

The Significance of Place in the Contemporary Theological Discourse of Heaven

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This study will offer a critical assessment of the hearings of heaven in contemporary theological discourse. After engaging with various eschatological perspectives that pertain to the contemporary discussion of heaven, I will demonstrate that there is an urgent need in eschatology to focus not only on the reality of heaven “at hand” but also on the Christian hope of bodily resurrection and new creation “not yet.” By building upon the work of various theologians, I will argue that the marginalization of place-centred thinking in theology has had a dangerous effect on the contemporary hearing of heaven. As a result, a biblical depiction of the future heaven has either been distorted because of a platonic understanding or under-emphasized by way of the myth of progress. By considering the urban imagery in Revelation 21:1-4, I will demonstrate that Jerusalem should not only be interpreted as God’s people in place but also the place believers will inherit in the future.

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Introduction

There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our hearts, we have not desired anything else.

—C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*¹

I. The Way One Hears of Heaven

C. S. Lewis suggests that every person has the same desire—heaven. Is this true? Other individuals would oppose Lewis' perspective by arguing that there is absence of irrefutable proof in the world to justify certainty in God and the afterlife. In his work, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant argues that if one cannot prove something's existence by way of the critical method, the object or system should not be the foundation for pure reason.² This raises the question, if one cannot empirically prove that heaven or an afterlife truly exists, why do so many people believe in it? I would suggest that the study of heaven is linked to three basic questions that Kant claims are the foundation by which every person comes to reasonable conclusions about their existence and the existence of the world around them:³

1. What can I know?
2. What should I do?

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: Macmillian Press, 1962), 145.

² Emmanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp-Smith (London: Macmillan Press, 1958), 635.

³ It should be clarified that although this investigation will utilize the same questions presented by Kant, the manner in which heaven will be engaged will by no means follow Kant's rationale for understanding pure reason or be associated with his conclusions.

3. What may I hope?

Whether we realize it or not, these three questions provide the framework by which one perceives and understand life itself. These three questions are also relevant to the contemporary discussion of heaven. Hearing of heaven today means filtering what one knows about heaven through personal perceptions of reality.⁴ One can assume that almost every North American has heard the word “heaven” at least once in his or her life. Although the word has originated within religious contexts, most individuals—with or without a faith background—refer to or believe in the concept of heaven. In 2011, Pamela Fickenscher, a co-pastor of a Lutheran church in Edina, Minnesota, did a broad study of the eschatology of middle-class, mainline Christians. She discovered a problem that faces the Protestant church. We aspire to teach and preach a creedal faith that maintains a steady gaze on the horizon of ultimate things but we rarely think about life beyond the here and now until we are stirred by the distress associated with death.⁵ I have seen it myself in my own occupation. Working as a pastor at a Mennonite church and a chaplain at a long-term-care facility, I notice that we become so preoccupied with living and being good persons in the present but rarely discuss the nature of life after death until our own mortality or that of a loved one comes into question.

II. The Reason for this Study

This study springs from my own ministerial experiences in which my discussions with individuals about death have generated some surprising insights about the common perception of

⁴ The phrase “hearing of heaven” will frequent our investigation of a place-centred view of heaven. When this phrase is utilized, it refers to the mental schema individuals adopt regarding the nature of human existence immediately following death or the reality which will be inaugurated upon Christ’s return. As we continue in this investigation, the phrase heaven “at hand” and heaven “not yet” will be used to differentiate between the present and future heaven.

⁵ Pamela Fickenscher, “People in the Pews: What in Heaven’s Name are they Thinking?,” *Word & World* 31 no. 1 (Winter 2011): 35.

heaven. Questions with the elderly concerning the existential nature of eternity become pertinent when discussing death. In my many conversations with individuals on their death-bed, when I have suggested that heaven might be the perfect expression of life on earth, most respond in bewilderment. Can heaven actually consist of bodies, buildings, fields, animals, and trees? One terminally-ill resident receiving treatment at our facility shared with me, “I want to believe that I’ll live in a literal heavenly mansion with a new body but something about that seems strangely unbiblical and too much like the way it is now.” This woman’s reflection on the nature of the future heaven caused me to think about why we have difficulty equating material place with heaven.⁶ Imagine what life would be like if there were no places in the world? Our lives are so place-oriented that it seems nearly impossible to imagine what life would be like void of physical place. In the same way, to imagine what heaven could possibly be like is difficult because society has become conditioned to think about heaven apart from that of place.

Like this woman with whom I was privileged to share this deep theological conversation, we also try to decipher what exactly we believe about life hereafter when the distressing prospect of dying impends. Thoughtfully considering the reality of heaven should not be something that only occurs at one’s deathbed or at a funeral. Rather, it should be something that influences daily living. Focusing upon heavenly things is a biblical concept that has been long forgotten in an age when “seeing is believing.” Individuals must renew their minds through the teaching of the Holy Spirit to begin a careful engagement with what Scripture has to say about the nature of eternal existence. The Christian church can also benefit from the work of many theologians who offer a variety of insights into the ways heaven can be heard anew in the 21st century. Many of these theologians are careful not to fall into the platonic tendency of spiritualizing the future heaven.

⁶ Many Christians in the twenty-first century find it hard to believe in a physical place called heaven. McDannell and Lang suggest that a meagre theology of place in contemporary eschatology has caused Christians to reject that notion that heaven is a type of physical dimension. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (London: Yale University Press, 1988), 353.

However, in an attempt to address the biblical tension between heaven “now” and heaven “not yet,” many theologians acknowledge that bodily resurrection is humanity’s eschatological hope but say very little about the forthcoming dimension in which resurrected bodies can engage and relate. To address the lack of dialogue pertaining to the nature of the future heaven, this study will first consider the theological theme of hearing of heaven “at hand” and examine how this theme leads us to think of heaven “not yet.” In doing so, I will supplement what has already been said in the contemporary discussion of heaven by presenting a place-centred hearing of heaven that addresses some common misconceptions regarding life hereafter.

III. The Purpose of this Study

After engaging various theological perspectives that pertain to the contemporary discourse of heaven, I will argue that the marginalization of place-centred thinking in theology has caused the contemporary discourse of heaven to overlook, under-emphasize, or even mythologize the biblical hope of heaven. By responding to two dangerous myths of heaven, this investigation will appeal to the city imagery in Revelation 21:1-4 and demonstrate why heaven relates to place in the present and redeemed place in the future. The first myth of heaven is a mindset which causes Christians to passively wait for heaven and neglect to bring heaven to earth in the present. The second myth of heaven causes individuals to focus so much on the activity of the church in the present that the hope of Christ’s second coming is underemphasized. This second myth has the potential to over-emphasize human progress to such a degree that the age of heaven “not yet” can be mythologized. As a result, the hope of Christ physically returning to do that which the church

cannot accomplish can be overlooked in contemporary theological discourse.⁷ To emphasize the biblical distinction between the age of heaven “at hand” and the age of heaven “not yet,” I will demonstrate that the city of Jerusalem imagery in Revelation offers a rich and compelling way to view heaven “at hand” in the places the church ministers but also as an apocalyptic image of the literal place in which Christ’s unhindered glory will accomplish what human progress cannot. In other words, the Jerusalem imagery should be interpreted not only as the church presently living out the characteristics of heaven but also as a glorified place which resurrected saints will one day inherit.

IV. The Outline of this Study

Chapter one will provide a representative overview of the contemporary treatment of heaven in Protestant eschatology. In order to provide a succinct rubric by which to compare other theologians, I will begin by examining Christopher Morse’s summary of the Protestant treatment of heaven in his book *The Difference Heaven Makes*. The theme of hearing of heaven “at hand” which Morse emphasizes in his book will be compared to the research of three other theologians. Hearing of heaven “at hand” effectively combats the myth of passively waiting to experience heaven beyond and disengaging from the ethical transformation of society. However, by comparing the approach of Morse to that of N. T. Wright, Jürgen Moltmann, and Anthony Thiselton, I will propose that Morse’s intent to combat future-minded thinking can lead to overly present-focused thinking which de-emphasizes the biblical hope of the future heaven. This overemphasis on the present to the neglect of the future can cause one’s hearing of heaven to fall prey to the second myth of heaven. This chapter will highlight the dangers of over-emphasizing human progress to such a degree that the hope of

⁷ What the church cannot do in the present age of heaven is completely eradicate the spiritual and physical curse of sin and death. More will be said on this in chapter two.

Christ physically returning to do that which the church cannot accomplish is mythologized. By appealing to Anthony C. Thiselton's book, I will demonstrate the importance of allowing our ethics of heaven "at hand" to be transformed by a literal understanding of bodily resurrection and new creation when God will become "all in all" in the places of the renovated cosmos.

With this eschatological groundwork made in chapter one, chapter two aims to answer two important questions pertaining to place and how place-centred thinking in theology impacts our eschatological discourse of the future heaven. The first is this: How has a marginalization of place affected theology? The second: How can the Christian hope of bodily resurrection and Christ's return be interpreted through a place-centred hearing of the future heaven? I will answer these questions by consulting authors like N.T. Wright, Jürgen Moltmann, John Inge, and Timothy. J. Gorrige all of whom challenge contemporary theologians to reconsider the spatial nature of God's activity in creation. It should be noted that not all of these authors make a direct connection between having a place-centred perspective in theology and addressing the reality of heaven. Nevertheless, their research uncovers new angles by which theology can carefully discern the theme of God intimately "dwelling" in the places of his creation "already" and "not yet." This chapter will conclude with a revisionist understanding of the future heaven by considering how the apocalyptic imagery in Scripture could point to a coming age when resurrected saints will eternally dwell with Christ in place.

Based upon the connection between eschatology and place-centred theology established in chapter two, chapter three aims to show how a place-centred hearing of heaven "not yet" can combat the dangerous implications pertaining to the second myth of heaven. This will be done by adopting a place-centred interpretation of the urban imagery found in Revelation 21:1-4. In the first section of this chapter, I will overview what the Scripture means by the word "new" in reference to the terms "heaven and earth." In the second section, I will appeal to the futurist,

preterist, and idealist interpretation of the city motif found in Revelation and demonstrate that they are all important interpretive layers that can point to a coming age of bodily resurrection and new creation. In the futurist approach, Revelation's Jerusalem imagery is interpreted primarily as a literal city which the saints will inherit in the future. In the preterist view, the Jerusalem imagery speaks to the historical reality of the original recipients of John's letter scattered throughout Asia Minor. In the idealist view, the city of Jerusalem is interpreted as an image for believers who embody the culture and ethics of the heavenly kingdom. Based on the proper integration of these three strategies, I will argue for a hearing of heaven in which Jerusalem not only represents believers here and now, but also the place believers will inherit in the age to come.

Chapter 1

The Contemporary Treatment of Heaven in Protestant Eschatology

To speak of ‘imagining heaven’ does not imply or entail that heaven is a fictional notion, constructed by deliberately disregarding the harsher realities of the everyday world. It is to affirm the critical role of the God-given human capacity to construct and enter into mental pictures of divine reality which are mediated through Scripture...We are able to inhabit the mental images we create, and thence anticipate the delight of finally entering the greater reality to which they correspond.

—Alister McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*⁸

Eschatology today finds itself compelled to take seriously the recent approaches and developments that surround the scholarly Protestant treatment of heaven. Hearing of heaven today means sifting through the ways various positions address the root of hope and faith. Although the study of heaven in theological discourse may reveal a variety of approaches, I would suggest that each path toward an eschatological conclusion must stop at three significant guideposts.

1. What can be known about the reality of heaven?
2. What hope can be sustained by a theological hearing of heaven?
3. How does hearing of heaven inspire daily ethics?

This chapter’s aim is to survey the proposals four contemporary Protestant scholars have determined regarding the nature, hope, and ethics of heaven. These theologians have been carefully chosen because each contributes a unique perspective in the scholarly discourse of

⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 5.

heaven in contemporary Protestant theology. First of all, each theologian's contribution to the discussion will be considered alongside the modern strategies for "hearing of heaven" proposed by Christopher Morse in his book, *The Difference Heaven Makes*. Secondly, this chapter will track each author's position by way of the three aforementioned questions. As we conclude this chapter, each theologian's hearing of heaven will be critically analyzed to determine how they address or combat eschatology's two most prominent myths of heaven: The myth of passively waiting to experience heaven beyond and the myth of progress. Before each theologian is considered however, the core contributions of Morse' strategy for hearing of heaven will be summarized to establish the groundwork for this study.

I. Christopher Morse's Strategy for Hearing of Heaven

Morse writes his book to address a concern that he has with the modern Protestant assumptions of heaven. He argues that faulty reasoning has estranged the contemporary discussion of heaven from its biblical roots. Morse points to the common notions of heaven as an upperworld, a fulfillment of human longing, an existence after death, or merely a state of eternal being as common depictions of heaven that do not necessarily constitute a faithful hearing. He argues that assuming heaven is a state of bliss one seeks in order to escape the pain of human existence does an incredible injustice to the "good news" that the gospel talk of heaven brings within the present.⁹

⁹ Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as Good News* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 4-5.

Ia. The Myth of Passively Waiting to Experience Heaven Beyond

Morse responds to a blissful view of heaven that the ecclesial community passively waits to experience in the life beyond. Although he does not deny the physical reality of a future heaven, he suggests that merely focusing on a future afterlife offers a truncated view of God's kingdom which deters the in-breaking power and ethics of God's kingdom from being realized within the present.¹⁰ He challenges his readership to see heaven as a forceful movement of God "at hand" that breaks into the physical reality of creation and overtakes what is passing away on earth. In an effort to balance an over-emphasis on a heaven in the future, Morse argues that a literalistic and univocal understanding of heaven has robbed heaven of its ethical realities "at hand" and resulted in an unfaithful hearing of heaven.¹¹

What Morse calls an unfaithful hearing, I have chosen to call the first myth of heaven.¹² I should note that Morse does not use the term "myth of heaven" but whenever I utilize it, I will be referring to what Morse constitutes as an overemphasis on the future heaven. This overemphasis ultimately deters the church from effectively embodying the transformative characteristics of heaven within the present. In this view, I would say that humanity and creation is portrayed like a sinking ship. Those who embrace the first myth of heaven are concerned very little about the boat itself and primarily interested in projecting how and when the ship of creation will sink and at what point believers will be rescued by God's lifeboat to escape for eternal bliss and safety. To combat this unfaithful view of heaven, Morse divides theology's dominant orthodox views of heaven into three hearings which used together effectively challenge this myth of heaven.

¹⁰ Ibid., 80, 96.

¹¹ Ibid., 4.

¹² The second myth of heaven will be introduced in N. T. Wright's strategy for hearing of heaven.

Ib. Hearing of Heaven “at Hand”

The first hearing of heaven that Morse presents is viewing heaven as the course of God’s forthcoming activity here on earth. When individuals and all of creation are seen as the locus of heaven’s redemptive activity, the term “heaven” becomes more than a place up in the sky, a mere existence hereafter, or a feeling of bliss. Morse states, “[Heaven] sounds like nothing less than God taking a new course of action in coming events to make the kind of home with us that will ever prove to be the right home for us.”¹³

The second hearing sees heaven as a multi-leveled cosmological reality existing above earth. The lowest level of heaven consists of a place where fallen angels and demons can interact with the dimension of earth. This hearing assumes that the fallen dimension of this present cosmos is “passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31) and that evil spiritual forces will eventually be replaced by God’s unimpeded dominion of love and freedom.¹⁴ This second hearing of heaven constitutes the spiritual dimension which exists above and alongside earth.¹⁵

The third hearing sees heaven as a place of community which constitutes the present commonwealth of God’s people. Citizenship is the theme that describes this hearing. Heaven is most clearly seen in this present age within communities of faith which live not by the principles

¹³ Ibid., 13.

¹⁴ Ibid., 16.

¹⁵ When I refer to the present dimension of heaven, I will be referring to the spiritual dimension which is not necessarily perfect in nature. Fallen angels and demons live in this dimension. For this reason, heaven heard as a spiritual dimension is not eternal in nature. God will one day create a new heaven and a new earth which will allow the perfect nature of the spirit realm to be fully compatible with the original perfection of the physical realm. When this takes place, anything in the physical and spiritual dimension which opposes God’s character and person will be completely eradicated. When I refer to the kingdom of heaven however, I will refer to the third hearing of heaven. The kingdom or commonwealth of heaven is the same eternally because it constitutes the changeless nature and characteristics of God himself which never changes in any age or dimension.

of this fallen age, but by the kingdom principles that will be visible when earth is fully encompassed by the kingdom of heaven.¹⁶

Morse argues that these three hearings of heaven offer a holistic framework by which one can view heaven as an active force which affects the physical dimension of earth and compels communities of faith to live in light of God's heavenly kingdom. By combining these three definitions of heaven, Morse combats an overly "univocal" understanding of heaven not only as a reality after death but also as an arriving kingdom (*basileia*) which is already "at hand."¹⁷ In addition, Morse suggests that a univocal approach can cause individuals to adopt an unhealthy hearing of heaven that focuses too much on determining the exact outcomes of prophecy and the exact timing of Christ's return. This approach in eschatology can cause one to focus on escaping earth instead of being an active participant of God's in-breaking kingdom. Morse believes that to "de-literalize" heaven is to challenge an ultra-fundamentalist perspective which presumes to know exactly how God will engage with creation in the future. Furthermore, he suggests that the multi-dimensional and supernatural nature of Scripture challenges the reader to not only consider what the author was consciously trying to communicate but also what God could be trying to reveal apart from the writer's personal awareness. According to Morse, if "literal interpretation" is connected only to "authorial intent" without "divine intent," modern interpretations of heaven can easily become a controlled and logical game of projecting exact times, places, circumstances, and dates connected to the coming of Christ's heavenly kingdom.¹⁸ At the same time, Morse treads carefully to avoid demythologizing heaven to such a degree that heaven "not yet" is perceived as inconsequential, unscientific, and irrational. Morse addresses the topic of heaven in order that the

¹⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹⁷ Ibid., 36.

