includes not just moral transformation and the renewal of community (important as they are), but also the renewal of all things, including our bodies and the earth itself.

### *Problem Texts for Holistic Eschatology*

However, since there are some New Testament texts that are typically misread as if they teach the annihilation of the cosmos and an otherworldly destiny in "heaven," we will need to take a look at this misreading. This is the burden

of chapter 9, “Cosmic Destruction at Christ’s Return?” and chapter 10, “The Role of Heaven in Biblical Eschatology”; it turns out that careful examination of these “problem” texts actually provides further support for the redemption of creation.

### *The Ethics of the Kingdom*

Whereas chapters 7 through 10 address the New Testament’s theology of cosmic redemption, along with clarifying the meaning of problem texts, chapters 11 and 12 take a look at some ethical implications of the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus, especially by attending to his programmatic sermon in the Nazareth synagogue, recorded in Luke 4.

Chapter 11, “The Good News at Nazareth,” focuses on the holistic, this-worldly character of Jesus’s announcement of good news at Nazareth, unpacking the implications of his message for the renewal of the entire person and the social order itself. But since the good news of his message was in danger of being misunderstood, Jesus added a critical caveat concerning the opening of the kingdom to outsiders, which led to an attempt on his life. This requires us to go beyond the good news of the kingdom to address the ethical challenge of the kingdom that Jesus brings, both in his day and ours; this is the task of chapter 12, “The Challenge of the Kingdom.” Together these chapters begin to work through some of the implications of biblical eschatology for ethics, especially the call for the church to live boldly yet humanely as an alternative community in a broken world—a world in which the kingdom of God has been inaugurated but has not yet reached its fulfillment.

With our exploration of the consistent biblical teaching of holistic salvation in Old and New Testaments completed, the appendix of this book, “Whatever Happened to the New Earth?” looks at how the idea of a heavenly destiny came to dominate popular Christian eschatology by tracing the eclipse of the biblical vision of the renewal of the earth over the course of church history. The appendix concludes by noting hopeful recent signs of the recovery of a more holistic vision.

It is my hope that this book, in clarifying the biblical basis for holistic eschatology, will help readers see more clearly the profound effects of evil both around and within ourselves, while also impelling us forward to live lives of obedience and compassion in anticipation of the new heaven and new earth, which God has promised.

I believe that the time is ripe; could it be that a holistic eschatology is at hand?

# I

## Introduction

### The Problem of Otherworldly Hope

In one of the courses I teach, I regularly set my students an interview assignment. They are asked to interview a pastor, church leader, or missionary whom they know, using a set of guided, though open-ended, questions. The questions ask how the interviewee understands a number of overlapping matters, including the nature of salvation or redemption, what it means to be a Christian in the world, the nature of one's calling as a Christian, what God requires of the faithful, and the nature of true worship, ministry, and discipleship. All the questions circle around one main goal: to uncover the worldview of the interviewees, in particular how they understand the relationship of so-called spiritual or religious matters to ordinary mundane matters of life in the world, and how they therefore should act in the world.<sup>1</sup>

1. Here I am using the term “worldview” not in the sense of a conceptual system or framework of ideas (as one tradition of Christian discourse understands the term), but rather to refer to how a pretheoretical, even precognitive, vision of life functions to orient people in the world and guide their life toward some goal or end. This usage of “worldview” derives from the tradition of Kuyperian Neocalvinism and underlies the analysis in Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984); and James H. Olthuis, “On Worldviews,” *Christian Scholar's Review* 14 (1985): 153–64, reprinted in *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*, ed. Paul A. Marshall, Sander Griffioen, and Richard J. Mouw (Christian Studies Today; Lanham, MD: University Press

## The Elephant in the Room

It is common for interviewees to claim that the Christian faith should not be separated from life but ought to connect to this world. This is a relatively recent shift in attitudes, from a more otherworldly interpretation of faith to a desire for a more holistic and integrated vision. Along those lines, more and more people tend to recognize that our calling or ministry should not be divided into sacred and secular, but rather should relate to everything we do.

What is fascinating, however, is what interviewees actually mention as examples of “everything” and what they leave out. Some laudably list the need to care for “creation,” since God made and loves the world. Some mention the terrible state that the world is in and declare that Christians ought to be involved in making things better. Many emphasize ethical matters such as valuing honesty and sexual purity and being against abortion (and sometimes war); they often say that faith should affect one’s work (usually without specifying how, other than that one should model Christian behavior and be committed to excellence). And they particularly stress the importance of “relationships.” Most interviewees, however, tend to reduce this to personal, intimate, or familial-type relationships.

