

New Heavens, New Earth
The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope
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Preface

As I was grateful for the invitation to give the Drew Lecture on Immortality in 1993, and for the welcome and hospitality I enjoyed at Spurgeon's College on that occasion, so I am grateful for the further hospitality of the Grove Biblical series for the chance to give the piece a wider circulation. It relates to the other work in which I am engaged in all sorts of ways, and will I hope serve to stimulate further thought and discussion, and indeed changes of policy and action, as the great sea-changes through which we are currently passing, in the church no less than in society at large, take their effect, and as, under God, new vistas of truth come to light. The subject of immortality, of the whole Christian future hope, and of belief in the reality denoted by my title, 'New Heavens, New Earth,' remains of huge importance.

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Introduction

I come to address the question of immortality with a warning ringing in my ears. A recent book by Professor James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Oxford: OUP, 1993) says that those who speak about immortality should be paid danger money for doing so. The subject, declares Barr, arouses strong passions. He cites the violent letters and comments that were addressed to Oscar Cullmann and Krister Stendahl after they had written on this topic. Whether Barr's own book will provoke equally strong reactions remains to be seen.

I have three starting-points as I approach this huge subject. The first is a personal one. It is not just that my Drew Lecture, on which this booklet is based, was delivered on Armistice Day, and that I had two great-uncles who died in the first world war; nor just that, as I was putting the finishing touches to this lecture the night before delivering it, Radio 3 played the wonderful German Requiem by Johannes Brahms, with its glorious setting of 'Blessed are they that mourn,

for they shall be comforted.' It is more because, pastorally, I am very much aware that everybody's life sooner or later is touched by the awesome question of what, precisely, happens next. The question is still asked, even in our postmodern world, as was graphically shown me not long ago when a woman, engaged in doctoral study in theology, told me of her husband's recent death. She said 'What I want to know is, where is he?' These human issues are real questions, not just ideas to play with.

My second starting-point is more academic (which, despite current popular usage, does not of course mean 'irrelevant!'). I had a student some years ago who decided to study Buddhism as one of her options. I sent her to study with the senior Professor in that department in Oxford. She came back puzzled. During the course of a tutorial, he had asked her to compare and contrast the Buddhist view of the soul with the Christian view; and she had had to confess that she could not. She did not know what the Christian view of the soul was, and, despite only just having begun Buddhism, already knew more about the soul within that scheme of thought. The Professor was incensed (I said it was a dangerous subject to get into), and actually wrote me a letter asking how someone could study Christianity for two years, as she had done, without knowing what the soul was. I wrote back and said that it was quite easy to study, as one does, Old Testament, New Testament, a fair amount of Church History, Ethics, and so forth, without ever being confronted head-on by the question, what is the Christian view of the soul? It is not a topic upon which many undergraduates have to write essays in traditional theological courses.

But what then do we mean when we use the word 'soul,' as some of us still do, and as we find in the Bible, the liturgy, the hymn-books (particularly the hymn-books, about which I shall say more presently), and so on? This question has been pointed up by Barr's recent book, which I mentioned a moment ago, and in another recent book, *The Meanings of Death*, by John Bowker (London: DLT, 1993). Bowker argues on the one hand that Marx and Freud are wrong: hope for something beyond death is not mere projection; and, on the other hand, that death possesses a dignity acknowledged across the different cultures and religions, even though as Christians we want to nuance this in specific ways. I do not want to discuss these books here, but rather merely to commend them for further study. Barr will make you think furiously (perhaps in both senses); Bowker will provide a lot of wisdom as well as reflection.

My third starting-point arises out of my own research as a student of the New Testament. I have come to the conviction that the rise of the early church in the 40s and 50s is completely inexplicable, historically speaking, unless you have a strongly historical, bodily view of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This may seem obvious to some, but it is remarkable how many New Testament scholars manage not to raise the question in that way, and continue to work with a minimalist view of the resurrection, developing theories about how it was that the church began which somehow avoid the question.¹ But it is clear that the resurrection of Jesus does not fit the prevailing worldviews of the time. The Greeks were not expecting 'resurrection' at all, and indeed would have been frustrated to think of re-embodiment. The Jews did not expect that one person would rise again from the dead, in the midst of ordinary history, but that God would raise all the true Israel to life at the end of the age. Belief in Jesus' resurrection is thus not simply the product of wish-fulfillment on the part of certain people who held certain expectations and who projected them onto 'reality.' How then do we plot and map the range of first-century

beliefs about death and what happens afterwards? That has been one of my concerns as a historian and theologian of the early church, and forms my third starting-point.

Thesis: The Integrated Christian Hope

With these starting-points, I want now to propose a basic thesis, which to some will seem so blindingly obvious that they will wonder why it needs saying at all, while to others it may seem more than a little controversial. After that, I shall fill the thesis in in certain ways and suggest certain results.

The basic thesis is this: that the Christian hope is not simply for 'going to heaven when we die,' but for 'new heavens and new earth, integrated together.' Let me spell that out a bit.

Christians regularly speak of their hope in terms of 'going to heaven when they die.' One hears it in hymns; one finds it in prayers-not least (in my tradition) in liturgical prayers, but also when people pray extempore. One hears it in sermons, both explicitly and implicitly. The point seems to be that there is something called 'eternity,' which is regularly spoken of as though it has only the loosest of connections with space and time, and one day we are going to step into this eternal existence, whether in the form of heaven or of hell, which has almost nothing to do with this earth and this present history. I suggest that this view, widely held though it is, is far less warranted by the New Testament than would normally be supposed; can be at the very least very seriously misleading, and at worst quite positively damaging to a healthy Christian faith; and should be challenged by a more biblical picture altogether. I suggest instead that what we find in the New Testament, and what I commend, is the Christian hope for a new, or renewed, heaven and a new, or renewed earth, with these two integrated together. I want to advance this view in five stages. The first is the longest, and looks at some biblical texts.