¹⁸ For example, Morse would argue that theologians who read the Zechariah 14 description of the "Day of the Lord" and assume that the flesh and eyes of the enemies of Jerusalem dissolving while they remain standing must be explained by a thermonuclear blast are reading the text through univocal lenses.

skeptical, modern mind would be open to a renewed understanding of heaven's hope and ethics. His approach challenges those who over-emphasize heaven's literal, future existence to humbly approach the text and see that heaven's future reality is already in-breaking within the present and preparing creation for the future.

Morse emphasizes that the biblical narrative depicts heaven within the genre of "news." In other words, heaven should be understood as a new expression of what God is doing on earth. Morse states, "As a news event, the gospel references to heaven are taken not as fragmented texts in isolation having no bearing upon one another, but as a coherent message that calls forth a current following."¹⁹ For Morse, the reality of heaven is no longer "heaven" in the traditional sense of the word, commonly thought of in contracting pairs such as "heaven and earth" and "heaven and hell."²⁰ Rather, hearing of heaven as "news" evokes a less-conventional usage which moves out of physical confinement and into an abstract direction of God's multi-dimensional yet relational activity with earth. He summarizes this less-conventional usage in terms of the locus of God's forthcoming action displacing this form of the world (1 Cor. 7:31). In other words, when heaven is heard as a reality that is constantly "overtaking what is passing away on earth," heaven changes from historical in nature to all-encompassing, surprising, and transcending "news."²¹ Morse suggests that hearing of heaven as "news" allows one to let the kingdom of heaven bring unexpected outcomes and results in human ethics and social transformation. As God states in Isaiah 43:18-19, "Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I

¹⁹ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 8.

²⁰ Later in chapter three, we elaborate further on how the phrase "heaven and earth" in reference to the future age should no longer be heard in the traditional sense of being contrasting and divided realities. Rather, a place-centred hearing of God's kingdom allows us to see that heaven and earth will be united through God dwelling with his people in place.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

will do a new thing. Now it shall spring forth; shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”²²

Morse offers an epistemological reason why many treat earth like something that they must escape and in turn have difficulty seeing heaven as a transformative force in the present. He suggests that if asked where heaven is, the average person would presumably motion up to the sky. However, if one was probed further and asked where exactly heaven is up in the sky, his or her scientific understanding of modern cosmology would take over. To illustrate his assertion, Morse points to the work of the influential New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann. “Certainly Bultmann was correct in writing that, from the standpoint of modern science and cosmology, our notion of space are very different from primitive ideas of a three-tiered universe, with heaven up in the sky, hell down under the ground, and a flat earth in between.”²³ It is commonly accepted that astronauts have gone into space countless times and have never experienced anything that fits with the pre-modern understanding of heaven being up in the clouds. In his assertion that “there is no longer any heaven in the traditional sense of the word,” Bultmann exemplifies this modern mindset.²⁴ In an attempt to show how heaven intersects the present, Morse sets out to understand what is meant by the “traditional sense of the word” and what other theologians have to say about it. If Bultmann is correct, Morse suggests that we need to reconsider how we interpret the approximately six hundred and seventy-five appearances of the words “heaven” or “the heavens” in the Old and New Testaments.²⁵ Could it be that modern cosmology leads us to believe that the Christian hope of heaven is irrelevant because it merely refers to a future state of existence that does not coincide with today’s scientific understanding of the universe? What Morse aims to do

²² Throughout our study, the New King James version will be used for Scripture quotation unless otherwise stated.

²³ Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, ed. Werner Bartsch (London: SPCK, 1960), 4, cited in Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 2.

²⁴ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 3.

²⁵ Christopher Morse, “The Virtue of Heaven: From Calvin to Cyber-Talk and Back,” *Modern Theology* 19 (2003): 317.

throughout his book is turn this question on its head. He challenges theologians to consider: “What is no longer believable or trustworthy in the modern frame of reference given the gospel talk of heaven?”²⁶ He invites theologians to explore the contemporary treatment of heaven in Protestant theology to discover “who is, and who is not, living in the real world.”²⁷ In other words, are we embracing the divine mystery of God’s redemptive work in this world or adopting the postmodern tendency of discarding faith in order to rationalize the mystery of his kingdom?

Ib1. Viewing the Present through Eyes of Faith

Morse suggests that “faith” in God’s system of measurement instead of humanity’s is the most essential ingredient by which individuals can truly experience the ways in which heaven relates to the ethics of daily living.²⁸ To hear of heaven “at hand” is to acknowledge that a higher power is in control of humanity’s future. Furthermore, to seek what God is doing “at hand” is to desire the very reality of God’s kingdom. In a review of Morse’ book, Philip Ziegler points out that acknowledging the at-handedness of heaven is “to become subject to a curious set of ethical imperatives having been charged to ‘watch’, ‘wait upon,’ and ‘seek first’ the kingdom.”²⁹ Human ethics are ultimately motivated by believing in a God who has already acted on our behalf. Seeking the in-breaking kingdom “at hand” should motivate believers not to fix their gaze on deprivation, fear, anxiety and thus try to escape life’s horrible realities.³⁰ Rather than focusing on escaping to “the sky or a future afterlife,” God challenges individuals to presently seek the in-

²⁶ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁸ Faith is the foundational spiritual law that governs the kingdom of heaven. Without faith, it is impossible to please God and witness the promises God wants to make manifest at hand (Heb. 11:6). There are no limits to the kingdom of heaven when humanity discards the scientific notion that “seeing is believing.” Walking by faith and not by sight delights the heart of God and causes him to move on behalf of his creation.

²⁹ Philip G. Ziegler, “The Difference Heaven Makes: A Review Essay,” *Word & World* 31 no. 1 (Winter 2011): 81.

³⁰ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 107.

breaking reality of heaven so that they can partner with God in transforming this world's current state of affairs. In other words, some have become so preoccupied with imagining and desiring the bliss of heaven that they have neglected the present. The common phrase, "some have become so heavenly minded that they have become of no earthly good" reflects this perspective.³¹ Morse concludes by saying, "The 'real world' is proclaimed to be one in which there is life currently arriving on the scene, in whatever situation we are facing, that is greater than any undeniable loss threatening us, including death."³² Morse explains that heaven at hand is not something that is under our control.³³ The kingdom of heaven does not conform to worldly perceptions or self-centred human expectations.

Ib2. Viewing the Future through Eyes of Faith

Morse makes an important distinction between the scientific "real world" and the "realm of heaven." Considering the nature of the kingdom of heaven means questioning and examining what is perceived as the "real world."³⁴ Morse effectively challenges us to consider the ways we can better embody heaven within the present. However, Morse' attempt to wrestle heaven from the grasp of "future-minded" thinking leaves the contemporary understanding of the future heaven

³¹ The idea— one can be so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good— when not heard in light of the context of our discussion, does not match the words of Jesus: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It should be noted that heavenly thinking should ultimately inspire an individual to actively partner with God to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

³² *Ibid.*, 117.

³³ Morse points to the gospel of Luke which reminds us that the kingdom of heaven is not a reality that is quantifiable and easy to peg down: "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-21). Coupled with verses in John 8:23-24 when Jesus said to the Pharisees "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world," many have assumed that Jesus' heavenly kingdom is only inward and spiritual instead of spatial. Morse suggests that Jesus was describing the supernatural way in which heaven is proximate with earth yet without approximation. By hearing of heaven "at hand," Morse is not suggesting that God's kingdom is immaterial in nature. *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

relatively unexplored. Could it be that Morse's attempt to balance heaven "then" and heaven "now" still offers an oblique understanding of the place resurrected saints will one day inherit? In the process of combatting, unhealthy "future minded thinking," Morse swings eschatology's proverbial "pendulum" from one end to the other. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, it is necessary that we have a biblical understanding of the place of heaven "not yet" so that believers are challenged to live in a way which serves as a foretaste of the new creation which will one day replace this fallen world.

How can viewing the future through eyes of faith motivate the church to presently live as a signpost of the ultimate transformation which awaits the earth in the perfect age to come? When this happens, heaven is a supernatural reality that affects people in place now but also prepares the church for life in the eternal place she will one day inherit. Hearing of heaven "at hand" will be the theological foundation for our study of heaven "not yet." As we focus on what the "not yet" of heaven consists of, I have drawn three additional theologians into this eschatological discourse. Wright, Moltmann, and Thiselton each work in various ways to address the tension in contemporary eschatology between the "already" and "not yet" of heaven. Once we analyse each of their strategies for hearing of heaven in the remainder of chapter one, we will bring the discourse of heaven into dialogue with a place-centred perspective in chapter two.

II. N. T. Wright's Strategy for Hearing of Heaven

In his book *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, N. T. Wright focuses on the hope of heaven and entertains two questions that resemble the guideposts of our study—"What can I hope for?" and "What can I do about it?" Wright suggests that the reality of the eschatological hope of heaven is rooted in the mutual relationship

between creation resting in God and God dwelling within his creation. His primary concern is reshaping the mission of the church by understanding the future redemptive plan God has for place, time, and matter. Like Morse, Wright also addresses the problem of passively waiting to experience heaven beyond.

IIa. The First Myth of Heaven and its Historical Background

The image of creation likened to a sinking ship is what I used to depict Morse' description of the first myth of heaven. Wright summarizes the first myth of heaven this way: "the world is a wicked place and we'd do better to escape it altogether."³⁵ To explain why this myth has become popular in Christian thought, Wright describes a historical shift which caused many to perceive the future heaven as a blissful existence void of place. Wright blames Christianity for allowing a platonic strain into biblical interpretation which distorted the Christian doctrine of heaven by underplaying the goodness of creation and the physical realm. He states that Plato (427–347 B.C.) remains one of the most influential thinkers of the Greek world who saw physical reality in an ideal or abstract way.³⁶ Plato's thinking birthed gnostic thought which adamantly refused to imagine the future heaven as a physical place.³⁷ Instead, it was perceived as being merely spiritual in nature.

The elderly woman with whom I had the honour of ministering before she passed away also had a difficulty equating physical places with heaven. Wright would suggest that her reservation in believing in a physical heaven is a consequence of platonic thought. He quotes a familiar

³⁵ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 87.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁷ Chapter two will go into greater detail describing the way platonic thought has robbed the future heaven of its connection to that of physical place.

gospel song to point out some common platonic distortions which have crept into many mainline denominations:

The ‘just passing through’ spirituality (as in the spiritual ‘This world is not my home, / I’m just a’passin’ through’), though it has some affinities with classical Christianity, encourages precisely a Gnostic attitude: the created world is at best irrelevant at worst a dark, evil, gloomy place, and we immortal souls, who existed originally in a different sphere, are looking forward to returning to it as soon as were allowed to.³⁸

Many have associated “eternal life” with a spiritual existence in a distant galaxy which is distantly removed from physical reality. He suggests that we reinvest our language of eternity to combat this platonic worldview. Wright notes that in a biblical worldview, heaven and earth were seen as dimensions that overlap so that the divine bleeds into this age. For early follows to say, “may thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” was to acknowledge that the world as it is now needs to look more like the world that will exist one day. To address the first myth of heaven, Wright argues that passages like Revelation 21-22 which speak of “a new heaven and a new earth” should be heard both spiritually and physically.³⁹ To illustrate this point, he offers a translation that radically re-invests the message of heaven and combats the myth of viewing creation as a sinking ship one must escape.

He examines the most beloved and memorized verse in the Bible from the perspective of how it would have been read in the first century. To hear John 3:16 in its day was to experience the shock of the incredible gospel news: God gave his son “so that everyone who believes in him should not be lost but should share in the life of God's new age.”⁴⁰ Wright’s use of the phrase “God’s new age” is a way of re-casting the Greek phrase *zoe aionios* “eternal/ everlasting life.” He explains that the various instances in the gospels and epistles which utilize this phrase refer to

³⁸ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 90.

³⁹ Later in this chapter, we will parse how the terms “spiritually” and “physically” should be interpreted holistically by consulting the research of Anthony Thiselton as he considers the spatial and spiritual nature of bodily resurrection.

⁴⁰ N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 43.

an ancient Jewish understanding of the division of time. For example, Paul writes in Galatians 1:4 of Jesus coming to give himself for the sins of the world and rescue us from the present evil age.⁴¹ Wright states, “Jesus has inaugurated, [and] ushered in, the age to come...there is no sense that this ‘age to come’ is ‘eternal’ in the sense of being outside space, time, and matter.”⁴² To re-interpret the language of eternity as “God’s new age” is to adopt a Jewish monotheist perspective that divides God’s greater purpose for creation into two distinct *aiōns* or epochs.⁴³ He suggests that the hope of heaven is deeply rooted in the understanding of an age to come that intersects the present age. Christ has come not to rescue people out of the world but to rescue the world itself, with the people included, from the present state of sin and corruption.

The present age of will one day be completely overtaken by the age when God will become “all in all.” 1 Corinthians 15:28 speaks of the eschatological momentum by which all of creation is progressing. By looking at this passage, Wright concludes that the ultimate purpose of God is to fill all of creation with his glorious presence and love.⁴⁴ Wright concludes that resurrection is the vital ingredient that makes it possible for God to eternally dwell with his creation. Wright’s eschatology focuses intently on the original creation as good yet incomplete.⁴⁵ Creation was originally created incomplete because the possibility of choosing or refusing God’s love in return was left open and therefore disobedient forces were able to spoil its goodness.

⁴¹ Similarly, Mark 10:30 records Jesus’ private words of instruction to his disciples after an encounter with a rich man who would not sell his earthly treasures and follow him. He states that anyone who puts the work of the gospel ahead of earthly relationships and possessions will receive a hundred times as much in “this present *kairō* (time/age) and in the *aiōni* (age) which is coming – *zōēn aiōnion* (the life of the age to come).” Wright, *How God Became King*, 43.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ These two “aions” in the Hebrew understanding can be divided into this “Present age,” *ha-olam hazeh* in Hebrew, and the “age to come,” *ha-olam ha-ba*. The “age to come,” is the epoch in which God would one day bring justice, peace, and healing to the world. Ibid., 44.

⁴⁴ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 103-104.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 102.

IIb. The Second Myth of Heaven

In review, the first myth treats earth as something we should escape. Consequently, this first myth of heaven renders believers ineffective in bringing the kingdom of heaven “at hand.” Morse addressed this unfaithful hearing of heaven as overly “future minded thinking” and I have called this misconception “the first myth of heaven.” In this section, we will introduce a second myth of heaven. According to Wright, this myth rationalizes and demystifies the supernatural activity of heaven within the present and the future.⁴⁶ This viewpoint emphasizes that within ourselves we have what it takes to attain world peace and prosperity. In other words, the “end times” is not an era of conflict and destruction leading up to a literal remaking of heaven and earth upon Christ’s physical return. Wright would coin this thinking as “the myth of progress.”⁴⁷ During the Age of the Enlightenment, humanity no longer depended on the grace and mercy of God but on the human ability to reach new levels of success through hard work and education.

He suggests that the evolutionary ideology of persons like Charles Darwin and Karl Marx was birthed out of humanity’s desire to embrace liberal modernist optimism without embracing Jesus Christ. Humanity would someday become like God by becoming “all in all.”