Yet “relationships” is a large umbrella term that covers just about everything. I am *in relationship* not just to other persons, but also to social and political institutions, to traditions, to the environment, to animals, to food, to time and space, to birth and death, to history, to science and art. I am *related to* technology, to entertainment, to economic systems, to ideas and ideologies, to depression, illness, and suffering, to consumerism, to globalization, to violence, and so on. How then does one’s salvation or faith relate to the entire spectrum of life on this planet?

It is telling that very few interviewees even attempt to address the range of everyday relationships that people have with broad swaths of mundane reality. While those who claim that faith is related to all of life do make some connections, there are nevertheless huge omissions. Even those who stress the need to care for creation tend to reduce “creation” to nature or the environment, with little reflection on the fact that human beings, and all the cultural and social formations that they have developed over history, are also part of the created order.

---

of America, 1989), 26–40. For a more recent work in the Neocalvinian tradition that helpfully relates this affective/precognitive understanding of “worldview” to the Augustinian tradition of desire and Charles Taylor’s recent notion of the “social imaginary,” see James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Cultural Liturgies 1; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), esp. 65–71.

What becomes clear from reading these interviews over the years is that “culture” (for want of a better term) is the elephant in the room that nobody notices. While we are, in fact, at every moment in relationship with a complex web or network of cultural and social meanings, artifacts, and institutions, there tends to be a significant blind spot in the vision of many contemporary Christians (including pastors and church leaders) concerning such matters. The full range of human culture simply does not enter into the equation of faith.<sup>2</sup>

One of the questions my students put to the interviewees has to do with eschatology, the end-state vision of God’s intent for humanity and the world. In particular, the interviewees are asked how they understand the final state of the righteous. Here the answers tend to be quite traditional, centering on judgment and going to heaven when you die. “Heaven” tends to be conceived in two main ways. First, heaven is understood as a transcendent realm beyond time and space. Second, heaven is characterized primarily by fellowship with and worship of God. The final destiny of the faithful is conceived as an unending worship service of perpetual praise in God’s immediate presence in another world. While the traditional doctrine of the resurrection of the body is usually affirmed, this typically stands in some tension with the idea of an atemporal, immaterial realm. And there is certainly no conscious reflection on the redemption of human culture.

More and more, however, some respondents understand that an ethereal “heaven” is more traditional than biblical, and instead they articulate the vision of “a new heaven and a new earth” from the book of Revelation. However, even their articulation of this more cosmic vision tends to have no explicit place for the concreteness of human culture. The elephant is unnoticed in both ethics and eschatology.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is my conclusion, not only from the interviews but also from my experience in the church and my study of theology and Scripture, that eschatology is inevitably connected to ethics. I am not referring here to one’s explicit statement of eschatology because some interviewees explicitly affirm a biblical vision of cosmic restoration; but it is clear that this is a bare confession and does not function as the sort of substantive vision that could guide significant action in the world. The point is that what we desire and anticipate as the culmination of salvation is what truly affects how we attempt to

2. One work that foregrounds the relationship of culture to faith is Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008). The book contains a wise analysis of culture (part 1), followed by a superb retelling of the biblical story in terms of culture (part 2), plus helpful reflection on norms for cultural engagement (part 3).

3. The omission of conscious reflection on the redemption of culture suggests that it has no significant place in the underlying (precognitive) worldview of the interviewee.

live in the present. Ethics is lived eschatology. It is, as New Testament scholar George Eldon Ladd put it, “the presence of the future.”<sup>4</sup>