1 *cf.*, for example, J D Crossan. *The Birth of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998). For Jewish views of the resurrection, see my *The New Testament and the People of God* (hereafter NTPG) (London and Minneapolis: SPCK and Fortress. 1992) ch 10.

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Biblical Foundations: Clearing the Ground

Jesus and the writers of the New Testament have very little to say about 'going to heaven when you die.' When I point this out to my students, as I do from time to time, they look shocked. Why? Very often, people have come to the New Testament with the presumption that 'going to heaven when you die' is the implicit point of it all, of Christianity and indeed of all religion. They acquire that viewpoint from somewhere, but not from the New Testament. But when they then read the New Testament, they think they find it there. We shall look at various texts.

'Kingdom of Heaven'

The first book in the New Testament is St Matthew's Gospel; and Matthew has Jesus speaking again and again about 'inheriting the kingdom of heaven.' Now, as all those who have ever taken serious courses in New Testament study will know, the phrase 'kingdom of heaven' in Matthew

does not mean' a place, called "heaven," to which you go after death.' It is, rather, a reverent, typically Jewish, way of saying 'kingdom of God,' as in Mark, Luke, John, Paul and elsewhere. And the phrase 'kingdom of God' does not mean' a place over which God rules,' particularly not conceived of as a place other than the present world. It means, rather, 'the fact that God rules.' We would do better to translate it as 'kingship, or kingly rule, of God.'² This then ties in to the first-century Jewish expectation that God alone would be king. Kingdom-expectation is revolutionary: God will be king, and all the jumped-up pseudo-kings will be put in their place. That is what it means when Jesus uses the phrase.

Matthew's gospel is actually radically subverted when it unwittingly becomes the tool of people who want to buttress the 'going-to-heaven-when-you-die' view of Christianity. Matthew's gospel, read like that, offers the Sermon on the Mount, and much else besides, as the guide-book, the rulebook, to enable people to get there in the end. So, just as when people say 'I'm a "Sermon-on-the-Mount" Christian,' meaning' I have a vague memory of some rather fine ethics I once heard somewhere, and I can probably claim some kinship with Jesus on this basis,' usually flagrantly ignoring the context, and two-thirds of the content, of the Sermon itself, I suspect that likewise that same Sermon is regularly abused as meaning that if you keep these ethics you will' go to heaven when you die.' And I suspect that a good deal of ordinary old-fashioned English Christianity exists more or less on that foundation. I suggest that this is a thorough misunderstanding.

2 On the whole subject see my *Jesus and the Victory of God* (hereafter JVG) (London and Minneapolis: SPCK and Fortress, 1996) esp chs 5-10.

'Eternal Life'

The second set of texts to which the 'going-to-heaven' view will appeal is the phrase 'eternal life,' which occurs quite frequently in Paul and John. But 'eternal life' does not mean' continuing existence.' It refers neither to a state of timelessness, nor simply to 'linear time going on and on.' In its original Jewish context the phrase fairly certainly refers to 'the life of the age to come.' The 'present age/ according to some Jewish thought, would give way to 'the age to come.' One of the great beliefs of the early Christians was that God I had already kick-started the 'age to come,' even though the 'present age' was still in some sense continuing. The new world order that God was to bring to birth had, they believed, already begun, and those who were Christ's had already entered upon it. The life proper to the new age, the new *aion* in Greek, had already begun. The phrase 'eternal life' should not, therefore, be read as though it meant a spaceless, timeless existence. It should refer to a new dispensation which God will create in the renewal of all things. Perhaps we should translate *zoe aionios* differently, to make the point.

'Salvation Kept in Heaven For You'

The third piece of evidence is 1 Peter 1.4, which speaks of 'an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.' My sense is that many people read that passage as referring to a place, called 'heaven,' where salvation is to be found, and to which we have to go in order to get it. I want to suggest, conversely, that that idea of something being 'kept in heaven for you' does not mean that you have to go and live in heaven in order to

enjoy it. 'Heaven' in the Bible is not usually a reference to a future state, but to God's dimension of present reality, that dimension which is normally hidden from our gaze but where God's purposes are stored up. The point is that salvation is being kept safe in heaven for you, in order then to be brought from heaven to where you are, so that you can enjoy it there. It is rather like a parent, in the run-up to Christmas, assuring a child that 'there is indeed a present kept safe in the cupboard for you.' That does not mean that on Christmas Day and thereafter the child is going to have to go and live in the cupboard in order to enjoy the present there. Rather, it means that at the appropriate time the present will be brought forth out of its safe hiding-place, so that it can enrich the life of the child in the world of real life, not just in the cupboard world.

'Our Citizenship is in Heaven'

This way of reading 1 Peter 1 is reinforced by another passage in the New Testament:

Philippians 3.19-21. 'Our citizenship is in heaven,' or, as Moffatt translates it, 'we are a colony of heaven.' What does that mean?