The eagerness with which [Darwin’s] ideas were embraced and reapplied not only in the narrow biological sphere in which they belonged but also in far wider areas such as society and politics indicates well enough the mood of the times. The world in general, and humankind in particular, was marching onward and upward in an immanent process that couldn’t be stopped and that would result in the great future that lay just around the corner.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 83

Wright continues to describe the way an evolutionary view of humanity caused many theologians and scientists of human origins to adopt forms of theistic evolution in Christian thought.⁴⁹ He notes that one of the most prominent disseminators of this Christian myth of progress was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit whose popular book *The Phenomenon of Man* became influential in combining Christian spirituality with scientific thought.⁵⁰ One supporter of Teilhard's ideology lauds: "his powerful affirmation of the Incarnation and his vision of the universal, cosmic Christ within an evolutionary perspective reaffirm the core of the Christian faith for our scientific age."⁵¹ Wright suggests that an outworking of this mishearing brings many forms of New Age spirituality into the interpretation of heaven. This ideology subtly shifts the focus in eschatology off of the physical second coming of Christ and onto the ways humanity can progress into greater levels of intellect, morality, and invention and in turn evolve into the universal, cosmic Christ.⁵² The result is a pantheistic view of the material realm rather than a biblical view of place in God and God in place.⁵³

According to Wright, "The myth of progress has been enormously powerful in our culture. In fact, it still is, not least as an implicit belief to which one can appeal to justify any and every 'development' in a supposed liberalizing, humanizing, freedom-bringing direction. 'Don't you believe in progress?' people ask scornfully when someone objects to a new 'moral' proposal."⁵⁴ It is becoming more prevalent within the Western church that the second coming, millennial reign, and hope of resurrection are interpreted as mere symbols for the bride of Christ completing her work on earth. In fact, an article featured on a website called *Red Letter Christians* in July 2013

⁴⁹ Ibid., 84

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ursula King, "Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre," in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. A. Hastings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 696. in *ibid.*

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ More will be said on this in chapter two.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 87.

called “What if the World Doesn’t End?” takes the very approach Wright warns against. The author, Yaholo Hoyt writes:

Because we constantly view this world through the lens of looking for evidence of imminent and irreversible destruction, we are missing out on opportunities to improve it. Yes, this world has a lot of problems, but it has also come a long way. Remember that in our past we have owned slaves, had legal segregation, even killed each other by thousands in a civil war... Scriptures promise a new heaven and new earth, but what if it is a promise of what the Church, the Bride of Christ is working toward? We think God is just going to burn everything down and rebuild it for us. What if the Church is the method of building that world? The world today is already much better than the world Christ came into. What if the ‘end’ is really just our completed work, and Christ’s completed work in us.⁵⁵

Wright strongly opposes this second myth of heaven. He argues that this view mythologizes God’s promise of becoming “all in all” by reinterpreting heaven as an earthly state of bliss established through humanitarian effort and ethics. He points to an eighteenth-century shift which birthed in humanity the belief that human knowledge and enlightenment could bring about the ability for us to work for a future utopia. With tongue in cheek, Wright summarizes the humanitarian manifesto of the myth of progress this way:

This utopian dream is in fact a parody of the Christian vision. The kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world come together to produce a vision of history moving forward to its goal, a goal that will emerge from within rather than being a new gift from elsewhere. Humans can be made perfect and are indeed evolving inexorably toward that point. The world is ours to discover, exploit, and enjoy. Instead of dependence of God’s grace, we will become what we have the potential to be by education and hard work. Instead of creation and new creation, science and technology will turn the raw material of this world into the stuff of utopia.⁵⁶

Wright’s strategy for hearing of heaven focuses on a time “not yet” when God will become “all in all.” Unfortunately, the second myth of heaven seeks an era when humanity will be “all in all.” This myth of heaven has the tendency to be anthropocentric instead of theocentric.

Many assume that the human species can reach new levels of social structures, bio-technology, trans-human research, and heightened spiritual awareness. An ever-growing view is

⁵⁵ Yaholo Hoyt, “What if the World Doesn’t End?” 2013, <<http://www.redletterchristians.org/what-if-the-world-doesnt-end>> (accessed January 23, 2014).

⁵⁶ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 82.

surfacing in the social-sciences and among members of the world council of churches that the dawn of a new humanity is nearly upon us.⁵⁷ For example, the Dalai Lama, Taoist masters, Hindu monks, and even Ottawa archbishop Lazar Puhalo, a controversial retiree of the Orthodox Church of America, are just a few of the world's prominent religious leaders who are joining an effort called the "2045 Strategic Social Initiative." The main goal of this initiative is to realize a totally new global reality by 2045 consisting of spiritual illumination, optimal conditions to meet civilization's challenges, trans-religious cooperation, reimagined ethics, and bio-human technology. Founded by Russian entrepreneur Dmitry Itskov in February 2011, this Moscow-based initiative which specializes in the field of neural interfaces, robotics, and artificial organ systems says this about itself,

The main science mega-project of the 2045 Initiative aims to create technologies enabling the transfer of a[n] individual's personality to a more advanced non-biological carrier, and extending life, including to the point of immortality. We devote particular attention to enabling the fullest possible dialogue between the world's major spiritual traditions, science and society... "The Global Future 2045" is organized by the Initiative to give platform for discussing mankind's evolutionary strategy based on technologies of cybernetic immortality as well as the possible impact of such technologies on global society, politics and economies of the future.⁵⁸

⁵⁷Gregor Wolbring, "The Triangle of New and Emerging Technologies, Disabled People and the World Council of Churches; Able-ism: A Prerequisite for Transhumanism," 2013, www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/justice-diakonia-and-responsibility-for-creation/science-technology-ethics/wcc-and-new-and-emerging-technologies (accessed February 4, 2014)

⁵⁸ The long-term goal of the 2045 Strategic Social Initiative is divided up into four stages. By 2020, they aim to develop an affordable avatar which can be controlled by a "brain-like computer interface. These avatars will give individuals new features. Those who adopt this technology can work or travel in extreme situations, rehabilitate disabled persons, and provided the ability to do things what one otherwise could not accomplish. By 2025, they hope to create an autonomous life-support system for the human brain linked to a robot, 'avatar.' This system will have the ability to save a patient's body functions by way of their fully functioning brain. By 2035, this initiative will partner with spiritual, metaphysical sciences to understand the human consciousness and transfer individual consciousness onto an artificial carrier. This development will offer every individual the possibility of cybernetic immortality, create a friendly artificial intelligence, expand human capabilities and provide opportunities for ordinary persons to enhance brain and body function. This initiative states that by the time of 2045, "This is the time when substance-independent minds will receive new bodies with capacities far exceeding those of ordinary humans. A new era for humanity will arrive! Changes will occur in all spheres of human activity – energy generation, transportation, politics, medicine, psychology, sciences, and so on... humanity, for the first time in its history, will make a fully managed evolutionary transition and eventually become a new species." See, "About the 2045 Strategic Initiative," 2012, <http://2045.com/about/> (accessed February 4, 2014).

The core problem of spiritualizing bodily resurrection and ultimately adopting the notion that we can create our own immortality is believing the lie that humanity can become “all in all.”

Wright responds,

The real problem with the myth of progress is, as I just hinted, that it cannot deal with evil. And when I say ‘deal with,’ I don’t just mean intellectually, though that is true as well; I mean in practice... This is why all the evolutionary optimism of the last two hundred years remains helpless before the world war, drug crime, Auschwitz, apartheid, child pornography, and other interesting sidelines that evolution has thrown up for our entertainment in the twentieth century.⁵⁹

Over and against this myth of heaven is the central Christian affirmation that God acts on our behalf to do what we could not do by ourselves to achieve immortality. The ancient lie Eve believed could make her be like the Creator is the same lie that faces contemporary culture. The same deception which caused humanity to question whether eating from the tree of knowledge would actually bring physical death has taken on a new form in our own age.⁶⁰ The root of this myth is that we can become our own saviour. When this happens, heaven is reheard as our own utopian evolution instead of God’s forthcoming, redemptive creation.⁶¹

In contrast to this mistaken view that we can become “all in all,” Wright counters, “the central Christian affirmation is that what the creator God has done in Jesus Christ, and supremely in his resurrection, is what he intends to do for the whole world—meaning, by *world*, the entire

⁵⁹ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 85.

⁶⁰ Wright suggests that when Adam and Eve were told that they would “die” on the day they ate the fruit, God was talking about a spiritual death. In fact, N.T. Wright goes so far as to say that physical decay was always a part of the first age of humanity’s existence. Transience was part of a “good” creation but spiritual death was not. Turning from worshipping the creator and turning to worship human potential, intellect, and ability was the ancient deception which caused Eve to worship something less-demanding. Turning from worshipping the creator to worshipping the created meant experiencing the effects of the Creator not dwelling with creation in the way he used to. As a result, spiritual death and torment were then able to dwell with humanity instead. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 96.

⁶¹ For Wright, using the word “heaven” is synonymous with speaking of God’s plan of redemption to free the material realm from the clutches of spiritual death and evil. This forthcoming eschatological redemption does not involve discarding that which has been plagued by physical and spiritual transience and death but rather, redeeming matter through recreation.

cosmos with all its history.”⁶² In the coming age of heaven, when the glory of God is embraced by individuals who have chosen love in return, God will fill creation with himself so that it remains an independent being yet will be inundated in the very life of God himself. For Wright, creation in God can become God in creation when the union is freely reciprocated. The climax of N.T. Wright’s theology rests in the glorious incarnation of love in the person of Jesus Christ. In the midst of a world subjugated to spiritual death, the incarnate God became personally acquainted with decay, pain, and sin. Jesus, the sinless Messiah, not only became sin for humanity, he died, was buried, rose from the dead, and became the first fruits of a believer’s resurrection body (1 Corinthians 15:20). With his glorified body, Jesus modeled our own future resurrection and then ascended into heaven to rule as the head over his glorious bride.

Ic. The Not Yet of the Spatial Heaven

Like Moltmann, Wright teaches that citizens of heaven are called to colonize the earth by the principles of God’s new kingdom age.⁶³ He speaks to the ways understanding bodily resurrection revolutionizes the notion of “saving souls.”⁶⁴ The dualistic tendency of either saving souls or engaging in humanitarian effort in the world is rebalanced through a holistic understanding of heaven. He believes that heaven has come to invade not only the soul of a believer but also the daily matters of society.

The world of space, time, and matter is where real people live, where real communities happen, where difficult decisions are taken, where schools and hospitals bear witness to the ‘now, already’ of the gospel while police and prisons bear witness to the ‘not yet’ ...the

⁶² Ibid., 91

⁶³ Wright sees that the mission of heaven overtakes, the “council chamber- discussion matters of town planning, of harmonizing and humanizing beauty in architecture, in green spaces, in road traffic schemes, and in environmental work, creative and healthy farming methods, and proper use of resources...This is not an extra to the church’s mission. It is central.” Ibid., 100, 267.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 265.

church that is renewed by the message of Jesus' resurrection must be the church that goes to work precisely in that space."⁶⁵

Heaven therefore, is not merely a place to inherit one day but also the force of God which compels believers to live in a way which points to the age which will one day overcome the present. Wright states, "The kingdom will come as the church, energized by the Spirit, goes out into the world vulnerable, suffering, praising, praying, misunderstood, misjudged, vindicated, celebrating: always—as Paul puts it in one of his letters—bearing in the body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed."⁶⁶ Although some could argue that Wright seems to embrace a type of human progress, the difference is that the church becomes the locus of God's kingdom preparing humanity for the ultimate transformation Christ will offer at his second coming. The societal transformation that the church brings is meant to direct the world toward worship and adoration of Jesus Christ.

Based upon passages like 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 8, Wright articulates the importance of the bodily resurrection as the key of continuity and discontinuity between the age of having transient bodies and the age of receiving glorified, physical bodies.⁶⁷ Wright sees the present heaven and earth as two different locations within the same continuum of space linked together through the resurrection and ascension of Jesus:⁶⁸

First, heaven relates to earth tangentially so that the one who is in heaven can be present simultaneously anywhere and everywhere on earth: the ascension therefore means that Jesus is available, accessible, without people having to travel to a particular spot on the earth to find him. Second, heaven is, as it were, the control room for earth; it is the CEO's office, the place from which instructions are given... More often it's because our culture is so used to the Platonic idea that heaven is, by definition, a place of 'spiritual,' nonmaterial reality so that the idea of a solid body being not only present but also thoroughly at home seems like a category mistake. The ascension invites us to rethink all this.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Ibid., 265.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 112.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 103.

⁶⁸ The use of the word "heaven" in this sentence refers to the place where God dwells.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 111.

Wright's hearing of heaven based on the resurrection and ascension of Christ enlivens profound hope. What happened to Jesus at his resurrection will happen to all people. Humanity awaits Christ's physical return to establish bodily resurrection and cosmic renewal. Wright offers a simple yet profound look at the hope of heaven. He explains that creation will only be made complete when Christ's resurrection power sweeps through and "all forces of rebellion have been defeated and the creation responds freely and gladly to the love of its creator, God will fill it with himself so that it will both remain an independent being...and also be flooded with God's own life."⁷⁰ The hope of heaven is linked to seeing the physical creation as "good" yet under an evil condition that is far from "good." For Wright, this is why God went so far as to die, rise from the dead, and ascend into heaven to ensure that he could buy back his creation from the clutches of spiritual death. Secondly, Jesus went ahead of us to rule over his church in a resurrected body so that he could model a "time when God will fill the earth with his glory, transform the old heavens and earth into the new, and raise his children from the dead to populate and rule over the redeemed world he has made."⁷¹ This hearing of heaven allows Revelation's city imagery which we will consider in chapter three to be read in light of place-centred eschatology. Living in light of heaven is not merely anticipating the redemption of the human soul and spirit. Rather, the age of the future heaven will encompass physical places by which resurrected saints can dwell with Jesus eternally.

III. Jürgen Moltmann's Strategy for Hearing of Heaven

Acknowledging the imperative tension between hearing of heaven "at hand" and "not yet" is a theme that Jürgen Moltmann addresses in his eschatology. As a major contributor to the

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 265.

academic community, German theologian Jürgen Moltmann is one who sees the eschatological promises of the Creator as closely connected to God's choice to dwell in the midst of his creation.

IIIa. The Already and Not Yet of Heaven

To summarize his view of heaven concisely, Moltmann hears of heaven through God's promise from the future to dwell within his creation in the present age and ultimately redeem it in the age to come. In seeing the present and future characteristics of heaven through what God has done and is doing in creation, Moltmann provides a robust theological treatise of the kingdom of heaven which offers a balanced view of heaven as already and not yet. For Moltmann, to understand the reality of heaven is to approach eternity from the future into the present. In other words, the trajectory of heaven's arrival is not from the past through the present into the future but from the future into the present which in turn determines the past.⁷² The present reality of heaven is engaged by understanding the language of promise which comes toward us from the future heaven but is spoken in the past. God's promises create a new reality in the present by instituting a relationship to the future through God's performative commitment.

In his work *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, Moltmann emphasizes the nature of the commitment God attaches to his promises. He reiterates the basic meaning of the Christian faith by showing how the entire Bible is firmly rooted in the hope of Yahweh's promises. Every historic event experienced by the nation of Israel was a fulfilled promise or consequence for not living in God's promises. Abram waiting for a son

⁷² Moltmann adheres to *adventus* theology in his interpretation of Scripture. He would assert that God has the ability to transcend time and exist in the future. The forthcoming kingdom of God which humanity awaits is already present in the reality of God and intersects the present. This view contrasts *futurum* theology which sees eschatological hope as a linear event which is built upon what already exists. In this view, God operates in the homogeneous reality of time and prepares his creation for an eschatological future. See Richard Bauckham, "Time and Eternity," in *God Will be All in All: The Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 164.

to continue his lineage, Moses and the Hebrews breaking free from the oppression of Egypt, Joshua and Caleb entering the promised land, and David faithfully awaiting his kingship are just a handful of examples which serve as reminders of God's constancy to people of faith. All of these individuals lived in a historical epoch between God's promises spoken and God's promises fulfilled. Moltmann addresses the eschatological tension between the "already" and the "not yet" when he states,

A promise is a declaration which announces the coming of a reality that does not yet exist... The promise binds [humanity] to the future and gives him[/her] a sense of history... If the word is a word of promise, then that means that this word has not yet found a reality congruous with it, but that on the contrary it stands in contradiction to the reality open to experience now and hereafter.⁷³

For example, when the prospects of having a child at such an old age seemed unlikely, when freedom from slavery in Egypt appeared impossible, when the giants in the promised land looked enormous, or when pursuit by a jealous king seemed overwhelming, to ask the question, "for what can I hope" in a human perspective would result in hopelessness. Apart from faith in the promises of God, an individual can only live in a basic, natural dimension. Moltmann recognizes that in the midst of the distress and upheaval of history, the ability of Israel to overcome these enormous obstacles was found in the choice to live in light of God's commitment to his promises. He further elaborates on living in the already and the not yet of God's promises when he states, "The word of promise therefore always creates an interval of tension between the uttering and the redeeming of the promise. In so doing it provides [humanity] with a peculiar era of freedom to obey and disobey, to be hopeful or resigned."⁷⁴ This interval of tension which he speaks of is evident in every Old Testament act of God in relation to his people. Every one of God's promises is a speech act which points to an overarching promise from the future which initiates and determines history and gives its recipients hope in the present.

⁷³ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1967), 67.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

Moltmann views the first coming of Jesus not as a mere historical event but as a fulfillment of the Old Testament category of promise. Moltmann points out that the forward-looking expectation in the Old Testament is not fully achieved in Christ's first coming. Rather, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is the partial fulfillment of a past promise that is the perfect guarantee within the present from the future.⁷⁵ For Moltmann, the resurrection of Christ is a "history-making event" in which all of history's eschatological and prophetic strands of hope, expectation, and confidence are enlightened, questioned, and transformed.⁷⁶ The cross and the resurrection point to the ultimate future that looks toward a new life that results in the resurrection of the dead by way of Christ's second coming. By understanding these important layers of Moltmann's theology, one can then delve into his views regarding the nature of heaven's reality.