### The Bible’s Best-Kept Secret

Central to the way the New Testament conceives the final destiny of the world is Jesus’s proclamation in Matthew 19:28 of a “regeneration” (KJV, NASB) that is coming; Matthew here uses the Greek word *palingenesia*, which both NIV and NRSV translate as “the renewal of all things,” correctly getting at the sense of cosmic expectation in Jesus’s prediction. Likewise, we have Peter’s explicit proclamation of the “restoration [*apokatastasis*] of all things” (Acts 3:21), which does in fact contain the Greek for “all things” (*panta*). When we turn to the Epistles, we find God’s intent to reconcile “all things” to himself through Christ articulated in Colossians 1:20, while Ephesians 1:10 speaks of God’s desire to unify or bring together “all things” in Christ. In these two Pauline texts the phrase “all things” (*ta panta*) is immediately specified as things in heaven and things on earth. Since “the heavens and the earth” is precisely how Genesis 1:1 describes the world that God created, this New Testament language designates a vision of cosmic redemption. Such cosmic vision underlies the phrase “a new heaven/s and a new earth” found in both Revelation 21:1 and 2 Peter 3:13. The specific origin of the phrase, however, is the prophetic oracle of Isaiah 65:17 (and 66:22), which envisions a healed world with a redeemed community in rebuilt Jerusalem, where life is restored to flourishing and shalom after the devastation of the Babylonian exile. The this-worldly prophetic expectation in Isaiah is universalized to the entire cosmos and human society generally in late Second Temple Judaism and in the New Testament.

This holistic vision of God’s intent to renew or redeem creation is perhaps the Bible’s best-kept secret, typically unknown to most church members and even to many clergy, no matter what their theological stripe. While this introductory chapter is not the place for a full exposition of the biblical teaching about the redemption of the cosmos, some clarification is in order. It is particularly helpful to trace the Old Testament roots of the New Testament vision, in order to understand the inner logic of the idea.

A good starting point is that the Old Testament does not place any substantial hope in the afterlife; the dead do not have access to God in the grave or Sheol. Rather, God’s purposes for blessing and shalom are expected for the

4. George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).



faithful in this life, in the midst of history. This perspective is theologically grounded in the biblical teaching about the goodness of creation, including earthly existence. God pronounced all creation (including materiality) good—indeed “very good” (Gen. 1:31)—and gave humanity the task to rule and develop this world as stewards made in the divine image (Gen. 1:26–28; 2:15; Ps. 8:5–8).

The affirmation of earthly life is further articulated in the central and paradigmatic act of God’s salvation in the Old Testament: the exodus from Egyptian bondage. Not only does Israel’s memory of this event testify to a God who intervenes in history in response to injustice and suffering, but the exodus is manifestly a case of sociopolitical deliverance whose fulfillment is attained when the redeemed are settled in a bountiful land and are restored to wholeness and flourishing as a community living according to God’s Torah.

Indeed, the entire Old Testament reveals an interest in mundane matters such as the development of languages and cultures, the fertility of land and crops, the birth of children and stable family life, justice among neighbors, and peace in international relations. The Old Testament does not spiritualize salvation, but rather understands it as God’s deliverance of people and land from all that destroys life and the consequent restoration of people and land to flourishing. And while God’s salvific purpose narrows for a while to one elect nation in its own land, this “initially exclusive move” is, as Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim puts it, in the service of “a maximally inclusive end,” the redemption of all nations and ultimately the entire created order.<sup>5</sup>

Although the Old Testament initially did not envision any sort of positive afterlife, things begin to shift in some late texts.<sup>6</sup> Thus in Ezekiel’s famous vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37), the restoration of Israel is portrayed by using the metaphor of resurrection, after the “death” that they suffered in Babylonian exile. But this is arguably still a metaphor, not an expectation of what we would call resurrection. Then a protoapocalyptic text, Isaiah 25:6–8, envisions the literal conquest of death itself at the messianic banquet on Mount Zion (where God will serve the redeemed the best meat and the most aged wines); this text anticipates the day when YHWH<sup>7</sup> will “swallow

5. Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 29; also 103.

6. The rise of resurrection hope in the Old Testament will be addressed in more depth in chap. 7 below.

7. Throughout this book I am using “YHWH” to represent the ancient name of God in the Old Testament, which is rendered “the LORD” (small capitals) in most English translations. This name is also known as the Tetragrammaton, referring to the four Hebrew consonants transliterated as “YHWH.” Most biblical scholars think that this name was originally pronounced *Yahweh*, although there is evidence that at the Jewish settlement in Elephantine (Egypt) it was

up death forever” (cited in 1 Cor. 15:54; cf. 15:26) and “wipe away all tears” (echoed in Rev. 21:4). But the most explicit Old Testament text on the topic of resurrection is the apocalyptic vision in Daniel 12:2–3, which promises that faithful martyrs will awaken from the dust of the earth (to which we all return at death, according to Gen. 3:19) to attain “eternal life.”