Many have thought that if our citizenship is in heaven that means that heaven is our real home, the place to which we will eventually go. But that is not how the language of citizenship functions. The point of being a citizen of a mother city is not that when life gets really tough, or when you retire, you can go back home to the mother city. The people to whom Paul was writing in Philippi were Roman citizens, but they had no intention of going back to Rome. They were the means through which Roman civilization was being brought to the world of Northern Greece. If and when the going got tough there, the emperor would come from Rome to deliver them from their enemies in Philippi, and establish them as a true Roman presence right there. So, Paul says, 'from heaven we await a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body.' This is, I suggest, much more integrated with a theology of new heavens and new earth than with a theology of going from the present space-time world to a non-spatiotemporal one. It ties in with other passages such as Gal 4.21-31, which speaks of the Jerusalem 'which is above.' The purpose is not to escape to that Jerusalem, any more than the muddled Galatians thought they had to go and live in terrestrial Jerusalem in order to be proper Christians. No: they were under the dangerous influence of the terrestrial Jerusalem, and Paul is saying, in effect, 'you must be under the influence of, and act as the agents of, the heavenly Jerusalem.' Philippians 3 and Galatians 4 both speak of the dimension of the present reality which is to be informed by the mother city, not of a sense of escaping from present reality to that mother city.

Mark 13: Sun, Moon, Stars-and Jerusalem

The next biblical passage is Mark 13 and its parallels, the wrongly so-called 'little apocalypse.' This passage is not about the end of the space-time world; it is about the fall of Jerusalem.³ The language of sun, moon and stars being destroyed is a part of a metaphor-system, designed to invest present reality with its theological significance. This usage is rooted in the Old Testament, where prophets regularly used 'cosmic' language of this sort to describe what we would call 'earth-shattering' events in the social and political spheres. Talk of sun, moon and stars goes back, in particular, to passages like Isaiah 13, which is describing the fall of Babylon and investing that event with its full cosmic or God-level significance.⁴

All depends on the recognition, and appropriate decoding, of the metaphor—a problem which might afflict us all. If we were to describe the fall of the Berlin Wall as an 'earth-shattering event,' someone in a couple of thousand years' time might misread that as a reference to a literal physical earthquake which created a new situation in which East and West learned to live with each other. That misreading, I suggest, is exactly what first-century readers would see in the modern reading of Mark 13 as a reference to the end of the space-time universe. The most natural first-century Jewish reading of it would be as a reference to what we would call 'earth-shattering events.' What sort of things would count as the 'sun and the moon falling from heaven, and the powers of the heavens being shaken'? Well, for example, having four different emperors on the throne within a year (remember, of course, that the Roman emperor was the ruler of most of the known world), each one having got there by means of a military coup. That is what happened in AD 69. Then, when Jerusalem was captured and burnt the next year, the only language that would be appropriate would be that of cosmic collapse, 'It was the end of the world for all sorts of people—with the awful corollary that they still had to wake up to another morning and somehow get on with life in the form it had now taken.'

There is a lot more to be said about all this, but this must suffice for the present.⁵ The key thing to realize is where the normal reading of apocalyptic will lead. If you read apocalyptic as referring to the destruction of the world, as is so often done, you buy into a world view which is neither the early Jewish nor the early Christian one, but is a rather different sort of thing, / having more affinities either with Gnosticism (the physical world is evil and to be destroyed) or Stoicism (the cosmos will all burn up, and will then be reborn like a phoenix in exactly the same form) than with mainstream Christianity.

Revelation 21: The Heavenly City.

The final biblical passage I shall look at here is Revelation 21. Revelation is not all about 'the future,' as though it were an Old Moore's Almanack for events yet to occur. This mistake is deeply rooted in many traditional readings of the book, and have woven themselves into much popular piety. Consider, for instance, Charles Wesley's wonderful hymn 'Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.' In the final verse, reaching a great climax, he writes:

Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee,
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise!

I hasten to say that I would rather have many a Wesley hymn, albeit allowing for some (as I see it) misreadings of Scripture, than most hymns of the nineteenth century, and many of the twentieth. But in this verse the great Methodist songster has done three things over which I think we must raise a question mark. First, he has apparently restricted 'new creation' to the work of God in human beings (assuming that the second line explains what he means by the first); the aim of salvation is that we shall be 'perfectly restored.' What then of Paul's great vision of the

whole creation being set free from its bondage to decay (Romans 8, on which see below)? Second, he has quoted 2 Corinthians 3.18 ('Changed from glory into glory') as though that text referred to a future transformation. But that text clearly refers to the present process whereby Christians, looking at the work of the Spirit in one another, are transformed from one degree of glory into another—a process to be completed hereafter, no doubt, but the thrust of what Paul says in the whole passage relates to the present, not the future.⁶ Third, and the germane point for our present discussion: Wesley seems to assume that Revelation 4 and 5, the glorious scene in heaven with the elders casting their crowns before the throne of God (4.10), is a vision of the future, the eventual state of the blessed. But this is clearly not the case. It is a description of present reality: creation worshipping God, and the people of God taking up the song and personalizing it. When the seer is told (4.1), 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this,' the initial vision is not of the things that are to take place later; it is of the throne-room within which the future will be revealed in subsequent chapters of Revelation. A great many popular pictures of 'heaven,' conceived as a purely future state (perhaps even up in the sky somewhere), are similar misreadings of the wonderful picture-language by which Revelation describes the heavenly dimension of present reality.

Nor is Revelation, in Austin Farrer's phrase, a kind of 'Cook's Tour' of heaven, telling you 'what things will be like when you get there.' Rather, it is a disclosure of what is true all along in God's dimension of reality, for which the biblical name is 'heaven.'

What then does Revelation say about the future? One thing that is true of the heavenly reality is that, like the gift in the cupboard, there is there a secure future for God's people. But that future, according to Revelation 21, is not that people will escape up to heaven, but that the new Jerusalem will come down from heaven, so that the dwelling of God will be with his human creatures, and that, eventually, heaven and earth will not be separated, but, in being renewed, will be integrated with each other. The great claim of Revelation 21 and 22 is that heaven and earth will finally be united. This is the polar opposite of all kinds of Gnosticism, with their ultimate separation of heaven and earth—a worldview which is all too suspiciously close to some forms of devout Western Christianity.