For Moltmann, heaven embodies the new Kingdom of God which is at its very essence God's promise from the future which comes from the present to show humanity a "new totality of being."⁷⁷ In his major eschatological treatise, *The Coming of God*, the statement "the end is the beginning" summarizes his doctrine of "the Last Things." Rather than seeing eschatology as a search for the "final solution," Moltmann attempts to look at the promise of the "final solution" in the future invading the present. In other words, the primary subject of eschatology is not the end at all. Moltmann asserts, "On the contrary, what [eschatology] is about is the new creation of all things."⁷⁸ For this reason, Moltmann is careful to re-think how theologians approach Christian eschatology in his theological writings. He avoids phrases like "the last things" or "the end of all things." Instead, his emphasis flows out of the language found in Revelation 21:5, "Behold, I am making all things new." God is the one who is making all things new. We will pick up on the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 148.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 180.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 203.

⁷⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), xi.

language found in Revelation 21 later in chapter three. As we shall see, Revelation 21:5 is God's ultimate mission statement that surpasses and encompasses all his promises. The dwelling of God in place causes the old order of things to pass away and be made into something new.

IIIb. The Reality of the Future Heaven and the Nature of God

For Moltmann, the answer to the question—"What can be known about the reality of the future heaven?"—is found by looking to the triune characteristics of God. Similar to Morse's hearing of heaven, Moltmann suggests that seeking the reality of heaven through a Trinitarian approach maintains a necessary level of unity between heaven and earth. In his book, *In the End—The Beginning*, Moltmann writes that heaven is the chosen dwelling place of God the Father who is the God of hope. The core of his character is faithfulness to his words of promise. The language of heaven is that of promise, the people he calls to live in the hope of heaven are prophets, his acts in history open up the future of heaven, and all life that he creates is a "promise of its future beside God, the future of eternal life."⁷⁹ Secondly, the reality of heaven manifests itself through the incarnate person of Jesus Christ. By taking on flesh, it was possible for the Creator to make the earth his dwelling place.⁸⁰ By trusting in the Father's promises which are fully embodied in the incarnate Christ, those who live by faith can now witness the invading dimension of heaven. In his book, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, Moltmann states that the chosen dwelling place of the Holy Spirit "must be seen in the coming direct bond between heaven and earth in the new creation, as whose energy the Holy Spirit already manifests himself

⁷⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End—the Beginning*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 164.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

now, in the present.”⁸¹ In the community of Christ one experiences God’s Spirit which comes into mortal life from “eternal life on the other side of death, and kindle[s] the beginning of the life which reaches beyond death.”⁸² In summary, Moltmann believes that the reality of heaven is the indwelling of God in the whole of his creation. Moltmann’s hearing of heaven also addresses the way the promise of God’s dwelling “at hand” is tied closely to ultimate redemption—the future hope of heaven.

He is careful to note that the new heaven will not be redemption from the world but redemption of the world. This concept will be elaborated upon in chapter three as we analyze the “newness” of heaven and earth in Revelation 21:1-4. Distinguishing this point helps to correct the first myth of heaven (the sinking ship mentality) which Morse combats in his book. For Moltmann, our heavenly future is in fact a human and earthly future.⁸³ In Moltmann’s eschatology, hearing of the reality of heaven means understanding the nature of the “new heaven and earth” depicted in Revelation 21:1-22:5. The cosmic and political language that surrounds this passage is what gives the future hope of heaven meaning and significance. God desires that one day the heaven and earth would experience the fullness of his glory—his immanence and transcendence. The present “heaven and earth” is a dual dimension which God is filling with his glory but the future “heaven and earth” is a glorified form of God’s creation which will not be conflicted and divided. “Heaven” in this case describes the sphere of God’s creative potentialities and energies. He states,

They are potentialities but, as such, creative possibilities of God’s. ‘The earth’ is the term we use for the sphere of creative reality and the possibilities inherent in that reality. By distinguishing between the quality of the created potentialities of God towards the world,

⁸¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 162.

⁸² Moltmann, *In the End—the Beginning*, 164.

⁸³ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 259.

and the quality of the world's own potentialities, we distinguishing between the world's historical and eschatological future.⁸⁴

As can be seen, the present age of heaven and earth as distinguishable and the future age of heaven and earth united is carefully worked into Moltmann's eschatological hope of heaven.

IIIc. The Implications of a Spatial Heaven

Furthermore, Moltmann's view of the future age embraces a spatial perspective which is dependent on the promise of bodily resurrection.⁸⁵ He states,

Eternal life can no more stand by itself than can the men and women to whom eternal life is to be given. It is therefore bound up with the future world. To the soul belongs the body, so there can be no salvation for the soul without bodily resurrection... That is why in the Bible the redemption is called 'new creation', and this embraces everything (Rev. 21:5).⁸⁶

He also addresses the inability of the secular mind to understand the alien images of Christian hope in bodily and cosmic redemption. He suggests that a rehearing of the hope of heaven can counteract certain streams of scientific thought and invigorate the recent interest in seeking solidarity between the planet and human life:

It is only the now-developing postmodern holistic and ecological thinking which [bodily and cosmic resurrection] can once again illuminate. Then burial also acquires a deeper meaning. How would it be if at the graveside instead of saying: '...and from this earth Christ will raise you at the Last Day', we said: '... and with this earth you will be raised'?'⁸⁷

He reminds readers that this Christological starting point for eschatological hope is first and foremost God's action in history coming to us out of the future through promise and is what motivates us to live a life that aligns with this divine action.

⁸⁴ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 182.

⁸⁵ In the beginning of chapter two, we will define further what it means to embrace a spatial perspective in light of our contemporary treatment of heaven.

⁸⁶ Moltmann, *In the End—the Beginning*, 161.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

III.d. The Commonwealth of the Heavenly Jerusalem

As we have seen, Moltmann emphasizes that daily life of a believer can be invigorated through a place-centred understanding of the age to come. In *The Coming of God*, he studies the image of seeking Zion to exemplify a life which lives out the ethics of heaven's commonwealth. The earthly Jerusalem had ambivalent significance for early believers. Moltmann suggests that seeking Jerusalem means walking a road of both suffering and hope.⁸⁸ At the time of Christ's ministry, Jerusalem was intricately connected to the worldly powers of the Roman Empire and ultimately became the place of Jesus' suffering and crucifixion. In describing the association that could have been made between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, Moltmann writes, "For the first Christians, 'Jerusalem' and 'Rome' were bound to blend into one another, as powers hostile to Christ."⁸⁹ The image of suffering likened to Jerusalem is depicted in the Epistle to the Hebrew Christians, "So Jesus also suffered outside the gate... Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp, and bear the abuse he endured" (13:12). Just as Morse highlights in his third hearing of heaven, the image of seeking Jerusalem is not about God tormenting those who follow in the path of Christ's suffering but rather a glorious countercultural kingdom whose heavenly citizens the god of this age wars against (2 Corinthians 4:4). In light of what God has done to reconcile creation back to himself, Moltmann suggests that seeking Jerusalem also means celebrating the life of Christ's bodily resurrection.

⁸⁸ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 308.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

In his book, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, Moltmann sees Jerusalem as a glorious image that embodies the gospel story.⁹⁰ The promise of God's eternal dwelling on earth is tied to the city of Jerusalem within the book of Revelation. Christ's ministry ended in Jerusalem. The Passover meal of the Lamb took place in Jerusalem. The Lamb's death, burial and resurrection are all tied to the city of Jerusalem. For Moltmann, the resurrection power by which the ecclesial community ministers is connected to the ethics and hope that was disseminated from the city of Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the apostles in the upper room. In fact, Moltmann ties the resurrection of the Messiah to the activity of the ecclesial community of Jerusalem when he states, "According to Hippolytus the risen Christ is the 'leader of the mystic roundance' and the church is his bride who dances with him."⁹¹ The bride of Christ goes forth from Jerusalem to continue the ministry that Jesus started.

Moltmann points out that Jerusalem also represents the Messianic launching point that sends the bride of Christ out to invite others to become citizens of this imminent commonwealth of heaven. In this political reality, the ecclesial community already finds her citizenship. Moltmann ties the ministry of the ecclesial community to the city of Jerusalem when he states, "So it was in Jerusalem that the first Christian community awaited the messianic kingdom, gathering round the twelve apostles who represented the twelve tribes of Israel."⁹² However, when the city of Jerusalem fell to the Romans in 70 CE Moltmann suggests that the mourning over this symbol of hope was rooted in an eschatological model of a heavenly city. He asserts,

This idea stems from the Israelite inclination to assume that religious objects on earth have heavenly archetypes (cf. Ex. 15:40). 'The Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother', writes Paul in Gal. 4:26. The antithesis to 'the present Jerusalem' (4:25) indicates that he

⁹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 84.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁹² Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 309.

understands ‘the Jerusalem above’ not platonically but eschatologically... the heavenly commonwealth to which the Christians already belong here on earth.⁹³

As citizens of this heavenly community, the bride of Christ is a refugee in the kingdom of this world until the entirety of God’s kingdom is established on earth. Hebrews 13:14 speaks to the ethical outworking of this heavenly perspective: “We have here no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.” The destruction of the earthly Jerusalem probably served as a reminder for early believers that there is no ‘lasting city’ in the transitory epoch the world currently finds itself. This concept will be elaborated upon further in chapter three when we consider how the city imagery in Revelation should be interpreted as a people and a place.

For Moltmann, acknowledging the reality of God’s triune characteristics is the foundation for hearing of heaven. The hope of heaven implies political, economic, and spiritual liberation in the present that is connected to the hope of the future. The ethics of heaven should motivate believers to live unlike the patterns of this world. Moltmann suggests: “Because [Christians] wait for the redemption of this whole perverted world in the coming eternal kingdom, they feel that in this world, estranged from God as it is, they are strangers.”⁹⁴ In essence, the commonwealth of Jerusalem becomes the counter-culture and the antithesis of Babylon and Rome. Likewise, the ecclesial community is to model the culture of the future heaven within the present.

IV. Anthony Thiselton’s Strategy for Hearing of Heaven

In his book *Life after Death: A New Approach to the Last Things*, Anthony C. Thiselton carefully contrasts the hope in natural human capacities to survive physical death and the

⁹³ Moltmann ties the theme of seeking Jerusalem to the ecclesial community’s engagement with physical places of worship. He states, “Consequently, for Christians there are no longer any ‘holy places which have to be visited or cherished. Those who worship him are to ‘worship him in spirit and in truth’ (John 4:24), nowhere else. Because they live wholly in the expectation of the coming kingdom, for these people, ‘every home country because a foreign land and every foreign land a home.’” See *ibid.*, 310.

⁹⁴ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 310.

Creator's sovereign act of resurrection and new creation. After acknowledging that on our own, humans do not have the capacity or ability to live eternally, Thiselton turns to God's promise of heaven as the only safeguard which guarantees human immortality.⁹⁵ He argues that theologians must approach anew the biblical concept of bodily resurrection and glorified life in the age come.

IVa. Heaven as the Locus of God's Glory

This "new approach" to studying an embodied, glorified existence allows individuals to see heaven as a product of God's sovereign grace and initiation. In other words, Thiselton would agree with Wright that human beings do not experience immortality as a result of their own latent capabilities. Rather, immortality is a gift graciously given by a sovereign God who acted on creation's behalf through the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah. Thiselton argues that to view human goodness, intelligence, or piety as the basis for immortality is to uphold a platonic approach to eschatology.⁹⁶ He argues that the Bible portrays heaven as "the locus of God's glory" and a place where one can finally see God face-to-face. Similar to Wright, Thiselton reminds the reader that hearing of heaven as a place where one can experience the physical presence of God face-to-face is not necessarily new to eschatology but easily forgotten amidst the deluge of platonic ideology that has crept into the contemporary understanding of heaven.

Like Wright, Thiselton takes a theocentric approach to the discussion of heaven. Seeing "glory" as the central motif that permeates the study of heaven, he suggests: "It is not in heaven that we find God, but in God that we find heaven. 'Heaven' is precisely not a construct of the imagination... The glory which awaits every Christian is precisely and primarily the presence of

⁹⁵ This is the major focus on the entire second chapter of Thiselton's book.

⁹⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Life After Death: A New Approach to the Last Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 111.

God. Very much secondarily, it then involves not a human projection, but God's creation."⁹⁷ In essence, heaven is not a place for celebrating human experience, goodness, and intellect but the very place of knowing the inexorable fullness of God's glorious presence. Not only does Thiselton understand heaven primarily as the glory of God's presence, but also as the reality of a "weighty or heavy" atmosphere.⁹⁸ The inexhaustible depth of this glory is what compels the worshipper to recognize visibly the love, beauty, power, and uniqueness of a holy God. Thiselton expounds upon what it means to adore the Creator by quoting Moltmann: "To 'glorify' God means to love God for his own sake, and to enjoy God as he is in himself."⁹⁹ Believers who stand in the heavenly glory of God will experience "the relative worthlessness of the created order in comparison with God himself. This is not to belittle the beauty of creation; it is to take up the faultless logic of Augustine and of Athanasius that, in spite of the beauty of what God creates, their beauty cannot compete with that of the God who created them."¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, to enjoy God as he is in himself is to love God for his sake. Nothing can hinder this enjoyment when God becomes the sole object of enjoyment and pleasure. Thiselton is careful to note that friends, historic figures, and beautiful objects do not cease to impact heaven's reality but will fade in comparison to the manifold presence of God.

Thiselton's final theme of God's glorious presence which determines the reality of heaven is described in the notion of being "face-to-face" with our Creator. He admits that this language remains speculative in nature because no one can declare with certainty the nature of being face-to-face with God. However, Thiselton builds upon his first theme of heaven's reality by observing how characteristics of glory are a visible manifestation of God. He notes that the Hebrew word for

⁹⁷ Ibid., 185.

⁹⁸ Thiselton bases this second aspect of heaven's reality on the Hebrew (*kabodh*), Greek (*doxa*) and Latin (*gravis*) words for "glory" which evoke images of a heaviness, dignity, honour, splendor, awe, and weightiness in God's holy presence. Ibid., 188.

⁹⁹ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 323, cited in Thiselton, *Life After Death*, 190.

¹⁰⁰ Thiselton, 190.

presence ‘*panim*’ is the same word regularly translated as “face.” He asserts, “Sometimes a different Hebrew word, ‘*ayin*,’ can also be translated both as *presence* and *eyes*.”¹⁰¹ Thiselton references the work of David Ford to illustrate the importance of the Hebrew concept of “face” when approaching the reality of heaven, “Seeing his face in worship is here the picture of unsurpassable joy and perfection.”¹⁰² Understanding the image of being face-to-face with God keeps heaven theocentric and becomes the foundation for relational life in the heavenly community. The face of God keeps past events, stories, and associations in perspective.¹⁰³ Furthermore, God’s face is the primary focus for relating, welcoming, and incorporating human beings into the newness of a life in God’s glorious, unhindered presence.

IVb. The Future Heaven and Bodily Resurrection

With the concept of God’s glory underpinning heaven’s reality, Thiselton describes the way human beings will be incorporated into the glory of God. He explains that this cosmic incorporation is what the scriptures call “glorification” and notes four characteristics of this future dimension of the age to come. The first element is founded on the biblical promise of bodily resurrection. He is careful to note that this future human existence is initiated as a gift of God through the agency of Jesus Christ and the causality of the Holy Spirit. He explains that bodily resurrection is a fluid and ever-progressing way of being that will not cause believers to become uninterested or bored in the eternal worship of God.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁰² David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 175, cited in *ibid.*, 192.

¹⁰³ Thiselton, 192.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

The second feature of the future reality of heaven is linked to the question of whether the resurrected human body is “immaterial” or “physical.” By looking to the Pauline writings, Thiselton suggests that this question is marginal to Paul’s concerns.¹⁰⁵ When Paul says we shall have a body, the focus is not on its physical properties but rather on the unique personality that makes a person’s identity recognizable in eternity. We are resurrected into our own distinctiveness rather than being absorbed into an unrecognizable state of being. Thiselton concludes, “Hence we can be certain that part of the purpose of resurrection, rather than the pagan notion of ‘immortality’ (as in Plato and some Eastern religions), is God’s preservation of recognizable and communicable individuality.”¹⁰⁶ In addressing the third component of heaven’s reality, he asserts that the future resurrected state is not an individual matter but rather a cosmic and corporate one. By referencing passages like 1 Corinthians 15:51, “We shall all be saved,” he balances the individual distinctiveness of one’s resurrected body with the importance of mutual relationship with God and Christian community.