It is important to note that this developing vision of the afterlife has nothing to do with “heaven hereafter”; the expectation is manifestly this-worldly, meant to guarantee for the faithful the earthly promises of shalom that death has cut short. Here, the third chapter of Wisdom of Solomon is particularly helpful. This text (which is in the Septuagint, though not in the Protestant canon) specifically associates “immortality” with reigning on earth (Wis. 3:1–9, esp. vv. 7–8); that is, resurrection is a reversal of the earthly situation of oppression (wicked people dominating and killing righteous martyrs). Resurrection thus fulfills the original human dignity and status in Genesis 1:26–28 and Psalm 8:4–8, where humans are granted rule of the earth.

These ancient Jewish expectations provide a coherent theological background for Jesus’s proclamation of the kingdom of God, which he construes as “good news” for the poor and release for captives (Luke 4:18), and which he embodies in healings, exorcisms, and the forgiveness of sins (all ways in which the distortion of life was being reversed). These expectations also make sense of Jesus’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that the meek will “inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5), and later in Matthew that “at the renewal of all things” the disciples will reign and judge with him on thrones (Matt. 19:27–30).

Paul’s description of Jesus’s own resurrection from the dead as the “first fruits” of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor. 15:20) signifies that the harvest of new creation has begun, the expected reversal of sin and death is inaugurated. This reversal is to be consummated when Christ returns in glory climactically to defeat evil and all that opposes God’s intent for life and shalom on earth (1 Cor. 15:24–28). Then the words of the book of Revelation will be fulfilled:

---

pronounced *Yahu* (the Hebrew letter represented by *w* can function either as a consonant or as a silent marker for an *o* or *u* vowel). Sometime in the Second Temple period (perhaps by the third century BC), some Jews began to treat “YHWH” as too holy to pronounce and began orally to substitute “Lord” (Hebrew *’ādōnāy*; later, Greek *kyrios*) whenever they read the divine name in the Scriptures (the derivation of *’ādōnāy* is actually quite complicated, since it technically means “my lords,” possibly a plural of majesty). Later, this tradition was codified in the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible, which typically inserts the vowels from *’ādōnāy* into the consonants for “YHWH.” The Dead Sea Scrolls (dating from the two centuries before Jesus) at some points use an archaic Hebrew script to write the Tetragrammaton, to distinguish it from the rest of the text. To this day, pious Jews will not say the divine name but will instead substitute “the Lord,” “Adonai,” “the Most High,” “the Eternal,” or “Ha-Shem” (literally, “the name”). My purpose in writing the divine name as “YHWH” is to allow readers to pronounce it as they wish.

“the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah” (11:15). At that time, explains Paul, creation itself, which has been groaning in its bondage to decay, will be liberated from this bondage into the same glory that God’s children will experience (Rom. 8:19–22).

The inner logic of this vision of holistic salvation is that the creator has not given up on creation and is working to salvage and restore the world (human and nonhuman) to the fullness of shalom and flourishing intended from the beginning. And redeemed human beings, renewed in God’s image, are to work toward and embody this vision in their daily lives.

### Singing Lies in Church

Such a holistic vision of salvation is found only rarely in popular Christian piety or even in the liturgy of the church. Indeed, it is blatantly contradicted by many traditional hymns (and contemporary praise songs) sung in the context of communal worship. This is an important point because it is from what they sing that those in the pew (or auditorium) typically learn their theology, especially their eschatology.

From the classic Charles Wesley hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” which anticipates being “Changed from glory into glory, / Till in heaven we take our place,”<sup>8</sup> to “Away in a Manger,” which prays, “And fit us for Heaven, to live with Thee there,”<sup>9</sup> congregations are exposed to, and assimilate, an otherworldly eschatology. Some hymns, such as “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder,” inconsistently combine the idea of resurrection with the hope of heaven:

On that bright and cloudless morning when the dead in Christ shall  
rise,  
And the glory of His resurrection share;  
When His chosen ones shall gather to their home beyond the skies,  
And the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there.<sup>10</sup>

Some hymns even interpret resurrection without reference to the body at all, such as “Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?,” which in one stanza regards

8. Stanza 4 of “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” written by Charles Wesley in 1747; this is published as hymn #92 in *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration*, ed. Tom Fettke et al. (Irving, TX: Word Music, 1986).