This, then, is the first and easily the longest of the stages by which I am ~ advancing my claim. The passages in the New Testament which would most naturally be called up to support the idea of 'going to heaven when you die' do not in fact do so. Rather, they point to God's heaven, God's life, God's dimension, impregnating, permeating, charging (in Hopkins' sense) the present world, eventually producing new or renewed heavens and new or renewed earth, integrated with each other.

3 On this chapter see *NTPG* ch 10, and, above all, *JVG* ch 8.

4 On this theme see particularly George B Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (2nd edn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

5 See my forthcoming book *The Myth of the Millennium* (London and Louisville: SPCK and Westminster John Knox, 1999) ch 2.

6 See NT Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh and Minneapolis: T & T Clark and Fortress, 1991) ch 9.

The second stage by which I advance my thesis is to suggest, more positively, that the weight of biblical theology as a whole actually falls on the renewal of heaven and earth. There is no space here to expound this in detail, so I choose one particular central passage to make the point. The prediction of new heavens and new earth at the end of Isaiah (66.22) can of course be called as witness; but the most obvious passage is Romans 8: 18-28. Here, in one of the most central statements in the New Testament about what God intends to do with the whole cosmos, the matter is set out quite clearly. This passage is regularly marginalized in mainstream Protestant interpretations of Romans (chs 9-11 suffer a similar fate). If you insist on reading Romans simply as a book about how human beings 'get saved,' in the sense of 'going to heaven when they die,' you will find that these verses function as a kind of odd, apocalyptic appendix. That, in consequence, is how the tradition has often regarded them, both in the 'radical' scholarship of Lutherans like Bultmann and Kasemann and in the 'conservative' readings of much evangelical scholarship. In fact, the passage is the deliberate and carefully planned climax to the whole train of thought in Romans 5-8, and indeed Romans 1-8, as a whole.

Paul's whole argument is that the renewal of God's covenant results in the renewal of God's creation. (That, incidentally, is the sequence of thought also in 2 Corinthians 3-5.) Romans has expounded the fall of Adam (1.18-32, made explicit in 5.12-21). How is the fall of Adam reversed? Clearly, through Christ: but when Paul talks of the work of Christ (and of the Spirit, which implements the work of Christ) he uses explicit 'new covenant' language to do it. Israel is God's means of rescuing the world, but Israel herself needs renewal if this is to happen. Rom 5.20 is the key: the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin abounded grace super-abounded. In 7.1-8.11, which unpacks 5.20, Paul speaks of the renewal of the covenant: what the law could not do, because it had to work with sinful human flesh, God has done in Christ and by the Spirit.

But the result of the renewal of covenant, according to regular prophetic Jewish literature, is the renewal of creation. That is why, in Romans 4.13, Paul says that the promise to Abraham and his seed was that they should inherit not the land, as one might expect, but the world, the cosmos. When God does for his people what he intends to do for them, the whole cosmos, the whole creation, will be renewed as well. The wilderness and the barren land will celebrate. In Romans 8: 18-27 we have the exodus-motif, which Paul has applied to the people of God in 8: 12-17, applied now to the cosmos as a whole: the whole creation 'will be set free from its bondage to decay, and share the liberty of the glory of the children of God.' This in turn is the completion of an exodus-motif which has run through several chapters of Romans, not least ch 6, where God's people come through the waters (baptism, in parallel with the Red Sea⁷), and so are freed from slavery (sin, in parallel with Egypt), whereupon they are given, not the Torah this time, but the Spirit. And it is the Spirit that will lead them into their promised land, the renewed and liberated cosmos.

This is not, then, a theology in which human beings are set free from spacetime existence and escape into a 'salvation' which is detached from the created world. It is a theology which answers explicitly to the problem of the cosmos as set out in Genesis 1-3, where the integration of

humans with the whole creation gives way to the subsequent dislocation and fracturing of that integration: thorns, thistles, and pain, shame, toil and sorrow for humans and the cosmos. Notice the way in which, throughout Isaiah 40-55 and reaching a climax in the final verses of the last chapter, the liberation of God's people from exile is inextricably linked with the rejoicing of all creation, the wilderness and the barren land celebrating along with Israel:

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to YHWH for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.
(Isaiah 55.12-13)

This is the kind of picture, we may suppose, that Paul has in mind when he holds out the salvation which arises out of the new covenant in Christ and the Spirit: the creation itself will enjoy its exodus, its liberation.

This is the theology upon which Paul then builds the more specific argument of Romans, in 9-11 and 12-16. It is not Paul, therefore, who speaks of leaving the cosmos to its own devices and of finding a salvation elsewhere. It is Gnosticism that twists apocalyptic into escapisms. This, then, is the second step in my argument: that biblical theology as a whole, witnessed here by one recognizably climactic passage within it, points firmly in the direction of the liberation of heaven and earth, rather than towards an escapist salvation. The new world will be more real, more physically solid, than the present one, as was brilliantly envisaged in C S Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. We speak of people being 'shadows of their former selves'; if 2 Corinthians 5.1-10 is correct, we should think of ourselves as being shadows of our future selves in God's purpose.

7 See 1 Cor 10.2. 8 See Christopher C Rowland. *Christian Origins: From Messianic Movement to Christian Religion* (London/Minneapolis: SPCK/ Augsburg. 1985).