This communal aspect of the parousia and the last judgment finds spiritual depth in Thiselton’s fourth feature of heaven’s hope.¹⁰⁷ The fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians becomes the focus of his research into the physical nature of a believer’s resurrected state. Thiselton delves into the words of 1 Corinthians 15:44 which suggest that our resurrected bodies will be “spiritual” in nature. He provides a helpful analysis of this biblical word image by showing that Paul was not using a Greek or Platonic way of interpreting the word “spiritual.” By carefully exegeting the text, he explains that the word “spiritual” (*pneumatikos*) is used in the sense of being animated by the

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁰⁷ The term *parousia* will be used frequently in our discourse of heaven and will refer to the two distinct yet similar stages of Christ’s physical presence on earth. The first stage of Christ parousia occurred when he was born of a virgin and ended when he ascended into heaven. This allowed the parousia of his Spirit to actively minister to and through his bride to prepare her and others for the his second coming. The second stage of Christ’s parousia, which will be elaborated upon in greater detail in chapter three, will commence when Christ comes back to earth as the angel promised he would (Acts 1:11). The second stage of Christ’s parousia is without end because his physical dwelling with creation will be for all eternity when he establishes his kingdom on earth forever.

causality of the Holy Spirit's power.¹⁰⁸ Thiselton points out that our spiritual bodies should not be understood as immaterial and Platonic in nature. Rather, our resurrected bodies should be seen as the perfect expression of human life redeemed from the power of sin and empowered by the dynamic and progressive work of the Holy Spirit.

As he extrapolates on the image of a "spiritual" body in 1 Corinthians 15, Thiselton highlights the three comparative features between life now and the hope of life to come. His sound exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15 reveals a direct contrast (15:36), continuity (15:49), and transformation (15:51-54) between our "old" bodies and our "resurrected" bodies.¹⁰⁹ Thiselton argues that the personal hope of heaven is firmly grounded in faith in Christ's own resurrection and our Creator God who designs particular species to enjoy distinctive physical bodies in his creation. What remains incredibly clear regarding Thiselton's eschatological hearing of heaven is that our existence in the age to come is a gift of God made possible through Jesus Christ who is the "first fruits" of our resurrection. Grounded in the Christocentric faith of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension, Thiselton underscores the "spiritual" and "physical" nature of our resurrected bodies. He is careful to note that this physical and glorified way of understanding the resurrected body in the age to come is not new to theology.¹¹⁰ However, the "physical" and the "spiritual" characteristics of bodily resurrection are often misconstrued and need to be reimagined through deeper biblical engagement.

When addressing the way heaven is lived out at hand, Thiselton believes that the Holy Spirit is the agent which sanctifies individuals in the present to prepare them and the world around them for Christ's second coming. Thiselton states, "Only in the Spirit will Christian believers

¹⁰⁸ Earlier in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, Paul uses the word "spiritual" in the same sense of the word by referring to the Holy Spirit as the agent which empowers and causes the resurrected body to exist. Thiselton notes that we may consider "how the post-resurrection mode of being and the new creation may provide counterparts to the sensory experience of earthly life, which far surpass it. Matter is not annihilated but transformed." *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

freely choose to do the right...God will be 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15:28). 'Death has been swallowed up in victory' (15:54). Sin will be abolished; hence death has lost its sting (15:55-56). Hence in the present Christians may fearlessly 'excel in the work of the Lord'."¹¹¹ Solely thinking of our present existence and our resurrected state as either "immaterial" or "physical" causes an unhealthy dualism to crystallize in Christian eschatology. Thiselton's biblical perspective serves as a reminder of the mysterious overlapping of the two.¹¹² Seeing our present bodies as physical conduits which were meant to already experience the "animated" activity of the Holy Spirit allows humanity to taste what is yet to come. Thiselton's work is a reminder that the reality of heaven is much more dependent on God's initiation and sustenance than many "scientific" perspectives are willing to admit. We must recognize that experiencing heaven "already" and heaven "not yet" involves complete surrender to the supernatural activity of God's Spirit—the causal agent of heaven "at hand" preparing creation for embodied, face-to-face worship of Christ.

V. Conclusion

As a representative sample of mainstream theologians, Morse, Wright, Moltmann, and Thiselton present thoughtful strategies to hear of heaven in contemporary discourse. In varying degrees, each theologian has considered what many presuppose regarding the reality and hope of heaven "at hand" and "not yet." In surveying the contemporary, theological landscape of heaven, I will conclude this chapter by addressing how each theologian has engaged with and potentially combatted the first and second myth of heaven.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 128.

¹¹² These ethics of heaven "not yet all in all in creation" are completely available in the present. By living in the present with hope of the future, one is compelled to live a life of faith and perseverance. This perseverance compels followers of Jesus Christ to live lives that identify with Christ's suffering and victory. A world identifying with the pain of sin and suffering needs to know the hope and victory that can be experienced in the present age. Those who are already animated by the Holy Spirit's redemptive activity become the conduits of heaven's ethics manifesting on earth "at hand." Ibid., 53.

To review, the first myth of heaven is a mindset which causes Christians to become so future focused that they neglect to embody the characteristics of the kingdom of heaven within the present. The second myth of heaven causes Christians to only interpret the prophetic and apocalyptic texts as the church embodying the future age of heaven. In this view, there is little to no emphasis on Christ's literal return to do that which the church cannot accomplish. The first is so future focused that heaven "at hand" is neglected while the second focuses so much on transformation within the present that heaven "not yet" is either under-emphasized or distorted. In this critical engagement of each theologian's hearing of heaven, I will consider how the biblical promise of bodily resurrection and new creation is woven into their depiction of heaven "not yet."

Christopher Morse has provided an excellent overview of heaven in contemporary thought. He effectively challenges the first myth of heaven by emphasizing the ways the good news of heaven must invigorate and transform life at hand. In an attempt to take the emphasis of heaven off of the future and onto the present Morse spends most of his effort discussing the ethics of heaven that the church embodies. In addressing the hope of heaven in chapter five of his book, Morse focuses primarily on the hope of heaven which affects the present but says very little about the characteristics of heaven "not yet." Bodily resurrection is referred to in passing four times in this chapter but nothing is said about what exactly humanity can hope regarding the place they will inherit following resurrection. The prophetic images of Scripture depicting a new heaven and a new earth are not emphasized or adequately explained in his book. Thus, Morse offers little to combat the second myth of heaven. One who upholds this myth would not find Morse' writing necessarily supporting the myth of progress but would not find his writing adamantly challenging it either.

Wright's strategy for hearing of heaven displays a careful balance between acknowledging that heaven is "already" and "not yet." He challenges an overemphasis on "future-minded thinking" by describing the ways the church goes out into the world embodying the characteristics of heaven and preparing creation for the day when Christ will completely transform it. He also effectively challenges the second myth of heaven by pointing to a subtle platonic shift in contemporary eschatology which has led many down the path of imagining the apocalyptic images of Scripture pointing to the church being the agent of creation's complete transformation. Likewise, by appealing to the biblical promise of bodily resurrection, he opposes the view that the heaven one experience after death will be an ethereal existence. Wright argues that Christ's physical return which will usher in a new age—the renewal of God's entire creation.¹¹³

Jürgen Moltmann hears of heaven as God's past promises spoken from a guaranteed future. Seen through lenses of hope, the eschatological reality of heaven comes to us from the future and challenges us rehear heaven in the present.¹¹⁴ In other words, we live in the epoch of the spoken promises of heaven fulfilled in part but not in full. Moltmann affirms the biblical promise of cosmic and bodily resurrection as being fulfilled already in part through Christ's resurrection from the dead. Therefore, Moltmann counters the first myth of heaven by affirming the concept of the kingdom of heaven being at hand in the ministry of the church going out from Jerusalem. In the same way, he challenges the second myth of heaven by viewing the church as a commonwealth of people who point to the "not yet" of heaven—the time when the dead in Christ will also experience resurrection.¹¹⁵ Although Moltmann recognizes that we live in the epoch between the promises of heaven fulfilled in part and not yet fully consummated, he focuses

¹¹³ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 294.

¹¹⁴ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 85.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

primarily on the ways the contemporary church constitutes the commonwealth of the heavenly Jerusalem in the present.

However, there is a critique of Moltmann's hearing of heaven which should be noted. To hear of heaven "at hand" as God's past promises of a "not yet" existing reality given from a guaranteed future is a convoluted way of saying what Scripture says quite clearly. A more direct way of saying this same point would be to refer to Romans 4:17b which show why the omniscient Creator has the ability to speak things as though they have already taken place: "God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did." Since God is not bound by space or time, he was able to say that the Messiah was slain before the foundation of the earth (1 Peter 1:20, Revelation 13:8). In the mind of God, his spoken promises are spoken in the past as if they have already happened in the future.

Anthony Thiselton does well to effectively challenge both myths of heaven by focusing on Christ's bodily resurrection as the distinctive key that links heaven "at hand" to the hope of embodied life in God's physical presence "not yet." To address the myth of progress, he suggests that pridefully believing that the fullness of heaven can be established "at hand" apart from bodily resurrection and new creation is not heaven at all.¹¹⁶ Of each of these four theologians, Thiselton goes into the greatest detail describing the nature of a glorified life in the age of heaven to come. He does so by demonstrating why the resurrection language used in 1 Corinthians 15 should be interpreted physically and spiritually. Instead of adopting a platonic and ethereal view of heaven, he notes why life in the age to come should be viewed as the perfect expression of human life redeemed from the power of sin and empowered by the dynamic and progressive work of the Holy Spirit.

¹¹⁶ Thiselton, *Life After Death*, viii.

Each theologian's strategy for hearing of heaven recognizes that the kingdom of heaven is most definitely "at hand" through the indwelling work of Christ's Spirit in believers. Likewise, each recognizes that there is an aspect of heaven which is still to come in the future. All four point to the promise of resurrection as central to the hope of heaven to come. However, each spend varying amounts of attention on what ushers in the "not yet" of bodily resurrection and cosmic renewal. For example, Morse acknowledges that resurrection is linked to the promise of heaven overtaking the present form of this world but says nothing about how Christ's second coming is connected to the restoration of all things. Morse says little about how the words in Revelation 21:2 "Then I saw a new heaven and new earth," is connected to a place-centred view of bodily resurrection and new creation.

In comparison, I believe N. T. Wright and Thiselton are much more intentional in addressing a physical depiction of heaven "not yet." Wright explains what it means to believe that Jesus is "coming again to judge the living and the dead." Likewise, he elaborates on the Christian hope of "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."¹¹⁷ Wright is much more effective than Morse and Moltmann in battling the myth of progress by showing why a platonic hearing of heaven robs the Bible's apocalyptic imagery from a place-centred interpretation. More will be said on how he does this in the following chapter. Similarly, Thiselton takes the time to show how the biblical image of bodily resurrection combats an ethereal hearing of the future heaven. Scripture points to a glorified, place-centred future in which persons await an age of resurrected, face-to-face worship with Jesus.

¹¹⁷ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 29, 101-104.

Chapter 2

The Way Place-centred Theology Affects the Contemporary Discourse of Heaven

You have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place...
– Psalm 91:9

The purpose of this chapter could be summarized in the following statement: A more place-centred perspective in theology will better address the hope of heaven “not yet.” In light of the theological landscape pertaining to the “already” and “not yet” of heaven described in chapter one, chapter two aims to consider two important questions.

1. How has a marginalization of place affected theology?
2. How can the Christian hope of bodily resurrection and Christ’s return be interpreted through a place-centred hearing of the future heaven?

In answering this first question, I will take a brief excursus to consider how the marginalization of place has affected a myriad of academic disciplines and then look at N. T. Wright’s thoughts on the subject in theology. I will spend the majority of this chapter considering the second question and appeal to the research of John Inge, Jürgen Moltmann, and Timothy Gorrige who consider how the transcendent Creator who fills the spaces of his creation desires to physically manifest himself in place.

I. The Distinction between Space and Place

Before we delve into this spatial discourse, I should differentiate between the terms “space” and “place” which will be used frequently in the remainder of this study. Many historians, theologians, and geographers use these terms interchangeably. However, the differences between these references should be clarified when approaching their relevance in theological discourse. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan describes the differences between the two in reference to the human experience:

In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. “Space” is more abstract than “place.” What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. Architects talk about the spatial qualities of place; they can equally well speak of the locational qualities of space. The ideas “space” and “place” require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.¹¹⁸

Tuan challenges us to think of “space” abstractly until it becomes differentiated, remembered, and distinguishable through human experience. To think in terms of undifferentiated space, billions of light-years of uncharted galaxies might come to mind. On the other hand, to think of place might evoke thoughts of particular locations encountered through virtue of human acquaintance.¹¹⁹ Although both are in the physical realm, one is infinitely beyond and the other is locally present. According to Tuan, places represent a pause in the movement of time—the very moment when the infinity of space is encountered by the realm of human experience. Only in space can places be

¹¹⁸ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1977), 6.

¹¹⁹ Waldemar Janzen helps differentiate between space and place by calling place “one’s spatial surroundings that become closely entwined with one’s experience.” He calls this private sphere one’s *Eigenwelt* which constitutes one’s “lived space” in which matter within spatial perceptions becomes qualitative and personal. See Waldemar Janzen, *Still in the Image: Essays in Biblical and Theological Anthropology* (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1982), 143.

remembered, time move forward, and life flourish. Therefore, throughout our study, the use of the word “spatial” will refer to the lived spaces in which places emerge.

II. The marginalization of Spatial Thinking in Society

Before reflecting on the embeddedness of place in theology and eschatology, one should understand how the marginalization of spatial thinking is a widespread problem that not only affects theology but other disciplines as well. Sigurd Bergmann, professor of archaeology and religious studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, carefully traces the roots of spatial theology in the context of the Western sensitivity to space and place. Bergmann notes that attention to place has been marginalized and even absent in the academic disciplines because of a strong Western tendency to favour time over space.¹²⁰ Bergmann argues that the privileging of space over time began in the seventeenth-century in a famous debate between mathematicians Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz.¹²¹ Max Jammer, an Israeli physicist and philosopher of physics, believes that Leibniz’s views were one of the factors during the Enlightenment that caused individuals to value the mental constructs of philosophy and reason over the physical realm. Before the time of Leibniz, early philosophers and scientists living in a

¹²⁰ Sigurd Bergmann, “Theology in Spatial Turn: Space, Place and Built Environments Challenging and Changing the Images of God,” *Religion Compass* 1 (2007): 353.

¹²¹ Newton and Leibniz disagreed whether space and time have absolute reality or whether they are merely relational concepts. Newton believed that space is distinct from the bodies that occupy it and that time passes uniformly despite the activity of these bodies within the container. For Newton, although space and time is measured using bodies and events, these are only indicative of relative motions. In contrast, Leibniz’s relationalist view sees space and time as one-directional, linear idealizations. One might say that Leibniz pictured space and time as mere abstractions from the realities of the material world. To simplify his perspective, Leibniz believed that if motion is determined by an absolute change of place in a certain period of time, then the reverse should also be considered. Time should be measured by way of the absolute motion of an object changing place in absolute space. His perspective relativized space and exulted time as ideal absolute measurement. Leibniz’s third paper on the subject summarized these findings as follows: “I hold space to be something merely relative, as time is... an order of coexistences, as time is an order of successions.” Michael J. Futch, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics of Time and Space* (New York: Springer Press, 2008), 30.

pre-modern society were predominately interested in understanding physical processes in terms of coordinates.¹²²

Coordinates were essential in plotting maps, constructing architecture, and discovering uncharted water or territory. Not until the age of the Enlightenment did Europeans begin to show more interest in discussing how time was inter-connected within the locality of human experience.¹²³ Edward Casey describes a shift during the Enlightenment from emphasizing the nature of human existence by way of space to that of time.¹²⁴ As modernity moved into a more abstract way of viewing reality, more sophisticated methods of travel were also being discovered. Jammer argues that science was moving so rapidly beyond the bounds of space that by the eighteenth to mid-twentieth century, the properties of space became inextricably dependent on the process of time. For example, determining times zones was now something society was considering important.¹²⁵

David Harvey, a professor of anthropology and geography, explains that an emphasis on the process of time could be a significant factor leading to disinterest in environmental science. He points out that the plethora of technological advancement in the twentieth century heightened society's interest in evading spatial boundaries. Modern-day technologies offering faster and easier accessible data, communication, production, travel, and manufacturing have created a condition in post-modernity known as "time-space compression."¹²⁶ We live in an age where true conquest is found in tearing down spatial barriers and ultimately annihilating the barriers of space by way of time. Yi-Fu Tuan's famous plea of 1974 in his book *Topophilia, A Study of*

¹²² Max Jammer, *Concepts of Space: The History of Theories of Space in Physics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 4.

¹²³ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 194-195.

¹²⁴ Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 6.

¹²⁵ Jammer, *Concepts of Space*, 4.

¹²⁶ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Press, 1989), 205.

Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values was the catalyst which propelled other thinkers like Bergmann, Casey, and Harvey to explore whether the emphasis on time has resulted in a disregard for the care of the places societies inhabit.¹²⁷ These geographers, philosophers, and environmentalists see “time-space compression” resulting from humanity’s lust for power and money. By neglecting the places in which human existence can flourish, humans are harming the planet’s water, destroying natural habitats, and polluting the air.