9. Stanza 3 from “Away in a Manger,” written by John Thomas McFarland sometime between 1904 and 1908 (the author of the hymn’s first two stanzas is unknown); hymn #157/#158 in Fettke et al., *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration*.

10. Stanza 2 from “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder,” written by James M. Black in 1893; hymn #543 in Fettke et al., *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration*.

death as liberation (“Till death shall set me free”) and in another asserts, “O resurrection day! / When Christ the Lord from Heav’n comes down / And bears my soul away.”<sup>11</sup>

A hymn such as “When We All Get to Heaven” may be too obvious,<sup>12</sup> but notice that “The Old Rugged Cross” ends with the words “Then He’ll call me some day to my home far away / Where his glory forever I’ll share.”<sup>13</sup> And “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” climaxes with these lines:

When my feeble life is o’er,  
Time for me will be no more;  
Guide me gently, safely o’er  
To Thy kingdom’s shore, to Thy shore.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, “Come, Christians, Join to Sing” affirms, “On heaven’s blissful shore, / His goodness we’ll adore, / Singing forevermore, / Alleluia! Amen!”<sup>15</sup>

This notion of a perpetual worship service in an otherworldly afterlife is a central motif in many hymns, such as “My Jesus, I Love Thee,” which declares, “In mansions of glory and endless delight, / I’ll ever adore Thee in heaven so bright.”<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, “As with Gladness Men of Old” asks in one stanza that “when earthly things are past, / Bring our ransomed souls at last / Where they need no star to guide,” and in another stanza expresses the desire that “In the heavenly country bright / . . . There forever may we sing / Alleluias to our King!”<sup>17</sup>

Thankfully, most hymnals no longer have the sixth verse of “Amazing Grace,” which predicts,

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,  
The sun forbear to shine;

11. Stanzas 2 and 4 from “Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?” Stanza 2 was written by Thomas Shepherd (published 1693) and stanza 4 by Henry Ward Beecher (published 1855); hymn #449 in Fetteke et al., *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration*. Stanza 4 originally read: “Ye angels from the stars come down / And bear my soul away.”

12. Hymn #542 in Fetteke et al., *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration*.

13. Stanza 4 from “The Old Rugged Cross,” written by George Bennard in 1913; hymn #186 in Fetteke et al., *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration*.

14. Stanza 3 from “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” author unknown (this American folk hymn became widely known during the 1930s); hymn #380 in Fetteke et al., *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration*.

15. Stanza 3 from “Come, Christians, Join to Sing,” written by Christian H. Bateman in 1843; hymn #108 in Fetteke et al., *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration*.

16. Stanza 4 from “My Jesus, I Love Thee,” written by William R. Featherston in 1864; hymn #364 in Fetteke et al., *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration*.

17. Stanzas 4 and 5 from “As with Gladness Men of Old,” written by William C. Dix circa 1858; hymn #163 in Fetteke et al., *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration*.

But God, who called me here below,  
Will be forever mine.<sup>18</sup>

Yet Chris Tomlin's contemporary revision of this classic hymn, known as "Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)," reintroduces this very verse as the song's new climax, ready to shape the otherworldly mind-set of a fresh generation of young worshipers unacquainted with hymnals.<sup>19</sup>

And this just begins to scratch the surface of worship lyrics that portray the final destiny of the righteous as transferal from an earthly, historical existence to a transcendent, immaterial realm. As the popular theologian and preacher A. W. Tozer is reputed to have said, "Christians don't tell lies; they just go to church and sing them."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps that is too harsh; nevertheless, I can testify to the steady diet of such songs that I was exposed to growing up in the church in Kingston, Jamaica, which certainly reinforced the idea of heaven as otherworldly final destiny.

I am, however, perpetually grateful that along with such exposure I came to know, through sheer proximity, the this-worldly theology of Rastafarianism, especially as mediated through the music of Bob Marley and the Wailers. Being a committed Christian, I cannot affirm everything found in Rasta theology, but nevertheless I discern a deeply rooted biblical consciousness in the lyrics of many Wailers' songs.<sup>21</sup> For example, the song "We an' Dem" claims that "in the beginning Jah created everything / and he gave man dominion over

18. Stanza 6 from "Amazing Grace," written by John Newton, originally titled "Faith's Review and Expectation," in connection with a sermon he preached on New Year's Day 1773 on 1 Chron. 17:16–17; many hymnals contain the first four of the six stanzas that Newton wrote (first published in 1779), along with a fifth stanza, beginning with "When we've been here ten thousand years," which is sometimes attributed incorrectly to John P. Rees (Rees was born in 1828, and this stanza appears in print in 1790 as part of a hymn titled "Jerusalem, My Happy Home" and was first linked to two of the stanzas of Newton's hymn by Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*); stanza 6 is missing from "Amazing Grace," hymn #202 in Fettke et al., *The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration*.