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'Heaven' as God's Dimension of Present Reality

The third step in my argument is to suggest that a proper Christian understanding of heaven is not as 'a place remote from the present world' but rather as a dimension, normally kept secret, of present reality. I have already anticipated this in one or two places and must now fill it out somewhat further.⁹ The idea that heaven is a distant place, perhaps up in the sky somewhere, is of course easily recognized as misleading today; most people know that that is not actually what we mean by such language. However, I suspect that a great many influential writers, not least hymn writers, in the last few centuries, have been influenced by some form of Deism, with a God who is somewhat removed from present reality, and so all too easily have written about God's dwelling place as 'way beyond the blue' and so on. This produced the farcical situation where Nikita Krushchev could claim that the early Russian astronauts had gone to look for God in space, and had not found him, thus disproving his existence. As C S Lewis said at the time, some of us would have been rather worried if they had found God, or paradise, in outer space. Rather, 'heaven' is God's dimension of present reality.

One of the best examples in Scripture of how this works out is in 2 Kings 6.15-19. Elisha and his servant are surrounded by the Syrian army. The servant, not unnaturally, says 'Alas, master, we are undone.' Elisha replies, telling him to be calm: 'Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' Is this simply something he has to take on trust? Yes and no. Elisha prays: 'Lord, open the young man's eyes.' The Lord opens his eyes, and he sees the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. A sudden unveiling of what was there all along, but normally unseen: that is what the opening of heaven (or, in this case, the opening of eyes so that they see the heavenly reality) is all about. When we read in apocalyptic writings 'I saw heaven opened' (as in Revelation 4.1 and elsewhere) this does not mean, even within the apocalyptic literary convention, that the seer had some kind of spiritual telescope through which he could see, miles and miles up in the sky, a door being opened, through which he could peep into 'heaven' itself. Rather, the opening of heaven is like what happened to Elisha and his servant. A veil which is normally present is suddenly pulled away, so that what is usually invisible becomes visible. That, I think, is a more biblical way of envisaging heaven.

It is interesting that the Eastern Orthodox Church seems to have got more of a handle on this than we have in the various Western Churches. The construction of an Orthodox Church is such as to divide the building by a screen, covered with icons; east of the screen, where much of the liturgy takes place, all is designed to symbolize heaven, and west of the screen, where the people are, symbolizes earth. The liturgy takes place in 'heaven,' since in Orthodox eucharistic theology that is exactly what is going on: heaven and earth are not distant spheres, separated by a great geographical or ontological distance, but actually overlap and interlock, supremely in Jesus but thereafter in the Eucharist. That is why, among many other things, the gospel is brought out to the people, moving from heaven to earth. The Orthodox have thus retained something of the old sense, present in the Temple in Jerusalem, that the sacred space in question is not merely a signpost of a different reality, but actually partakes in the reality itself. For a devout and well-taught Jew, the Holy of Holies was not just a place on earth where one might sense more particularly the presence of God; it was the place on earth where heaven and earth intersected, in a quite literal sense. Western Churches in the Gothic tradition have made a similar point by the use of soaring arches and vaulting, and particularly by the use of light through high windows. A Gothic cathedral symbolizes by its structure that we are worshipping with the angels, archangels and all the company of heaven, not least when we make music that rolls around the rafters and joins in (symbolically? why not actually?) with the music of the angels.

All this has an interesting spin-off in terms of one element of usual Christian language, namely that the old split between 'natural' and 'supernatural' is ill-conceived. When we find ourselves talking about 'nature' and 'supernature,' as we still do, I think we are running some conceptual risks. It would be more biblical, in my view, if when we wanted to make this sort of distinction we spoke instead about 'earthly' and 'heavenly.' There is a distinction between earthly and heavenly, and we do well to recognize it, not simply to pretend they are just the same thing, or to collapse one category into the other. There is a duality, a two-sidedness to God-given, God-created reality. But if we talk about 'natural' and 'supernatural,' we can easily slide back into that Deist framework of thought in which God lives in the 'supernatural' world and occasionally 'intervenes' in the 'natural' world; or, worse, into a neo-Gnosticism in which the 'natural' world is either trash or actually evil.

It is against the 'interventionist' view that theologians like John Hick and David Jenkins have protested. Faced with this protest, some traditionally-minded Christians have assumed that, in order to shore up their belief in the gospel, they must go bail for a total 'supernaturalism' as conceived in the eighteenth century, with all its language of 'miracle' and so on, as though there were an 'interventionist' God who occasionally reached in and stirred the pot, but who was normally absent. That is not the biblical view of God. The biblical view of God is as the one who is constantly present, who breathes with the breath of the world, and gives his own breath to his human creatures, who feeds the young ravens when they call upon him, and so on. It is our perspective, clouded of course by sin, that compartmentalizes God's world up into nature, supernature and such like. If we go on in that way, we will play into the hands of the New Agers and others like them. We live today in a period that is increasingly religious but decreasingly Christian. In that setting, simply to think that we have got to talk about 'the supernatural' all the time will render us unable to distinguish between the true God and the many false gods who are being hawked around. 'The supernatural' is not the same thing as the Christian view of God. That, then, is my third step: a proper understanding of heaven, leading to a proper distinction between heaven and earth, as opposed to the false antithesis of nature and supernature.

9 the chapter entitled '*Heaven*' in my *Following Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1994).