Sigurd Bergmann praises various branches of the social sciences, mainly geography and social anthropology, for beginning to re-emphasize place-culture interconnections through a more intentional spatial theory of society.¹²⁸ Likewise, environmental science places careful emphasis on natural space as the sphere which mobilizes energies for social and environmental transformation. Bergmann suggests that works by Tuan, Casey and Harvey are part of a resounding call for every academic sector to think of ways to care for the places that will be the home generations to come. At the heart of this perspective is the conviction that a deeper appreciation for place will help us view the earth as our home.¹²⁹ Furthermore, every community on earth shares a common goal—global partnership to nurture and care for the earth.

III. The Marginalization of Spatial Thinking in Theology

The rising tide of protest from scholars in a variety of academic sectors acknowledging the demise of place and its destructive effects on human experience can also prompt thoughtful consideration in theology and eschatology. Has a marginalization of place-centred thinking affected theology? As was briefly noted in chapter one, Wright argues that it has. He points to a

¹²⁷ See Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia, A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).

¹²⁸ Bergmann, “Theology in its Spatial Turn,” 354.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 356.

platonic strain that crept into theology during the time of the early church and has kept theology from embracing the “goodness of the physical realm.”¹³⁰ Although it may be seen as an oversimplification of the Greek “theory of forms,” he suggests that instead of celebrating the “goodness of creation,” Plato focused on the physical realm as evil because of its transitory nature.¹³¹ Wright states,

We may say that Plato’s picture was based on a rejection of the phenomena of matter and transience. The mess and muddle of the space-time-matter world was an offense to the tidy, clean philosophical mind, which dwelt upon eternal realities. It wasn’t just evil that was wrong with the world; it was change and decay, the transitoriness of matter: the fact that spring and summer are followed by autumn and winter, the sunset tails off into darkness, that human blossoming and flourishing are the prelude to suffering and death.¹³²

The issue for Plato and many Gnostic Christians who adopted Platonic thought was that everything pertaining to mortality, transience, and decay must be absent from the study of God.¹³³

An outworking of this Platonic perspective is to take eschatological hope and strip it of any

¹³⁰ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 88, 94.

¹³¹ Wright offers his own view on the “transitoriness of matter” in the age prior to the fall. He does this by understanding the spatial relationship the Creator once had with his creation. For example, in the beginning, creation was called “good” by its Creator yet it was transitory. Creation was regarded “good” not because it is independent or self-sufficient from the essence of God or because it shared the same characteristics of the divine as pantheism suggests. The original creation was considered “good” because it was the perfect physical place where the divine could commune, rest, and dwell. In the garden of his creation, nothing hindered him from allowing the manifold glory of heaven from resting in close proximity with Adam and Eve. Wright holds to a slightly different view in that although creation was good, it’s transient nature deemed it unsuitable for God to set up his permanent dwelling. *Ibid.*, 95.

¹³² Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 88.

¹³³ Wright believes that there were elements of this good yet transitory creation that pointed to a choice to stay in communion with the Creator who would come to dwell with them in the cool of the day or enter a coming age in which the Creator would not dwell with his creation in the same manner. The leaves falling from a tree in its season, the cells of a body weakening and being repaired and the sun going down over the Garden of Eden was not evidence that something was intrinsically wrong with what God called “good.” The transient nature of the physical realm was a signpost that reminded Adam and Eve to either live in the fullness of life by eating from the tree of life and walking side by side with God in obedience (Genesis 3:8a) or be cut off from an abundant life by way of disobedience (Genesis 3:8b). A relationship based on sovereign love demands a choice between the two. They could choose to eat from the tree of life eternally to avoid the decay of death or eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and be refused access to the tree of life. God is a god of reward and there is no blessing of reward without the blessing of a choice. The world that God created “good” in the beginning was perfect yet incomplete because that age allowed a choice to experience an age in which God’s goodness would be marred by sin and death. *Ibid.*, 94.

characteristics that can be affected by transience.¹³⁴ Plato went so far as to argue that matter and time is inferior to couch the spiritual because they constitute a transient dimension decaying and in constant flux. According to Wright, the result of Plato's influence is a widespread assumption that humans will live as disembodied, immortal souls in God's presence void of physical place.¹³⁵

IV. A Place-centred Perspective and the Future Heaven

To consider the question: "How can the Christian hope of bodily resurrection and Christ's return be interpreted through a place-centred hearing of the future heaven?" I will examine the research of Anglican Bishop John Inge in his book *A Christian Theology of Place*. The purpose of his book is to show how the Western culture has pushed place-centred thinking into the fringes of theology. As a result, it has endangered a biblical hearing of heaven. Inge is convinced that the Bible holds within it the tools for a rediscovery of the importance of place. He challenges theologians to think more carefully about how the concept of place intersects with every aspect of human existence.

Inge conducts a comprehensive sweep of the biblical narrative exploring the reasons why a spatial perspective is essential in theological discourse. Inge believes that the Old Testament utilizes spatial imagery to demonstrate the three-way relationship of God, people, and place. To be in the world is to encounter God's ultimate eschatological plan for humanity—to experience the creator in place. The working definition of "spatial theology" that Inge utilizes in his writing is viewing every element of human existence through 'locales' of God's encounter with humanity in

¹³⁴ According to Plato's "theory of forms", ultimate reality is not found in the material world. Instead, reality is found in "forms" or "ideas" that exist in the spiritual dimension. K. W. Mills, "Some Aspects of Plato's Theory of Forms: 'Timaeus' 49c ff," *Phronesis* 13 no. 2 (1968): 153.

¹³⁵ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 90.

place.¹³⁶ With regard to the New Testament, Inge builds upon a relational view of place but develops a more incarnational perspective. He explores the sacramentality of sacred spaces by recognizing God's intent to become even closer to humanity through the mystery of the Christ's incarnation. He underscores the Bible's preoccupation with God walking, dwelling, and interacting with people in specific times and places. In the parousia of Jesus Christ's first coming, Inge sees that God transforms the space of creation into a place where his relationship with humanity entered into a deeper level of intimacy. He states, "the incarnation implies that places are the seat of relations of the place of meeting and activity in the interaction between God and the world... balance is maintained by an incarnational perspective."¹³⁷ Inge explains why the first coming of Christ was God's way of pointing to place as the central component of his forthcoming and redemptive plan for creation. Secondly, he urges the church to take place more seriously when approaching tradition, worship, and the biblical text.¹³⁸ At the conclusion of this chapter, we will consider Inge's thoughts on how the second stage of Christ's parousia is tied to the hope of bodily resurrection. But before we do that, we will consider Jürgen Moltmann's reflections on the redemptive nature of Christ's incarnation in place and consider how themes of "dwelling" and "relationship" in the first stage of Christ's parousia help us appreciate the physical characteristics of Christ's return.

IVa. How Place is Tied to the Parousia of Christ

Moltmann renders the theme of place essential in the systematics of Christian faith. His early theological works which were developed in the 1970's address the importance of time in

¹³⁶ John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 33.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

reference to eschatology. His interest in Christian eschatological hope was grounded in the theology of God's reign manifested in social and ecological dimensions of time. As was seen in the previous chapter, he emphasizes the person of Christ who appeared in a specific cultural period as God incarnate. Moltmann's book *The Way of Jesus Christ* carefully interprets the mission, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in an eschatological manner. This Christocentric approach in eschatology provides the epochal framework by which he interprets human history and experience. In this way, all Christological statements are statements of hope and promise. He carefully explains the distinct relationship between Christology and eschatology this way: "[C]hristology is no more than the beginning of eschatology; and eschatology, as the Christian faith understands it, is always the consummation of Christology".¹³⁹ For Moltmann, eschatology can only be truly understood in light of Christology. Eschatological revelation only comes through an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. His subsequent Christological works moved beyond social dimensions of time and began to include themes of space in creation. His central eschatological reflections of eschatological hope are rooted in two themes—"the space of creation" and "the living spaces of God."

To be in relationship with the reigning and crucified God is to entertain the question, how can God be regarded as the living space of creation and creation be regarded as the place for God dwell? All of history and human experience has a singular focus: to host the glory of God in the places of creation. Some refer to the glory as the cosmic Shekinah of God.¹⁴⁰ Moltmann acknowledges that the parousia of the Messiah is the embodiment of God's promises from the future that were foretold by prophets of the Old Testament. This cosmic coming of God into his

¹³⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), xiv.

¹⁴⁰ The word "shekinah" is a noun that comes from the Hebrew verb *shakan* which means to settle, to inhabit, or to dwell. Jürgen Moltmann believes that the *shakan* "dwelling" of God is linked to his rest within his creation. Although the word "Shekinah" is not utilized within the Hebrew text, the concept most definitely is. The word is frequently used in Rabbinic literature. Moltmann's theology of God's presence among his people takes on a unique focus that sees the weekly Sabbath and Sabbatical years as a rhythm of God's presence in the constructs of a transient world. Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, viii.

creation is the central expression of Jewish and Christian eschatology.¹⁴¹ The very reason he titled his eschatological treatise *The Coming of God* is to illustrate how central he sees the expectation of God coming to dwell in physical proximity with creation. The book indicates that the Lord's parousia begins the process of completing his creation.¹⁴² He shows consistent intrigue with the Jewish notion of "resting" and "dwelling" in place. Both of these terms are similar to Jewish understanding of the six days of creation and the seventh day of Sabbath rest. For Moltmann, all six days of work find meaning and fulfillment in the seventh day of rest. In the beginning, God referred to his creation as "finished" (Gen. 2:2) on his day of rest. The process of blessing the works of creation took place by Yahweh "resting" in the community of his creation.¹⁴³ The seventh day is a relational image of the Creator dwelling with his creation. At that instance, the magnitude of eternity invaded and rested within the time and place of creation.

Moltmann suggests that God's rest on the seventh day of creation points to the eschatological Sabbath of God's cosmic *shekinah* resting with creation for all of eternity.¹⁴⁴ His theological perspective emphasizes God's interest in dwelling in the places of his creation. This leads us to Wright's thoughts on the transient nature of God's original creation. The Jewish attention to the weekly Sabbath and Sabbatical (*sheviit*) years constituted a rhythm of God's eternal presence in an estranged and transient world.¹⁴⁵ The *shekinah* of God indicates that God delights in being physically manifest in the midst of his people.

The connection Moltmann makes between God's Sabbath rest and God dwelling within his creation prompts eschatological expectation. The parousia of God is linked to the Jewish concept of God's *shekinah*. God's choice to dwell in place is his way of saying that the physical

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 23-24.

¹⁴² Ibid., 307.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 265.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 266.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 138.

dimension can and will experience restoration and redemption. He reads 1 Corinthians 15 as a development of the Pauline statement, “God will be everything in everything” (15:28). He believes that God has a unique relationship to place and place has a special relationship with God. This mutual indwelling of creation in God and God in creation is not the same but closely related through the Jewish concept of Yahweh’s *shekina* in *Makom kadosh* (holy places).¹⁴⁶ His attention to the rabbinic doctrine of divine *zimsum* stresses God’s ability to create empty space by withdrawing himself from himself. In other words, God creates space within himself so that there can be ontological room for a substance other than himself.¹⁴⁷ The eschatological hope of God becoming “all in all,” the concept already looked at in chapter one, is the infusion of extravagant love into the world through intimate dwelling and relationship.

When God inhabits his creation, Moltmann’s eschatological vision tells us that the “the Creator becomes the God who can be inhabited.”¹⁴⁸ Within the old covenant, God’s desire to dwell in particular places and rest on particular persons is a foretaste of God becoming “all in all.” God’s choice to dwell with his creation enlivens hopeful anticipation of a forthcoming new creation when “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14). The concept of the localized presence of the divine in creation is beautifully visualized in the Old Testament theme of Jerusalem and more specifically—the temple. Viewing Jerusalem as the place where God inhabits creation and becomes inhabited will be further elaborated upon in the conclusion of chapter three.

¹⁴⁶ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 153.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁴⁸ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 299.

IVb. How the Genus of Place is Tied to the Age to Come

Carefully observing the concept of place in theology evokes refreshing perspectives concerning the material realm. The question remains, how is a place-centred hearing of heaven tied to the hope of resurrection? Timothy J. Gorringer uncovers a compelling answer that blends together the hope of redemption and place-centred theology. He reinvests the language of God's redemptive work in the built environment by exploring what it means to see how the heavenly kingdom can operate within the scientific "genus of place." Gorringer sees God actively working in the social, sacred, and geographical elements of creation. He goes a step further by demonstrating that God is active within the built environment. Buildings, cities, streets, geographical regions, and architectural design are all part of humanity's opportunity to join the Creator in sharing delight in the creativity opportunities of the physical realm.

In his book, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, Gorringer argues that theology ought to be concerned about public space, architecture, design, ecological sustainability, and city planning, because all of life expresses our theology and even buildings "make moral statements." He explains how the triune God's redemptive work is closely connected to place. The Holy Spirit is the transcendent God working through faithful men and women to have "visions of a better human environment," God as Father demonstrates his relational attributes by bringing "order out of chaos, the structuring of space by form" and God in the Son reconciles humanity "in order to teach peace to the nations and make justice concrete."¹⁴⁹ Gorringer then takes this mapping of spatiality and adopts a Jewish understanding of the land in order to show that it should be stewarded for the community instead of the individual. Gorringer also acknowledges that a

¹⁴⁹ Timothy J. Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 48-49.

Platonic perspective distorts a biblical understanding of the Creator and his redemptive plan for creation.¹⁵⁰ He states, “The Triune God is not to be understood simply as the negative of our experience of space and time, but as its creative origin and ground, and therefore as the possibility of its eschatological redemption.”¹⁵¹ He suggests that although God is Spirit, God has chosen to dwell in place with humanity through his incarnation. The divine mystery of the incarnation is extrapolated upon by Gorringer in the same way Moltmann describes the kabbalistic notion of *zimzum*.¹⁵² Gorringer notes that “‘space’ is neither the container of all reality, as in the Platonic tradition, nor the sum of the dimensions and relations of objects, as it is for Kant, but a way of understanding *political* reality.”¹⁵³ The way place is understood in God and God in place is crucial to understanding the mysterious nature of Christ’s first and second coming.

Gorringer suggests that the genus of space is closely connected to the redemptive nature of his heavenly kingdom. This is noticeable in the frequent use of the preposition “in” scattered throughout the New Testament. One noticeable instance is found in Acts 17 when Paul stands in the Areopagus and states, “In God we live and move and have our being.” Knowing the social and spiritual context of the people of Athens, Paul was affirming their view that the God of heaven and earth in his omnipresence chooses not to dwell in temples made with human hands. The God who breathed the entire cosmos into existence and offers life and breath to every human being is the same God who is not bound by geographical locations (Acts 17:24). Paul is referencing and clarifying the Stoic views of Zeno of Citium disseminated three hundred years before the ministry

¹⁵⁰ Gorringer appeals to the research of Harvey Cox who argues that in Hebrew understanding, Yahweh was perceived as a god who transcended space. Compared to the pagan nations who worshipped stationary gods, the God of the Hebrews traveled with his people. By pointing to the apostle John’s claim that “God is Spirit,” Gorringer points out that unfortunately, God has been so far removed from the spatial realm, that redemption of the built environment seems to be a foreign concept. In essence, western theology has adhered to an image of God that has divested him of any physical properties. He acknowledges that God is Spirit but that the conundrum of God’s spiritual yet physical properties should be held in more careful tension. *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁵² As was described earlier, this Hebrew concept refers to the ontological space God makes within himself for another reality to exist. *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 41.

of Christ. The Stoics believed that God is the very soul of the world and that each individual on earth contains part of the divine fire of God. All created things are part of one single system which is known as nature. The individual life is considered “good” when it is in harmony with the omnipresent characteristics of the divine in nature.¹⁵⁴ Gorringer explains, “Stoicism was pantheistic, and pantheism ultimately identifies the universe with God. Both Christianity and Judaism, however, have insisted that God is not a member of this or any universe. They have, then, on the one hand affirmed God’s omnipresence, but at the same time been chary of discussing the implications this has for space.”¹⁵⁵ Seeing nature as completely dependent on God as the cause of its existence was something some early theologians who were familiar with Stoic thought were more than willing to discuss.

Gorringer quotes Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* to highlight this point, “Since it is God’s nature to exist, he it must be who properly causes existence in creatures, just as it is fire itself [that] sets other things on fire...now existence is more intimately and profoundly interior to things than anything else... So God must exist and *exist intimately* in everything.”¹⁵⁶ Drawing on the biblical understanding of God being “all in all,” Gorringer appeals to Karl Barth’s engagement with Aquinas’ understanding of God’s omnipresence in space. Barth’s outline of divine spatiality within his *Church Dogmatics* centres upon God’s ‘eminent spatiality.’ Barth’s view of space and place is Trinitarian in that God’s omnipresence is the manifestation of his love known through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Aquinas primarily saw God’s omnipresence in space as the objective means to sustain creation through his creative power. Barth would suggest that God’s omnipresence is not just about proximity through space but about rationality in place. In pantheism, space is identical with the transcendent God but for theologians like Gorringer and

¹⁵⁴ Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York, Random House, 2011), 75-77.

¹⁵⁵ Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, 41.