19. Chris Tomlin, "Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)," released on the album *See the Morning* (Six Steps Records, 2006).

20. This quote is found all over the Internet without an explicit citation to Tozer's works. Noted Tozer scholar James L. Snyder admits that while it may not be found in a specific published work, the quote accurately echoes what Tozer has said in some of his sermons (available in audio recordings); "it is Tozer and it expresses his feelings on the subject" (personal communication, December 20, 2010).

21. I have explored the theology of a number of songs by Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and Bunny Wailer in "Identity and Subversion in Babylon: Strategies for 'Resisting against the System' in the Music of Bob Marley and the Wailers," in *Religion, Culture and Tradition in the Caribbean*, ed. Hemchand Gossai and N. Samuel Murrell (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 181–204. For an excellent in-depth study of how Bob Marley's lyrics draw on biblical texts and themes, see Dean MacNeil, *The Bible and Bob Marley: Half the Story Has Never Been Told* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013).

all things,” and “Pass It On” proclaims, “In the kingdom of Jah / Man shall reign.”<sup>22</sup> These lyrics express (in androcentric language, admittedly) the biblical vision of this-worldly dignity granted humans at creation, a dignity that will be restored in the kingdom of God.<sup>23</sup>

And Peter Tosh’s version of “Get Up, Stand Up” (a song he coauthored with Marley) understands well the implications of eschatology for ethics when it contrasts the doctrine of the rapture with a desire for justice on earth:

You know, most people think  
 A great God will come from the skies,  
 And take away every little thing  
 And lef’ everybody dry.  
 But if you know what life is worth,  
 You would look for yours  
 Right here on earth.

The song goes on to critique the “preacher man” for taking the focus off earthly life and affirms that the singer is “sick and tired of this game of theology, / die and go to heaven in Jesus’ name.”<sup>24</sup> This is the very theology that leads Marley, in the song “Talkin’ Blues,” to admit, “I feel like bombing a church, / now that you know that the preacher is lying.”<sup>25</sup> But if Tozer is right, it is not just the preacher who is lying, but also the worshipers who blithely sing hymns of escape to an ethereal heaven, when in fact the Bible teaches no such thing.

Where, then, did the idea of “going to heaven” come from? And how did this otherworldly destiny displace the biblical teaching of the renewal of the earth and end up dominating popular Christian eschatology?

22. “We an’ Dem,” by Bob Marley, released on the *Uprising* album by Bob Marley and the Wailers (Island Records, 1980); “Pass It On,” by Bob Marley, released on the *Burnin’* album by The Wailers (Island Records, 1973). “Jah” is the shortened form of the divine name “YHWH” (“Yahweh/Jehovah”) found in expressions such as “hallelujah” (which literally means “praise YHWH”). Rastafarians love to quote Ps. 68:4 in the King James Version of the Bible: “Sing unto God, / sing praises to his name: / extol him that rideth upon the heavens by his name JAH, / and rejoice before him.”

23. Since these lyrics are not published in any fixed format and often vary (sometimes significantly) from one recording to the next, I have provided my own transcription of song lyrics, along with which version of the song I am citing. This complex state of affairs has led one Bob Marley biographer to comment that compiling an accurate discography of any Jamaican reggae group “would try the patience of anyone but Jah Rastafari himself” (Timothy White, *Catch a Fire: The Life of Bob Marley*, rev. ed. [New York: Henry Holt, 1996], 393).

24. “Get Up, Stand Up,” by Bob Marley and Peter Tosh, released on the *Equal Rights* album by Peter Tosh (Columbia Records, 1977); originally recorded (with slightly different lyrics) on the *Burnin’* album by The Wailers (Island Records, 1973).

25. “Talkin’ Blues,” by Bob Marley, released on the *Natty Dread* album by The Wailers (Island Records, 1974).