5

The Meaning of Resurrection

So to the fourth step. The traditional Christian doctrine of resurrection actually requires a robust sense of the new heavens and the new earth. I have discovered that some Christians, when using the word 'resurrection,' for instance in saying the Creed, mentally translate that word out so that it simply means 'survival,' a disembodied 'life after death.' The result of this is that when David Jenkins, then Bishop of Durham, expressed doubts over the physicality of Jesus' resurrection, many ordinary Christians heard him to be saying that he doubts survival. That is what they thought he was talking about. Of course, he was not; he was talking simply about what did and did not happen on Easter morning in relation to Jesus' body, the tomb, and so on.

Equally, many who today believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus do so simply because that is one plank in their second-order defence of a 'supernaturalist' worldview. Belief in the resurrection of Jesus is, for them, the supreme example of God's miraculous power; alternatively, the resurrection somehow 'proves' Jesus' 'divinity.' But resurrection as an idea began in a very different setting. It began in parts of the Old Testament as a function of the national hope. Ezekiel 37 is a wonderful picture of the return from exile, using resurrection as a great and evocative metaphor for what that return would mean. The idea developed through the period of the Maccabees in the second century BC, as people came to realize that, if there was any justice anywhere in the world, those who had died rather than compromise their loyalty to God and his Torah must be raised to life to share the new age of world history which God would eventually bring forth.

But this picture of resurrection is not simply about 'survival,' nor yet about the 'supernatural.' The Jews believed anyway that God would in some sense or other look after them after death; that is

not what their belief in 'resurrection' was getting at.¹² Many Jews of Jesus' and Paul's day believed not only in some sort of 'survival' but also that God would have a new world for them to live in one day, and that loyal Jews would inherit this recreated world. 'Resurrection,' as an idea, is designed to function within the overall belief in a renewed world, not as a thin 'survival' with the present cosmos simply abandoned. When it comes to early Christianity, the resurrection of Jesus seems to have triggered the announcement of the claim of the one true God upon the whole world. The message of the early Christians was not that the world was going to be destroyed and that one had better escape, nor that there was after all an after-life and that they had a way of accessing a happy version of it, but that the whole world belonged to the one true God, and that he was claiming the allegiance of his long-rebellious subjects within it.

11 For further details on what follows *cf* *NTPG* pp 320-334.

12 There is some debate at present on the subject of *sheol*, the OT abode of the dead: what people thought it was, who went there, and such like. I cannot go into this here.

6

Results of Different Views

My fifth step ties the threads together. If we speak simply of 'going to heaven when we die,' we run into serious problems in terms of its knock-on effects. It has the effect, if one is not careful, of inducing a Gnostic spirituality, in which the cultivation of the 'spiritual' life becomes more important than our responsibility in God's world. It encourages an individualistic view of salvation rather than the NT one. (Bishop Michael Marshall makes a good distinction, stressing that we should speak of 'personal' rather than 'individual,' and 'corporate' rather than 'collective.' 'Personal' and 'corporate' entail each other; 'individual' and 'collective' rule each other out.) The idea of escaping from the world to a non-spatio-temporal heaven encourages an unbiblical attitude towards creation, so that anyone who engages in ecological activity, or perhaps even feeding the hungry, is seen as somehow selling the pass. One should be doing something more 'spiritual.'

One can understand the longing for escape from this world in a context where people are suffering untold persecutions. 'This world is not my home; I'm just a-passing through' is comprehensible when sung by a black slave in the old American South, for whom the present world simply did not hold out any prospect of hope. (I am told, however, by sociologists of that period that even then the so-called 'Negro Spirituals' were 'heard' as coded messages, both of escape from the US to Canada and as calls to some sort of resistance or revolution-though I suspect for many who sang them they functioned simply as expressions of despair in this present world.) But it seems to me inexcusable and inescapably sub-Christian if one persists in saying 'I'm just passing through' if one is in fact living a comparatively comfortable life in this world. 'Passing through,' taken literally, is a far more Gnostic idea. I have, says the Gnostic, an immortal spark within me, which started off somewhere else, is in a state of transience here, and is then off on its travels somewhere else, perhaps to some kind of 'heaven.' It is remarkable how many people in our world would still say, if asked, that this is what Christians are supposed to believe.

7

Resurrection and Immortality

My basic thesis is now complete. It remains to fill in some important details. If my point is to be sustained, it should be clear that it actually requires something not always granted within theologies of resurrection. Within this scheme there is a necessary place for a concept of immortality-for a concept of immortality, but not the Platonic concept. It is, rather, a revision, in the light of Christ and the Spirit, of the Jewish concept (perhaps I should say, of a Jewish concept) of immortality. Resurrection and immortality are not simply to be played off against one another, as used to be done. Things are not that easy. We have to make some distinctions. Here pressure of space demands that I oversimplify a rather complex argument.

In his recent book, James Barr confuses, I think, different types of immortality. He confuses the idea of persons simply going on living, and never dying at all, with the idea of a soul continuing after death-and then with various different variations within that. He is so concerned, in attacking Cullmann and Stendahl, to make space for any sort of immortality at all being found in the Bible that anything, it seems, will do as evidence. There is, however, a well-known view of immortality which is not found in the early Jewish world and the New Testament (with the possible exception of Philo), namely, the Platonic view of the body as a shell which the immortal soul happens to inhabit for a while. I want in particular to emphasize the proper understanding of Wisdom of Solomon 3; I suspect that a great many discussions of immortality have referred to this passage at some point or other:

The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them; in the sight of the foolish they seemed to have died, but they are at peace. (3.1-3)

It is a well-known passage, sung regularly at funerals and memorial services, not least in its Latin text, *Iustorum animae in manu Dei sunt*. It is regularly heard, I suspect, as a statement of a generalized, perhaps Hellenized, 'immortality,' meaning that the final state of human beings, at least righteous ones, is to live with God as disembodied souls. What you almost never hear is what the passage goes on to say: that, after these people have rested awhile, out of the sight of their tormentors and persecutors,

at the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and run like sparks through the stubble; they will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them for ever. (3.7-8)

What is this whole passage about? It is about the Jewish hope of the coming Kingdom of the true God, ruling over the world in justice and peace. Those who at present are resting will rise again to be God's agents in that renewed world. This falls within the Jewish martyr-literature; it is cognate with the books of the Maccabees. Part of the whole point of the passage is that the wicked, who were persecuting the righteous, celebrated a triumph over them, supposing them to be dead and gone. But the righteous are in fact at peace, and will rise again to rule the world and overturn the apparent victory of their oppressors.

