

## **A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Case for a Holistic Reading of the Biblical Story of Redemption**

Over the past quarter of a century, various evangelical Christian voices have articulated the bold, even startling, claim that the eternal destiny of the redeemed consists in the renewal of earthly life to the exclusion of a disembodied heaven hereafter. This claim goes beyond the hybrid idea of eternal fellowship with God “in heaven” experienced through a resurrected body. Indeed, it entirely does away with the notion of “heaven” as an eternal hope, since this concept is thought to be fundamentally incompatible with authentic biblical faith. While this claim has been warmly received in some circles (especially those seeking to develop a holistic Christian worldview), it has been condemned as heresy in others (professors in Christian colleges have been known to lose their jobs for teaching this).

This paper explores the theological, and especially the exegetical, case for a consistent understanding of redemption as the restoration of God’s creational intent, such that the appropriate hope of the redeemed is life in a renewed intra-mundane creation. The first step towards making this case is to clarify the inner theological logic of the claim, utilizing a creation-fall-redemption paradigm. Here it will be important to distinguish the logic of redemption as the reversal of the fall and the restoration of God’s creational intent (which is the core of the biblical testimony) from our Greek philosophical inheritance of redemption as transferal from a lower, inferior realm (body, earth, matter, nature) to a higher, more valued or esteemed realm (soul, heaven, spirit, grace). It will also be important to distinguish the unwarranted limitation of the idea of creation to “nature” (the non-human) in the modern western tradition from the biblical concept of creation, which includes human society and culture in all its complexity and fullness along with our earthly environment—an idea that the Bible shares with its ancient Mesopotamian milieu. With these two distinctions in mind it becomes easier to see that the traditional idea of “heaven” as perpetual fellowship with, and worship of, God typically implies the negation of large areas of human life (that God created good) and thus does not constitute a genuine redemption of the multifaceted world God intended from the beginning. On the contrary, the logic of biblical redemption requires the restoration and renewal of the full complexity of human life in our earthly environment, yet without sin.

This inner theological logic will, however, need to be supplemented with a two-pronged exegetical exploration of the content of Scripture. First, the paper will examine five representative New Testament texts that describe our eschatological hope as the repairing of what went wrong in the fall and that apply this repair as holistically or comprehensively as possible to all creation, human and non-human. These five texts are Acts 3:17-21 (esp. 21), Ephesians 1:7-10 (esp. 10), Colossians 1:16-20 (esp. 20), 2 Peter 3:10-13 (esp. 10 & 13), and Romans 8:19-23 (esp. 21 & 23) and together they envision nothing less than the redemption of all things in heaven and on earth (with earth understood as the dwelling of humanity).

The second exegetical strategy of this paper will be to sketch the complex plot structure of the entire biblical metanarrative that is represented in abbreviated form by the creation-fall-redemption paradigm. Using basic narrative analysis, this sketch will address the major plot moves of the biblical story, from Genesis to Revelation. By attending to the basic thrust and movement of the biblical plot it becomes clear that eschatological redemption consists in the

renewal of human cultural life on earth. More than that, the idea of heaven as the eternal hope of the righteous has no structural place in the story. It is simply irrelevant and extraneous to the plot. Heaven was never part of God's purposes for humanity in the beginning and has no intrinsic role as the final destiny of human salvation. Indeed, that there is not one single reference in the entire biblical canon (Old or New Testament) to "heaven" as the eternal destiny of the believer. While this idea has an important role in popular Christian imagination (and even theology), not once does Scripture itself actually say that the righteous will live forever in "heaven."

In response to this bold (even brash) claim, certain New Testament texts are typically adduced as counter examples, which seem to suggest an extra-mundane destiny for the redeemed. These texts include Jesus' reference to the place he was going to prepare for the disciples in John, 14:1-3, the idea of the "rapture" in Matthew 24:36-44 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, and Paul's description of the heavenly dwelling and his desire to be absent from the body and present with the Lord in 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10 (to this may be added Jesus' words to the thief on the cross about entry into paradise and the parable of the rich man in torment and Lazarus in Abraham's bosom). These proposed counter-examples will be carefully examined for what they actually say. A close reading of these texts, however, suggests not only that they do not teach an extra-mundane destiny for the redeemed, but that they fit very well with a consistent understanding of redemption as the restoration of bodily life on earth (that is, the renewal of God's creational intent from the beginning).

Having argued, theologically and exegetically, for a holistic vision of biblical redemption, the paper will conclude with some reflections on the ethical implications of this vision for human life.

J. Richard Middleton  
Roberts Wesleyan College