## The Origin of the Idea of a Heavenly Destiny

The idea of a transcendent nonearthly realm as the goal of salvation can be traced back to the innovative teaching of Plato in the late fifth and early fourth centuries (428–348) BC. Prior to Plato, the dominant view of the afterlife in Greek culture was basically that articulated by Homer in works such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. This present life was where glory and honor could be found, and death was tragedy; all that the dead could expect was a shadowy existence in Hades, not unlike how the Old Testament conceived Sheol. It was not at all a positive expectation, but rather a view that merely the shade of one's former vitality persisted in the realm of the underworld.<sup>26</sup>

Plato, however, influenced by Orphic myths of the soul's preexistence among the stars and subsequent entombment on earth, posited a view of the person as composed of immortal soul or mind (the true self) and transitory, corruptible body. Likewise, the cosmos was binary, composed of a transcendent, suprasensory, timeless realm of ideas (the Forms) and the sensory realm of changeability and flux. There certainly are different versions of Plato's dualism articulated in the different dialogues that he wrote. Thus we find the radical dualism of the *Phaedo*, where the rational soul is diametrically opposed to the corruptible body, which leads the former astray and drags it down; and philosophy is practice for death, since even in this life the philosopher (by pure, abstract thought) can separate his soul (mind) from his body.<sup>27</sup> Contrasted with that is the more relaxed dualism of the *Timaeus*, where time is a "moving image of eternity," and this world is a flawed but beautiful reflection of the ideal realm.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the worldview that held together both versions of Plato's dualism, and that he bequeathed to later ages, involved the radically new assumption of an immortal, immaterial soul and the aspiration to transcend this present world of matter, sensation, and change in order to attain to a higher, divine reality. The only way out of the endless cycle of re-birth (or transmigration of souls) was purification of the inner person from all contamination with bodily influences.

26. See, for example, *Iliad* 23.99–107, where Achilles has a dream visitation from the dead Patroclus; and *Odyssey* 11, where Odysseus recounts his journeys into the underworld (especially his encounter with his dead mother, Anticleia, in 11.208–222, and with the dead Achilles in 11.475–491). For a lucid discussion of the nature of Hades in these Homeric texts, see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 3; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 39–45; and on the Old Testament concept of Sheol, see *ibid.*, 87–99.

27. See Plato, *Phaedo* 64a–68b. The language is intentionally androcentric.

28. For Plato's phrase a "moving image of eternity," see *Timaeus* 37d; for a description of the beauty of the cosmos, see *Timaeus* 29e–31b.

A slightly different version of Plato's philosophy was promulgated by his most famous student, Aristotle (384–322 BC). Although Aristotle came to understand the soul as the form or unity of the body, and not an immaterial substance separable from the body, he accepted Plato's fundamental conceptual distinction between form and matter or immaterial ideas and corruptible physical reality.<sup>29</sup> More important, he accepted Plato's *value* distinction, such that the immaterial and rational were superior to the bodily and the material. Over time, this shared dualistic vision of reality became more and more popular in hellenized cultures.<sup>30</sup>

Plato's idea of a positive afterlife, however, did not immediately replace the traditional concept of Hades. Indeed, Plato himself never actually taught that "heaven" was the realm the soul returned to at death, despite the "likely story" or myth that he has Timaeus recount about the astral origin (and possible destiny) of the human soul in *Timaeus* 41d–e. It is open to debate whether Plato actually believed in personal immortality (the survival of individual identity), but he did not think that the soul literally came from or returned to the supralunary incorruptible astral realm, populated by ethereal, subtle bodies (such as planets, stars, angels, and gods), which is how heaven was popularly conceived in ancient times. Rather, the abstract and strictly immaterial realm of the Forms that Plato posited was his attempt to "demythologize" this popular notion of the astral realm.

Plato's influence (esp. *Timaeus* 41d–e) led initially to scattered belief (throughout the ancient world) in the possibility of becoming a star (or like a star) in the astral realm after death.<sup>31</sup> Later, in the Christian era, it led to the idea of dwelling with God (in a resurrected body) in the heavens (located above and beyond the earth). It was not, however, until much later that the

29. Aristotle's view of the relationship of soul and body is articulated most clearly in *De anima*. "Form" is a technical term in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle for universal concepts or "ideas," understood as the unifying factor in material things. Whereas Plato thought that these forms existed independently of the physical world (but were embodied in this world), Aristotle thought that they had no independent existence.

