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Where Is Heaven? Robert C. Newman

After one of the early Russian astronauts returned from orbit around the earth, he remarked that he was satisfied that God does not exist, since he had not seen Him while travelling in the heavens! Absurd as it sounds, this sort of scoff is not rare. Theologically liberal works on the Bible commonly teach that the Bible’s picture of heaven is some sort of “attic” up above the solid sky.

Just what does the Bible have to say about the location of heaven? To answer this question, we must first distinguish which heaven we are talking about. For instance, 2 Cor 12:2 speaks of a “third heaven,” which apparently means the place of God’s dwelling or presence. The other two heavens implied by this phrase appear, after some study, to refer to the air or atmosphere, as the Bible often speaks of “birds of heaven,” and what we now call outer space, as Scripture refers to the “stars of heaven.” Thus, in a religious context, it is the “third heaven,” or abode of God, that is usually meant by “heaven.”

So, what we would like to know is the location of God’s special dwelling place. There are, of course, many Scriptures which speak of it as being “up,” from which, naturally enough, most people have assumed it is up in the sky somewhere. As astronomers have looked further and further out into space, such people have been forced to move heaven further and further away, or to hide it in certain dark nebulae. But is this really the Scriptural view?

How far up is heaven? References about travelling to heaven do not indicate that any substantial distance is involved. When Jacob sees the ladder reaching into heaven, he recognizes God standing at the top. Since God’s appearances in human form are also in human size, this implies that the top of the ladder is not very far away, surely much less than a mile. So likewise in regard to the ascension of our Lord, we see that Jesus is only taken up into a cloud when He disappears.

Only one passage would seem to speak of travel to heaven going beyond the stars, Isaiah 14:13. Yet careful examination of this passage reveals that the king of Babylon is compared to the “morning star” Venus (improperly translated as a personal name, Lucifer). Thus the remark that the king will exalt his throne **above the stars** only compares his pride to the fact that the planet Venus really is exalted **in brightness** above the other stars. There is here no Scripture warrant for any great distance to heaven.

But is heaven always “up” in the Bible? Several passages speak of an unseen world all around us, as for example in 2 Kings 6:17, where Elisha’s servant is allowed to see that he and the prophet are protected from the Syrian army by a great company of horses and fiery chariots surrounding the city. Such invisible angelic beings are frequently called the “armies of heaven,” which certainly could mean that their sphere of activity, the invisible world around us, is heaven.

Even more to the point, however, is the Biblical description of God's appearance to Israel at Mt. Sinai. In Nehemiah 9:13, God is represented as having come down upon the mountain and yet as having spoken from heaven. Similarly, Deuteronomy 4:35 says:

Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice ... and **upon earth** he shewed thee his great fire; and thou heardest his words out of the midst of the fire.

Both of these passages seem to say that heaven is upon Mt. Sinai at the time of these events.

The same impression is given by the direct account of these event related in Exodus 20:21-22:

And the people stood afar off: and Moses drew near unto the **thick darkness where** God was. And the LORD said to Moses, Thus shall you say to the children of Israel: Ye have seen that I have talked with you **from heaven**.

It thus appears from Scripture that heaven, in the sense of God's special dwelling place, is all around us, although for some reason we cannot see it unless God chooses to reveal it. Such a picture is very fruitful in helping us to understand a number of puzzling passages related to visions of heaven, the appearance of peculiar clouds, Jesus' entrance into a closed room after His resurrection, the "rolling up" of the sky at the Last Judgment, and so forth. It should also give us a renewed appreciation of the nearness of God and of His watchful care over those who are depending on Him.

How may we understand the connection between our visible world and heaven? This is a matter on which we can only speculate. One suggestion has been given in the Moody Science Film **Facts of Faith**, where it is proposed that the forces of our world (which would involve all our senses) do not interact with those of heaven. However, I personally prefer a picture involving multi-dimensional spaces. Let me attempt to describe my suggestion.

To do this we need to look briefly at geometry, that rather odd branch of mathematics which most of us learned in high school in a form virtually unchanged since the time of the ancient Greeks. During the nineteenth century, however, several mathematicians made some important "mental experiments" with geometry. Noting that the parallelism postulate of Euclid (given a line, and a point not on that line, there is **one and only one** line which can be drawn through that point parallel to the given line) did not seem to be necessary, the German Wilhelm Riemann substituted the postulate that **no** such parallel line could be drawn. Surprisingly enough, the resulting geometry turned out to be practical! It is the geometry for a curved space such as (in two dimensions) the surface of a sphere, whereas Euclid's geometry in two dimensions is that of a flat surface.

The Russian Nikolai Lowachevsky, on the other hand, proposed that **more than one** such parallel line could be drawn. As a result, he discovered the geometry of another sort of curved space, which in two dimensions looks roughly like the surface of a riding saddle.

Meanwhile, other mathematicians expanded the scope of geometry to study spaces have more than merely three spatial dimensions.

Early in this [20th] century the physicist Albert Einstein discovered that these strange ideas about multi-dimensional curved space actually seemed to apply to our own universe – that our three-dimensional space is actually “bent” in the presence of gravity. His ideas were presented in his General Theory of Relativity.

Now even mathematicians (not to mention laymen!) have a hard time visualizing a three-dimensional space being curved (since it is necessary to imagine some fourth spatial dimension or direction into which to bend it). So to illustrate some properties of such a space, it is necessary to “retreat” to a two-dimensional space in order to visualize what is going on. Imagine then, a flat sheet of paper. It is a two-dimensional space, and its geometry satisfies Euclid’s parallelism postulate. But if it were bent (some stretching and crumpling will also be necessary) to form part of the surface of a sphere, it would no longer satisfy this postulate.

Now let us imagine two-dimensional people living in this flat surface. They cannot see out of the surface but only within it, just as our senses are limited to the three dimensions in which we live. If a three-dimensional object (say a sphere) were to visit this three-dimensional space, the two-dimensional people would be terrified, just as we would by a visit from one inhabiting four dimensions. For instance, the sphere entering the two-dimensional space would look like a circle (the intersection of the sphere with the plane), but it would be able to change size by moving perpendicular to the plane, and it could also enter the two-dimensional space at any point (seeming to appear from nowhere) by moving parallel to the plane while not in it. In just the same way, a four-dimensional “sphere” could enter our three-dimensional space and appear to us as an ordinary sphere (but variable in size!), yet it could show up anywhere in our space without having passed through any other part of our visible space.

It seems to me that the appearance of Jesus to His disciples on Easter Sunday evening might have been something like this. The doors are locked, but Jesus is suddenly in their midst! There is no statement that He came through way, floor or ceiling, yet He is seen and touched by them and He eats food in their presence. We can imagine our resurrected Lord as one who is no longer restricted to our three-dimensional space. Instead He can now move in a fourth direction into which we can neither move nor point, and which we can scarcely imagine. But He, by moving perhaps only a fraction of an inch in this fourth direction, may enter or leave our space at will.

Likewise, then, we gain a terrifying picture of the reality of the Last Judgment when (perhaps) all mankind is moved a thousandth of an inch in this fourth direction so that “heaven and earth flee away and no place is found for them” (Revelation 20:11) and we stand in the presence of God Almighty to answer for our every act and thought.

No doubt, several of the above paragraphs are speculation, and further investigation may prove them inaccurate. Yet even such guesses show us that the Scriptures are not to be

dismissed as merely the gropings of primitive men, but they are consistent with the latest results of modern science and mathematics. Our God is the One who really exists, and He will do all that He has promised us in His word.