¹⁵⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a 8.1, cited in Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, 42. (emphasis mine)

Barth, places constitute the preferred dimension by which the omnipresent God can be physically experienced through relationship.¹⁵⁷ As can be seen in the biblical narrative, place always has its origin in the pattern of relations. Karl Barth would state that God is a relational god who engages with his creation through “acts” and “events” in time and place.¹⁵⁸ Gorringer summarizes Barth’s view of space like this, “Space, in other words, is not something contingent, something which will one day be annihilated and ‘be no more’, because it has its true and intrinsic ground in God.”¹⁵⁹ He asserts that to be in space is to encounter places by which persons can encounter the relational Creator: “We are invited to understand our experience therefore in and through the narrative of this God’s creative engagement in creation, incarnation and at Pentecost.”

God the Father, the transcendent and omnipresent Creator took on human flesh in the incarnation of Christ to relate with humanity in the person of Jesus the Messiah. As both Barth and Moltmann suggest, place is not something that will be annihilated as if it is sub-par and temporary in God’s redemptive plan. The physical realm is the place within God where God manifested his glory by way of the first coming of Christ—the first stage in God’s promise to one day be “all in all” with his creation. Reflecting on God’s relationship with people in specific places ultimately leads to the biblical hope of being bodily resurrected in eternity. As Thiselton suggests, the hope of bodily and cosmic redemption is connected to the promise of seeing the Creator face-to-face. Inge indicates that just as a body necessitates a physical container in our present experience, so it is necessary to be place-oriented when considering the hope of bodily resurrection.¹⁶⁰ Thiselton and Inge’s use of bodily terminology to describe our eschatological future aligns with the words of Revelation 22:4 which reads, “They will see His face.”¹⁶¹ This is

¹⁵⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 275, cited in Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, 43.

¹⁵⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 263, cited in Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, 45.

¹⁵⁹ Gorringer, 42.

¹⁶⁰ Inge, *A Christian Theology of Space*, 134.

¹⁶¹ For the contemporary Jewish readership, this was an overwhelming eschatological promise in light of what they would have known concerning God’s physical presence. According to the Torah, only the priest of God who

not an insignificant detail in Revelation and should not be spiritualized by dull stereotypes and lifeless caricatures. Nothing else can eclipse the unspeakable joy of heaven—the physical presence of God himself. Every other heavenly pleasure will derive from and be secondary to seeing our Creator face-to-face.¹⁶² To desire heaven is to desire the face of God. Ancient theologians often spoke of desiring the face of the creator by way of the term—the “beatific vision.” The term comes from three Latin words that together mean “a sight of utter happiness.”¹⁶³ The mystery of seeing God “face-to-face” is the foundation of eschatological hope theologians have been trying to describe for centuries and the very purpose of life itself.

The book of Ezekiel expresses the nature of the “beatific vision” when describing the coming parousia of God: “And the name of the city from that time on will be: the Lord is there” (Ezekiel 48:35). True communion will finally be possible between God and his people. Jonathan Edwards emphasizes the proximate nature of the relationship we will have with God when he states, “The seeing of God in the glorified body of Christ is the most perfect way of seeing God with the bodily eyes that can be.”¹⁶⁴ No longer will sin, distance, or principalities hinder a reciprocal relationship between God and his people. Revelation reveals an intimacy between Jesus and those who overcome the trials of earth. As we will see, the words of Revelation seem to tie dwelling in physical proximity with God to the utter joy of seeing God “face-to-face.” However,

performed stringent set of cleansing rituals outlined in the Levitical law could enter the Holy of Holies. Furthermore, even Moses was refused the honour of seeing the face of God because it was too radiant and glorious to look upon (Exodus 33:20-23). 1Timothy 6:16 describes the common understanding Hebrew worshipers had of their God, “He lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.” The wonder of redemption would give humanity the ability to do what was impossible before. This is why David states, “One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple” (Psalm 27:4).

¹⁶² Thiselton, *Life After Death*, 192.

¹⁶³ John Morreall, “Perfect Happiness and the Resurrection of the Body,” *Religious Studies* 16 no. 1 (March 1980): 29.

¹⁶⁴ Jonathan Edwards, quoted in John Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 48.

that is not all; the language of relationship with God deepens as we consider the description language in Revelation used to describe our resurrected life with Christ.

The genus of place is invariably connected to the built environment in which we now live and the age to come. If the age “to come” is bleeding into God’s kingdom “at hand,” will the new earth bear a spatial connection to that of this present age? One author answers this question by saying, “The eternal phase of Heaven will be so unlike what we are familiar with that our present language can’t even describe it.”¹⁶⁵ Could it be that the platonic ideology which Wright describes has robbed the contemporary discussion of heaven of its spatial roots? If the earth is seen as the opposite of heaven, statements like this should make sense. But does the biblical narrative see heaven and earth as diametrically opposed? Certainly, our present language cannot fully describe the place of the new heaven and earth but as we shall see in the next chapter, the language used in the biblical text does in fact describe it. We shall see how the Bible uses spatially charged language to describe the nature of human destiny. This destiny appears to be an earthly one—a redeemed and transfigured earth which is reunited with heaven. Nevertheless, the new earth is just that—earth.

V. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have emphasized that place-centred theology affects the present by the way we care for the places of creation and ultimately care for people in place. Secondly, we have demonstrated why the hope of Christ’s second coming be understood in light of the place-centred nature of his first coming. Heaven “at hand” will cease at Jesus’ physical return. As we will demonstrate further in chapter three, the hope of heaven or as Hoyt calls “the end” will not be

¹⁶⁵ Douglas Connelly, *The Promise of Heaven: Discovering Our Eternal Home* (Downer’s Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 120.

attained through human progress but by the physical return of Jesus Christ.¹⁶⁶ Christ will complete the good work that he started through his church. The church can point to the future age of heaven by living out its “at-handendess” but cannot fully enter into heaven “not yet” until Christ returns to give the gift of resurrection. Through the incarnation, the transcendent and omnipresent God demonstrated that his ultimate desire in redemption is to dwell with humanity in place. Resurrected bodies in the age to come will allow humanity to engage with the glorified and resurrected Christ forever.

¹⁶⁶ See Yaholo Hoyt, “What if the World Doesn’t End?” 2013, <<http://www.redletterchristians.org/what-if-the-world-doesnt-end>> (accessed January 23, 2014).

Chapter 3

The New Jerusalem and the Future Heaven

Heaven, in the Bible, is not a future destiny but the other, hidden, dimension of our ordinary life—God’s dimension, if you like. God made heaven and earth; at the last he will remake both and join them together forever. And when we come to the picture of the actual end in Revelation 21-22, we find not ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven but rather the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, uniting the two in a lasting embrace.

—N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* ¹⁶⁷

As was summarized in chapter one, Morse suggests that an over-emphasis on the heaven one experiences after death overlooks the course of God’s forthcoming work of redemption in the present. Viewing heaven as a created dominion of God displacing this form of the world combats the attitude that believers can somehow disengage from transforming society because Christ will return to rescue the church from earth’s impending destruction. In summary, we have called this overly future-minded thinking the first myth of heaven. Emphasizing the “at handedness” of heaven should underscore the commonwealth of heaven’s kingdom physically manifested in the ministry of believers in place. ¹⁶⁸

Later in chapter one, N. T. Wright acknowledges another misconception of heaven and calls it the myth of progress. In this study, we have called this misconception the second myth of heaven. This myth sees heaven as something that emerges from within humanity rather than being a gift from elsewhere. Furthermore, the biblical promise of new creation is something that can be attained through science, better technology, and Christian ethics. Hard work and worldwide

¹⁶⁷ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 19.

¹⁶⁸ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 10-15.

cooperation can turn the material of this world into a utopian age.¹⁶⁹ Wright suggests the myth of progress sees the church as the agent which will bring about a coming age of world peace and prosperity. In this view, the biblical promise of Christ's return, bodily resurrection and new creation is overlooked or even mythologized.

Throughout chapter two we have discovered how place-centred theology affects the contemporary discourse of heaven. More specifically, in light of the theological landscape pertaining to the "already" and "not yet" of heaven, we considered how the Christian hope of bodily resurrection and Christ's return can be interpreted through a place-centred hearing of heaven "not yet."

The goal of this chapter will be to underscore the importance of acknowledging the commonwealth of heaven through the activity of believers in place but also emphasize a place-centred understanding of a resurrected life in the age of heaven to come. In doing so, I intend to address the dangerous implications pertaining to the second myth of heaven which can de-emphasize, ignore, or even mythologize the biblical promise of bodily resurrection and new creation. The means by which I will address the second myth of heaven will be through careful analysis of the urban imagery found in Revelation 21:1-4. I have chosen to use the city of Jerusalem theme to demonstrate how a place-centred interpretation of the future heaven and earth can be emphasized without falling prey to overly future-minded thinking. I will argue that the church is the agent which prepares the cosmos for its ultimate renewal. However, Jesus—not the church—will be the agent which will bring about the renewal of the cosmos. In the first section of this chapter, I will consider the meaning of the term "new" which is used in Revelation 21:1-4 to describe the future heaven and earth. In the second section, I will appeal to the futurist, preterist, and idealist interpretations of the city motif in Revelation to show in section three how each of

¹⁶⁹ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 82.

these interpretive layers demonstrate that Jerusalem is a twofold depiction of a people in the present and a place in the future. While emphasizing the importance of Morse' strategy for hearing of heaven "at hand," I will conclude by offering a place-centred strategy for hearing of heaven already and not yet.

I. The New Earth in Revelation 21:1-4

N. T. Wright notes that an overemphasis on the "already" of heaven through the social gospel can eclipse the biblical promise of the eschatological "not yet"—when our current reality will be transformed into a perfect physical existence.¹⁷⁰ If attending to the "at-handedness" of heaven causes one to downplay the future age of heaven fully overtaking earth, an imbalance in eschatology has occurred. I will argue that the final chapters of Revelation should not only be interpreted as an image of the church "at hand" but also the signaling of a new period in human history when the "not yet" of heaven will become a reality on a restored earth. God will do a new thing in the cosmos of his creation. Revelation's stunning final vision is full of images and allusions which impress the reader with the comprehensive healing and restoration God desires to bring to human civilization. Revelation 21:1-4 reads:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth disappeared, and the sea vanished. And I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared and ready, like a bride dressed to meet her husband. I heard a loud voice speaking from the throne: "Now God's home is with people! He will live with them, and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared.

It would be difficult to imagine a more fitting conclusion to the biblical narrative than these words taken from Revelation 21-22. These last two chapters closely parallel the letter's first

¹⁷⁰ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 215.

chapter. The prologue in 1:1-6 and the epilogue in 22:6-21 functions as apocalyptic and liturgical bookends for John's letter. Michael Gorman puts it this way:

the opening vision of the majestic Christ present among the seven urban churches (1:9-20) foreshadows the presence of God and the Lamb in the new city (21:1-22:5). The One who promised to come has in fact come, and the promises to the churches addressed in chapters 2-3 and to the martyrs in chapter 7—promises drawn from chapters 21-22—have been realized in the New Jerusalem.¹⁷¹

In the closing pages of Revelation, the imperial cult of Babylon is destroyed and replaced by the worship of the one true King in Jerusalem. The Genesis creation account and the apocalyptic imagery in Revelation share some similar features. Creation began in the garden of paradise and moves into an eternal era of a paradisaical city. The tree of life which offered eternal life to the man and woman in the garden is once again available to humanity on the restored earth (Rev. 22:2). Similarly, the original garden that became a source of curse and death because of human disobedience is transformed in John's vision into an urban garden, the place where millennia of human civilization finds fulfillment. In the coming age, the fruit and the leaves from tree of life will serve as a means of healing for the nations which were once under the curse of war, sin, and death. If a word could encapsulate the overall theme of Revelation 21:1-4, it would be "newness." In my close examination of this text, I will demonstrate that the newness of the future heaven and earth described is not an ethereal existence totally other than the present but rather a renewed physical place.

¹⁷¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 160.

Ia. Revelation 21:1–All Things Made New

We generally think worship implies coming into the presence of God. In John's vision however, the reverse occurs.¹⁷² God's presence comes to pervade the worship that creation offers. All things are made new as the promise of a new creation unfolds and Jesus, the incarnate God, comes to permanently reside with humanity. Revelation also suggests that the characteristics of earth and heaven undergo a kind of alteration. Something takes place causing the former things to pass away. This promise finds semblance with the description given by the Lord through the prophet Isaiah:

For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; For behold, I create Jerusalem *as* a rejoicing, And her people a joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, And joy in My people; The voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, Nor the voice of crying. (Isaiah 65:17-19)

'For as the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before Me,' says the Lord, 'So shall your descendants and your name remain. And it shall come to pass *That* from one New Moon to another, And from one Sabbath to another, All flesh shall come to worship before Me,' says the Lord. (Isaiah 66:22-23)

Both the New and Old Testament seers acknowledge that heaven and earth will undergo a significant cosmological change in an age yet to come. Isaiah records an oracle of God by describing the day when "I the Creator" will create a new heaven and new earth. John, on the other hand, becomes a third party witness of the Creator doing what was foretold through the prophets. In ancient Judaism, the theme of re-creation is not only limited to Isa. 65:17 and 66:22 but also described in Jewish apocalyptic literature. David Aune refers to the widespread Hebrew belief that the earth will undergo a period of renewal.

¹⁷² J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 169.

This view is reflected in 1 Enoch 91:16, part of the Apocalypse of Weeks, written ca. 170 B.C.: ‘And the first heaven will vanish and pass away, and a new heaven will appear, and all the power of heaven will shine for ever (with) sevenfold (light).’...similarly, 1 Enoch 45:4 speaks of the transformation of heaven... ‘And the world will cease, and death will be abolished, and hell will shut its mouth... And there will be another earth and another heaven, an everlasting dwelling place.’¹⁷³

Interestingly, extra-biblical tradition coincides with Revelation’s description of heaven’s cosmic transformation.

Before we continue, we should offer clarification to any confusion there might be regarding the interpretation of the term “heaven.” First of all, heaven is often closely associated with the eternal character (Ps. 90:2) and characteristics (1 Chron. 16:34, Isa. 40:8) of God. Paula Gooder, in her book entitled *Heaven*, suggests that the use of the word “heaven” in Revelation 21:1 is not a reference to this common understanding of heaven as eternity with God but rather the atmosphere above earth known to the biblical writers as the sky.¹⁷⁴ She indicates that if God created the sky above earth and will re-create it, it must be possible for God to dwell somewhere other than heaven: “God is permanent and everlasting but heaven is not: it will pass away and be

¹⁷³ David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 1116.

¹⁷⁴ Gooder’s book begins by examining heaven as a “place up in the sky” and the “dwelling place of God.” First of all, God is Spirit (John 4:24) and is not bound to any dimension of space or time. God originally created the dimension above earth so that he could interact with the physical dimension of humanity. With this understanding, the dimension (known to the biblical writers as the sky) above earth is called heaven because it is the chosen dwelling place of God. With this cosmological understanding of heaven and earth, Gooder suggests that these two hearings of heaven are inseparable from each other. Hebrew cosmology, she explains, functioned out of a three-tiered understanding of the universe which exemplifies this very point. Hebrew cosmology sees the earth as a circular plain surrounded by a dome that separates the waters above from the waters below (Genesis 1:6). She suggests that the Hebrew word for sky (*raqia*) is more than just a reference to a protective circular layer but the biblical differentiation between the physical dimension of earth and the dimension of God’s dwelling place. Gooder compares the Hebrew word for sky with its Hebrew counterpart *shamayim*. The word *shamayim* is the common Hebrew reference for the image of God’s dwelling place up in the sky. The differentiation between the Hebrew word *raqia* and *shamayim* is not a question of variant locations or cosmology but differing perspectives. Both indicate a Hebrew cosmology of God dwelling close to earth with an incredibly thin layer separating the two. *Shamayim* could describe the human perspective of looking from below into the sky while *raqia*— God’s perspective by which he looks down upon his creation below. In making this cosmological distinction, she points out that the biblical writers saw the heavens where God dwells as a spatial location just above the earth. She concludes that the problem with modern cosmology is that heaven is seen as a distant reality instead of a “higher” or “alternate” dimension that exists in a similar fashion to that of earth. To correct this faulty view of heaven, Gooder believes that one must shift from a “spiritual” view of heaven to a highly “physical” one. See Paula Gooder, *Heaven* (London: SPCK, 2011), 4-6.

replaced by a new heaven. This challenges us to think again about what we mean by eternity. If by eternity we mean something everlasting, then heaven is clearly not eternal, since it will pass away. But if, by eternity we mean outside time then heaven may be eternal.”¹⁷⁵ She suggests that Genesis 1:1 and Revelation 21:1 “make it clear that heaven and earth began together and will be re-created together... It is often assumed that heaven in this context is used to mean the sky not God’s dwelling place, and that it is the sky that will pass away and be newly created.”¹⁷⁶ With this in mind, one could interpret Revelation 21:1 to read, “Then I saw a restored earth and a restored expanse above the earth.”