30. The term "dualism" is used in different ways in the literature of religion and philosophy. Historically, it has been used for the idea that there are two metaphysical principles of separate origin. More recently the term has come to be used to designate just about any duality or twoness (often referred to as binary oppositions). My usage is different from both of these. I am employing the term "dualism" to name any bifurcation in which one side of the distinction is given a *priority in value* over the other (that is, it is viewed as better, higher, more important, etc.) and the other side is correspondingly *devalued* (as lower, unimportant, or even downright evil). "Dualism" therefore refers not simply to a conceptual duality, but rather to a value distinction at the worldview/precognitive/affective level superimposed on what may (or may not) be a valid conceptual distinction. For further discussion of value or worldview dualism, see Walsh and Middleton, *Transforming Vision*, chaps. 6–7.

31. See, for example, Cicero, *De republica* 6.13–16.



Christian tradition came to embrace the more metaphysical notion that Plato actually held, concerning an immaterial, nonspatial eternal state.<sup>32</sup>

The Platonic worldview, and especially Plato's more abstract notion of the afterlife, were given extra impetus in the third century AD by the Greek philosopher Plotinus (204–270), who renovated Plato's conceptual framework (combined with Aristotelian and Stoic ideas) to promulgate a vision of reality that deeply influenced Christian theologians from Augustine to Pseudo-Dionysius and beyond. Known today as Neoplatonism, Plotinus's vision was regarded for centuries simply as an articulation of Plato's own views (until modern times, with the rise of historical criticism).<sup>33</sup>

Whereas at least some Christian theologians may have balked at Plato's notion that the rational soul or mind was immortal and the highest part of the person (which verged on the deification of reason), Plotinus made room for something beyond, and higher than, reason. He proposed that above (and in a certain sense, deeper within) the rational mind or soul (on both the personal and cosmic levels) could be found the intuitive, suprarational mind or *Nous* (later identified by some Christian theologians with Spirit or the Logos), and above (and within) that was the One, the unitary fullness and depth of being from which all reality flowed (some Christians identified this with the Father or the mystery of the Godhead). Plotinus thus explicitly identified the ascent to the divine with the turn inward, thereby initiating a Western form of mysticism that has reverberated throughout the church in the Middle Ages and even into the modern period.

Although it was specifically Plotinus's form of Platonism that influenced Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, it was the earlier form known as Middle Platonism that formed the dominant intellectual milieu for many of the church fathers of the second and third centuries. I believe that we must not be too hard on these Christian forebears who found Platonic ideas useful for articulating and communicating their theology in the context of Greco-Roman culture. After all, the Jewish conceptualities of New Testament theology needed to be brought to bear on the new cultural context in which the Christian faith found itself. That the church fathers drew on the best of the intellectual heritage of their times is natural. They were simply attempting to

32. The impact of Platonism can also be seen in differing views of the final destiny of the righteous in Second Temple Jewish apocalyptic literature; some texts expect the redeemed to dwell in a renewed cosmos, while others suggest transfer to an otherworldly heaven.

33. Note that in *Confessions* 7.9 and 7.20 Augustine refers to what are in fact *The Enneads* of Plotinus simply as the books of "the Platonists." Plotinus wrote dense philosophical treatises that were collected by his disciple Porphyry in *The Enneads* ("the nines": six groups of nine treatises each).

relate the gospel to their own culture, something that Christians of all ages have done, often unaware of the attendant dangers of assimilating practices and ideas that are antithetical to our faith.

Although I am sympathetic to the church fathers, I believe that we need to be aware of the negative consequences of their synthesis of Christian faith with Greek philosophy. Those consequences include (but are certainly not limited to) a transformation of Christian eschatology beyond anything that the writers of the New Testament would have envisioned. I will address the history of this transformation in more detail in the appendix of this book. For the present it will suffice to quote Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart's summary of the pervasive legacy for Christian eschatology bequeathed by Plato (and intensified by Neoplatonism): "The Christian hope has constantly been understood as hope for human fulfillment in *another world* ('heaven') rather than as hope for the eternal future of *this world* in which we live."<sup>34</sup> In the chapters that follow, it will become clear how far we have departed from the biblical teaching of the redemption of creation.

34. Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context* (Trinity and Truth; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), 129, emphasis added.