The book Wisdom is not in the Protestant canon, as it was not in the ancient Jewish one. We are not committed to this way of putting things-though we may note that there are several analogies between this passage and parts of the New Testament, as we shall see presently. What matters is

this: Wisdom 3, the main passage regularly cited as evidence for first-century Jews believing in the Greek view of 'immortality,' proves nothing of the sort. It is evidence for a particular way of construing the Jewish hope. Those who are suffering and dying at the moment will disappear; the wicked will celebrate a triumph over them; but they will be at rest, with God; and they will rise again to rule over God's renewed creation.

Something of that same shape, though redefined by Christ and the Spirit, is what we find in the New Testament. When Jesus says to the brigand, 'Today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23.43), he is referring to this I same concept. 'Paradise' is a regular Jewish way of referring, not to the final destination of God's people, but to the temporary place of rest before the rising again from the dead.¹³ When Jesus says to the Sadducees that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and that therefore they are alive 'to him' (Mark 12.18-27 and parallels), this might seem to be simply talking about 'survival' ('Oh yes, they're still alive somewhere'). But within the wider Jewish context that idea of being still alive somewhere, rather like the gift in the cupboard, is the sign that they are going to rise again to a new life, a full life. As often within Rabbinic discussions, the final step in the argument, like the final moves in a high-level chess game, is left unstated; both parties know when the game is really over. What Jesus needed to prove was simply that the patriarchs were still alive in the presence of God; the strong implication is that God will one day renew all things, and then those who are now 'alive to him' in this way will be given new, re-embodied, life.

Paul's language about departing' and being with Christ' (Philippians 1.23) belongs here as well. He has taken a regular Jewish view about the dead 'being' alive to God,' and has re-thought this, as so many things, in the light of Jesus Christ. Paul does not suppose, however, that this state of simply being 'with Christ' is the end of the matter; the time will come when Jesus will himself change the body of our humiliation to be like the body of his glory' (Philippians 3.21). When Paul also uses the language of 'sleep,' as he does in 1 Corinthians 15.51 and 1 Thessalonians 4.13-15, this is a metaphor, but not a misleading metaphor. When one sleeps, one is still alive, albeit, as we sometimes say, 'dead to the world.' There is a sense of peculiarity, of retreating for a while from the present hurly-burly of things, in order then to awake to a fuller life again. There is continuity; and I suggest that for Paul, and for the other early Christian writers, the resurrection of Jesus has, literally and metaphorically, put flesh and bones on to the rather vague Jewish hope of an immortality succeeded by a resurrection.

'Departing and being with Christ,' or 'living to God,' then, are for the New Testament writers ways of expressing a temporary stage, ahead of the time when God will restore all things, and will renew his people to bodily life, in the midst of his new creation. Paul believes, after all, that God has given his own Spirit to his people; and if God has deigned to dwell within his people, by his own Spirit, then God is well able to keep by that same Spirit those who are his until, again by that same Spirit (Romans 8.10-11), he gives to them their renewed bodies.¹⁴ And, in the renewal of our bodies, we may assume that there will be continuity without the suggestion of absolute physical identity. God does not need to search for the same atoms and molecules that once constituted us; if he did, there would not be nearly enough to go round, since we all wear second-hand clothes in that respect. We are all of us, as C S Lewis says, like the curve in a waterfall; our bodies are in a state of physical flux. Any resurrection to physical life will involve a massive act of new creation. No doubt that was so for Jesus himself, though because the new creation of his

body preceded the decomposition of his original body there was a close continuity which we do not need to imagine in the case of those of whom Christ, in Paul's language, is the first-fruits.

13 An important study of this whole area is Andrew T Lincoln. *Paradise Now and Not Yet, Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to His Eschatology*, SNTS Monograph Series. vol 43 (Cambridge: CUP, 1981).

14 This has all kinds of overtones for how we read Genesis 1-3, but this again would take us too far afield in the present essay.

8

Results

What are the results of construing the Christian hope in this way? It gives us a view of creation which emphasizes the goodness of God's world, and God's intention to renew it. It gives us, therefore, every possible incentive, or at least every Christian incentive, to work for the renewal of God's creation and for justice within God's creation. Not that we are building the kingdom by our own efforts. Let us not lapse into that. Rather, what we are doing here and now is building for God's kingdom. It is what Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 3.10-15: there is continuity between our present work and God's future kingdom, even though the former will have to pass through fire to attain the latter. It is also clearly implied in 1 Corinthians 15.58: the conclusion of Paul's enormous exposition of the resurrection is not an outburst of joy at the glorious life to come, but a sober exhortation to work for the kingdom in the present, because we know that our work here and now is not in vain in the Lord. In other words, belief in the resurrection, the other side, if need be, of a period of disembodied life in the Lord (cf Cor 15.29), validates and so encourages present Christian life, work and witness.

A suspicious reader might, perhaps, think that this is sliding down the hill towards some kind of naturalism or even pantheism. That would be quite wrong. This same theology, precisely because it speaks of a renewed heaven and earth, rules out any sort of pantheism such as (for instance) you find in New Age theology at the moment. It emphasizes that creation is good, but in need of renewal and restoration by a mighty act of God, parallel to the resurrection of Jesus. We cannot divinize nature as she stands; were we to do so, we would be locking ourselves in the cabin of a ship that is going down, since nature as she stands is subject to the long, slow (to our eyes) process of decay. 'Change and decay in all around I see'; but that does not mean that the cosmos is evil, merely that it is not divine.

The Christian hope cannot, therefore, collapse into individualism ('me and my salvation'). If we allowed it to, we might be making a similar mistake in our theological context to that of first-century Israel in her theological context. We would imagine that God's whole purpose focused on us and us alone, instead of seeing grace as summoning us to be God's agents in mission to and for the whole world. (This, I suggest, is the way to a proper construal of being in the image of God—not simply that we as humans are somehow like God, a rather impressive thing to be, but that we as God's image are to reflect his saving, healing love into the rest of God's creation.)

As for the use of language, therefore, I suggest that it is all right to use the word 'heaven,' so long as we remember that it refers to God's dimension of present-to-hand reality. If we talk about 'going to heaven,' we strictly speaking should remember that that means 'going to be with God, with Christ, until the time when God makes new heavens and new earth and gives humans new bodies appropriate for citizens of this realm.' The language of 'going to heaven' is so ingrained in us that I sometimes despair of correcting the false impressions that are thereby given; but I think the attempt must be made. Another example from a popular hymn, 'Sun of my soul, thou saviour dear'; after a devout and humble sequence of prayer, the last verse suddenly turns from Christianity to Buddhism:

Come near and bless us when we wake,
Ere through the world our way we take;
Till in the ocean of thy love
We lose ourselves in heaven above.

One suspects that many devout Western Christians are blithely unaware of the way in which that thought, of the soul leaving the physical world and becoming lost, a drop in the ocean of disembodied reality, manages at a stroke to deconstruct the New Testament picture of the future life.

Should we continue, then, to speak of 'souls' at all? I see no problem with the word in principle (as Lewis Carroll suggested, you can use words how- I ever you like as long as you pay them extra on Thursdays); you can say 'soul,' as long as you are committed to meaning by that 'a whole human being living in the presence of God.' Soul-language, within a Christian context, is a shorthand for telling a story of that sort, a story about the way in which human beings as wholes are irreducibly open to God. It is not, within Christian theology, a shorthand for a story in which a partitioned human being has a soul in one compartment, a body in another, and quite possibly all sorts of other bits and pieces equally divided up. We can then continue to (use the word 'soul' with fully Christian meaning; but we should be careful, I because the language has had a chequered history, and may betray us.

The language of 'soul' is telling a story; the trouble with shorthands is that they can become absolutized. The story is of a person as a person living with God and towards God, , departing and being with Christ.' I prefer not to push beyond where Scripture takes us on such things; Paul does not speculate as to what more precisely happens when one has thus' departed.' In 2 Corinthians 5.1-5 he is stressing that the eventual goal is a totally renewed vi' body, not a disembodied spirit. It is natural for us to use the language of separation of body and soul, in order that we then have a word available to talk about the person who is still alive in the presence of God while the body is obviously decomposing, But we should not think of the soul as a part of the person that was always, so to speak, waiting to be separated off, like the curds from the whey.

The language of immortality itself, then, has to be held within the whole sweep of thought from creation to new creation. Some churches, I have noticed, have stopped saying merely, of the departed, 'may they rest in peace,' and have added 'and rise in glory.' That, it seems to me, is a thoroughly proper thing to say of those who have gone on ahead of us. Another example from

popular piety would be the hymn 'For All the Saints,' in which we find the two things clearly separated: first, 'Paradise,' where the blessed are resting in anticipation of the final day, and then the resurrection:

The golden evening brightens in the west;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors cometh rest:
Sweet is the calm of Paradise the blest. Alleluia!

But lo! There breaks a yet more glorious day;
The Saints triumphant rise in bright array:
The King of glory passes on his way. Alleluia!

That, it seems to me, is an example of a Victorian hymn getting it exactly right. Rest in Paradise (or, if you prefer, in 'heaven'); then the resurrection, the great renewal of all things, the marriage of heaven and earth.

Christian hope, therefore, is for a full, recreated life in the presence and love of God, a totally renewed creation, an integrated new heavens and new earth, and a complete humanness—complete not in and for itself as an isolated entity, but complete in worship and love for God, complete in love for one another as humans, complete in stewardship over God's world, and so, and only in that complete context, a full humanness in itself.

Of course, the most glorious feature of the whole renewed creation, the new heavens and the new earth, will be the personal presence of Jesus himself. 'When he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3.2). Or, as another hymn puts it, 'And our eyes at last shall see him/ Through his own redeeming love' (though the hymn then spoils it somewhat by implying that this seeing will be in 'heaven above,' rather than in God's complete new-heaven-and-new-earth new creation.) Since the Greek word for 'presence,' particularly for 'royal presence,' is *parousia*, it seems to me that that word is misunderstood if we think of it as simply 'coming.' Jesus will indeed 'come again,' from the perspective of those still labouring here in the present earth; but I believe it is more appropriate, and more biblical, to see Jesus' personal presence, within the glorious renewed cosmos, as the ultimate feature of Christian hope.¹⁵ But that is another subject, for another occasion.

¹⁵ I have said more on this subject in ch 14 of Marcus J Borg and N T Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco and London: Harper San Francisco and SPCK. 1999).