Gooder suggests that the main purpose of the first created heaven was to be the place where the transcendent Creator could dwell alongside earth. She continues, “Eventually, even heaven was too far away and God came to earth in human flesh, but the creation of heaven and earth reminds that God’s desire in creation was to dwell alongside humanity in a realm created for that purpose.”¹⁷⁷ Originally, God came and went from the place above earth into the physical dimension of Eden (Gen. 3:8). Eden was not meant to be the Creator’s permanent dwelling place. Since the fall of humanity, God has taken on human flesh and now has a glorified human body by which he can proximately dwell with humanity in a more intimate way than before. Therefore, the dimensional characteristics of this new cosmos will allow the glorified body of Jesus Christ to permanently dwell with resurrected saints in physical place.

Furthermore, the Greek word for “new” (*kainos*) in the Revelation 21:1 refers to the kind of growth which emerges out of what was already created.¹⁷⁸ The eschatological implications of this Greek word will be further elaborated upon in a later section of this chapter. John R. Yeatts

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁷⁸ Henry Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes, and Indices*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1908), 275.

suggests that the text implies that the new heaven has continuity with the present cosmos (3:12; 11:12; 21:10). He states “Newness here carries with it the idea, not of a spiritual existence, but of a new creation of the material world (Gen. 1:1; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Eph. 2:10; 4:24)... the Bible places humanity in a restored heaven and earth from which evil is banished and righteous reign supreme, rather than in a spiritual realm separate from the physical (Dan. 12:3-4).¹⁷⁹ As Yeatts points out, the phrase, “a new heaven and new earth” does not imply the destruction and replacement of the material world but rather its transformation. Everything that operated in hostility to the Creator will be destroyed and the entire cosmos will be brought into unhindered worship and submission.

Ib. Rev. 21:2-4—The Future Transformation of Spiritual and Physical Culture

By looking to the destruction of Babylon in chapter eighteen, verse two can be read in context. The culture of the beast has been replaced by the culture of the Lamb. A culture of death is overtaken by a culture of life, corruption by absolute goodness, insecurity by peace, and war by perfect harmony. John witnesses the holy city of Jerusalem descending out of heaven. The vision could easily be an image of the spiritual and physical culture of Babylon being transformed into the spiritual and physical culture of Jerusalem. When using the term “spiritual,” I will be referring to the second hearing of heaven Morse’ utilizes to describe the invisible dimension in which angels and demons presently co-exist. With this in mind, Revelation 20 describes a millennial era when Lucifer is bound and those who refused to receive Babylon’s political and economic seal in their forehead or hands are given the opportunity to reign with Christ during this time (20:4). The future transformation of civilization and culture progresses up to and through Christ’s millennial

¹⁷⁹ John R. Yeatts, *Revelation*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003), 399.

reign.¹⁸⁰ It is during this period that the kingdom of darkness progressively weakens as the commonwealth of heaven completely overtakes the culture of earth. We should note that heaven's coming on earth in Revelation 21 does not come to an eschatological climax in a mere return to the Garden of Eden but rather a transformation and glorification of the garden. The edenic imagery found in Revelation's closing chapters alongside the urban imagery given in verse two indicates that the restored and glorified earth will not only be a garden but a garden-city.

Many assume that the city along with its violence and pollution must be immoral while the self-sustaining nature of the countryside is more sacred. Scripture does not support this view. In fact, Revelation has no problem harmonizing the urban with the pastoral. This reminds us that civilization and the human city is not evil in itself. Rather, the domination by malevolent people and powers over culture is what is evil.¹⁸¹ Richard Bauckham puts it this way:

In the beginning God had planted a garden for humanity to live in (Gen. 2:8). In the end he will give them a city. In the New Jerusalem the blessings of paradise will be restored, but the New Jerusalem is more than paradise regained. As a city it fulfills humanity's desire to build out of nature a human place of human culture and community.¹⁸²

The newness of creation encompasses and comprises the culture, architecture, invention, and creativity which were birthed out of humanity's God-given work and intellect.

Our latent abilities can point to heaven but apart from the redemptive work of Christ do not have any salvific merit in of themselves. In the same way Anthony Thiselton challenges the second myth of heaven by pointing to God's promise of heaven rather than human ability as the only safeguard guaranteeing salvation and immortality, we can see that God makes the first step to transform human culture.¹⁸³ Revelation's city imagery does not resemble a primitive, pastoral existence like that of humanity in Eden but rather a redeemed culture transformed out of the

¹⁸⁰ Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 164.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 135.

¹⁸³ This is the major focus on the entire second chapter of Thiselton, *The Last Things*.

spatial reality we once knew. Human culture, although being enlivened and partially transformed by the ministry of the church, still awaits a complete transformation in the eschatological “not yet” of the future heaven.

Ib1. The Nature of Creation’s Transformation

The city imagery utilized in verse two is rooted in an important interpretive detail found in Revelation 21:1. John designates the kind of newness the cosmos and culture will experience by using the word *kainos* instead of *neos*. In English, both words mean “new” but have variant meanings in Greek. The word *neos* means new in time or origin, whereas the word *kainos* means new in nature or quality.¹⁸⁴ Anthony Hoekema writes, “The expression *ouranon kainon kia gēn kainēn* (“a new heaven and a new earth,” Rev. 21:1) means, therefore, not the emergence of a cosmos totally other than the present one, but the creation of a universe which, though it has been gloriously renewed, stands in continuity with the present one.”¹⁸⁵ A fascinating similarity is found between the words of Isaiah 65:17-19; 66:22-23 and Revelation 21:1. By looking at the words of the prophet Isaiah in the Greek Septuagint, the same Greek word for “new” (*kainos*) is employed in both passages to describe the cosmos that will contain the greatly anticipated city of Jerusalem.¹⁸⁶ Isaiah gives additional evidence of a coming change to the cosmos. The nature of this change however denotes a kind of rebuilding or renewing. The eschatological imagery in

¹⁸⁴ Gerhard Kittel, ed., and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. and trans., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), s.v. “kainos,” 3:447-49.

¹⁸⁵ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 280.

¹⁸⁶ In Isaiah 66:22-23, the renewed cosmos becomes the place by which all flesh continues to participate in a physical environment filled with spatial traditions and culture. For example, new moons and Sabbaths indicate a relationship to the world as we know it. Isaiah also provides references heaven and earth becoming the place in which all flesh will come to the holy mountain of Jerusalem to bow before Yahweh. See G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 362. and Henk Leene, *Newness in Old Testament Prophecy: An Intertextual Study* (Leiden, NL: Brill Press, 2014), 125.

Isaiah strongly resonates with the description found not only in Revelation 21:2-4 but also in II Peter 3:13- “Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”¹⁸⁷ I would suggest that the culture of a new heaven and new earth does not refer to a cosmos which stands in discontinuity with the present. Rather, life in the future will be a renewed and renovated one. Edward Thurneysen describes the new heaven and earth this way,

The world into which we shall enter in the Parousia of Jesus Christ is therefore not another world; it is this world, this heaven, this earth; both however, passed away and renewed. It is these forests, these fields, these cities, these streets, these people, that will be the scene of redemption. At present they are battlefields, full of the strife and sorrow of the not yet accomplished consummation; then they will be fields of victory, fields of harvest, where out of seed that was sown with tears the everlasting sheaves will be reaped and brought home.¹⁸⁸

Thurneysen argues that the present form of heaven and earth will pass away. The earth that God originally created will remain forever. As Ecclesiastes 1:4 states, “One generation passes away, and another generation comes: but the earth abides for ever.” The fire of God’s holiness and glory will come to purify anything in the physical realm that has counterfeited God’s goodness and creativity. Just as Revelation 20:11 describes, the fallen state of the present earth and heaven will not be able to withstand God’s glorious face and “flee from him.” J. Oswald Sanders states, “The picture is of the universe transformed, perfected, purged of anything that is evil and that exalts

¹⁸⁷ Just one verse earlier in II Peter, the apostle writes, “Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?” Although it is clear in the gospels and in Revelation that certain cataclysmic events will affect the physical environment of the present cosmos (Matt. 24:29), I would suggest that any part of the physical dimension not covered by the redemptive blood of the Lamb will be liable to the cleansing fire of God’s holiness and righteous indignation. In this way, the present cosmos will not be completely annihilated. The redemption process of the cosmos has already begun through the death and resurrection of the Word made flesh. If God were to annihilate all that can be seen in the physical realm, Satan would win a great victory. If this were the case, the enemy would succeed in corrupting the present cosmos to such an extent so that God would have no choice but to blot it out of existence. Satan did not win such a victory. On the contrary, sin and death has been decisively defeated. God will reveal the full dimensions of that defeat when he shall renew the earth on which Satan deceived mankind and finally banish from it all effects of sinful disobedience.

¹⁸⁸ Edward Thurneysen, quoted in J. A. Schep, *The Nature of the Resurrection Body* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 218-219.

itself against God. It is ‘new,’ not in the sense of being a new creation, but of being new in character— a worthy milieu for the residents of God’s people.”¹⁸⁹ The culture of earth will be transformed in order that it may become God’s permanent dwelling place.

Ib2. The Permanent Coming of God’s Presence into Place

From verse three, we learn that the “holy city, new Jerusalem,” stands for the entire glorified church of God, coming out of heaven to earth. God’s people are found without spot or blemish and “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” and ready for the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7-9). Interestingly, from verse two we discover that God’s people are not left in heaven far off in space but are to come and spend eternity on a transformed earth. Verse three indicates that the dwelling place of God will no longer be away from earth but on the earth. “And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God” (Rev. 21:3).

Revelation 21:1 indicates that whatever was associated with the sea in the previous age—the beast from the sea (Rev. 13:1) or the whore that sits on the waters of the sea (Rev. 17:15)—is now completely done away with: “The first heaven and the first earth disappeared, and the sea vanished.” I would suggest that the word “sea” is meant to depict the evil which plagued the fallen dimension of the first heaven and earth.¹⁹⁰ James L. Resseguie notes that the spiritual and physical culture of the future cosmos will be completely continuous with the first except for the

¹⁸⁹ J. Oswald Sanders, *Heaven: Better By Far* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 1993), 133-134.

¹⁹⁰ In Hebrew tradition, the sea is regarded as a hostile force brought under submission by God in creation. Aune suggests that this reference reflects the antipathy between Yahweh and the sea expressed through numerous examples in the Old Testament. The disappearance of the literal sea could serve as an image for the removal of all spiritual and physical forces on the planet which operate in hostility to the Creator. Just as the brutality of the sea (Job 38:8-11; Psalm 89:9; Isaiah 57:20-21; Amos 9:3) is out of keeping with the perfection of the new earth, so also the hostile powers of the world are replaced by Gods kingdom of peace and justice. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1116.

threat of evil. He writes, “If good and evil coexist in the first heaven and first earth, the triumph of good and the total absence of evil marks the new heaven and new earth.”¹⁹¹ By way of Christ’s redemptive work, the entire cosmos will be utterly transformed and the Creator’s unhindered presence will finally invade the material realm. When this happens, resurrected bodies and redeemed places will be completely invaded by the dimension of heaven—God’s dwelling place. By referring back to Thiselton’s analysis of 1 Corinthians 15:44 which reads, “It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body,” we can see that resurrected bodies will be both spiritual and physical in nature. Thiselton investigates Paul’s description of the resurrected body and notes that Paul was not utilizing a Greek or platonic way of interpreting the word “spiritual.”

As we saw earlier, the Greek word for “spiritual” (*pneumatikos*) is used in the sense of being animated by the Holy Spirit’s power.¹⁹² Therefore, when referring to the “new earth” in this chapter, we will be referring to the “future heaven” as well. When God becomes “all in all” as we described in chapter one, a distinction between the new heaven and earth seems invidious. By the dynamic and progressive work of the Holy Spirit, the spiritual culture of heaven will finally become the physical culture of earth. With this in mind, Hoekema writes,

Believers will therefore continue to be in heaven as they continue to live on the new earth... ‘He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people’ are the familiar words of the central promise of the covenant of grace (cf. Gen. 17:7; Exod. 19:5-6; Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 34:30; II Cor. 6:16; Heb. 8:10; 1 Pet. 2:9-10).¹⁹³

This future-orientated language is the language of God’s ancient covenant with the Jewish people. God instructed Moses to tell Israel, “I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people” (Lev. 26:11-12).

¹⁹¹ James L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse* (Leiden, NL: Brill Press, 1998), 87.

¹⁹² Thiselton, *Life After Death*, 210.

¹⁹³ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 285.

Ezekiel wrote, “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God and they will be my people” (Ezekiel 37:26-27). Ezekiel continues by stating, “Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever” (v. 28). Ezekiel implies that God’s covenant of grace is also for the Gentiles. This very truth is elaborated upon by Paul in his letter to the Gentile congregation in Corinth: “For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said, ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people’” (2 Cor. 6:16). The people described in Revelation 21:3 constitute all races, creeds, cultures, and colours who enter into God’s everlasting kingdom by being born of water and spirit (John 3:5). The kingdom of heaven is “at hand” through God’s pre-existent plan to one day become incarnate and “dwell among us” (John 1:14). The kingdom of heaven forcefully advances through the indwelling Spirit of God which dwells within us and causes us to become the temple of the living God.

As we have seen, the idea of God’s presence coming to dwell with us and within us is indeed “at hand” but Revelation 21:4 indicates that an aspect of God’s tabernacle is not yet. “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death neither sorrow nor crying neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.” The future-oriented language of verse four suggests something we eagerly await. There will be no more tears on the new earth. Crying and pain will belong to the former things which will be passed away. Fatal accidents, incurable disease, funeral services, and painful experiences will be a thing of the past. Yeatts states, “Because God is present, evil and all that comes with it is eradicated. The words no more echo the dirge over Babylon, where it is happiness and prosperity that vanish

(18:21-23)... Indeed, the effects of the fall from Eden are reversed.”¹⁹⁴ Eden will be transformed into an urban paradise called Jerusalem. Jerusalem is “already” in the lives of those who are committed to God’s kingdom here on earth but the present state of the human civilization is not yet fully transformed. Frederick Buechner says this about the coming state of the future civilization on the new earth: “Everything is gone that ever made [the old] Jerusalem, like all cities, torn apart, dangerous, heartbreaking, seamy. You walk the streets in peace now. Small children play unattended in the parks... The city has become what those who loved always dreamed and what in their dreams she always was—The New Jerusalem.”¹⁹⁵

It has been clearly demonstrated that the newness (*kainos*) of the future heaven and earth indicates that what John witnessed was not a universe totally other than the present but one which has been gloriously renewed. With this interpretive detail in mind, I will appeal to the city of Jerusalem imagery in Revelation 21:1-4 as a way to bring a place-centred theological perspective into dialogue with our study of heaven.

II. The Already and Not Yet of Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1-4

How is one to interpret the Jerusalem imagery in Revelation 21-22 in light of one’s future existence? Do the words of Revelation offer any insight or hope for a person like the woman with whom I had a conversation at her deathbed? What Jerusalem does the apostle John envision? Many theologians wonder, is the Jerusalem in Revelation the earthly city which stood until 70 CE before being destroyed by the Roman emperor Titus, the present dwelling place of God in a dimension above earth, the Jerusalem spiritually represented by present-day believers, or the Jerusalem which is yet to be established on a renewed earth? The seer does not make a clear

¹⁹⁴ Yeatts, *Revelation*, 401.

¹⁹⁵ Frederick Buechner, *A Little Bit of Heaven* (Tulsa, OK: Honor Books, 1995), 118.

distinction. Can all interpretations apply? The purpose of pursuing this question is that we might effectively challenge the second myth of heaven which sees humanity as the agent used by God to bring about the coming of a new heaven and a new earth.

Most would agree that Revelation is describing a point in human history when Babylon is fallen (Rev. 14:8), evil is defeated, and death is banished forever (Rev. 21:4). The final chapters of the biblical narrative describe humanity's dire need for radical redemption. Revelation points forward to the end of this "present evil age" (Gal. 1:4) and the arrival of heaven—eternity with God. As 1 John 1:8 suggests, "the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining." Heaven is truly an already-present state because God already dwells within believers. In this present age, believers constitute the dwelling place of God which shines forth into a spiritually dark environment. However, Revelation describes a coming day when spiritual darkness outside the believer must completely die as well—when the glory of God shines without shadows. Bradley Jersak puts it this way,

In Rev. 21, the final judgement and the lake of fire give way to the new heaven and new earth with God reigning as King over all. It marks the end of what was and the genesis of the eternal state. To put things in economic terms, John's final vision describes more than a rapturous bailout package (dispensationalism) or an enlightenment-sponsored stimulus package (e.g. Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth*).¹⁹⁶

Jersak comes to a similar conclusion regarding the two myths of heaven to which we have already attended in chapter one. The first myth of heaven likens humanity and creation to a "sinking ship and lifeboat mentality" or as he puts it—a "rapturous bailout package." This myth of heaven has been effectively challenged by theologians like Christopher Morse who emphasizes the at-handedness of heaven. Although we long for the second-coming of Christ, we pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. In the midst of this spiritual darkness, when the church aligns her mind and ethics (Rom. 12:2) with heaven's agenda, her light will draw others

¹⁹⁶ Bradley Jersak, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hope, Hell, and the New Jerusalem* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 164.

into a deeper relationship with Jesus. As a result other individuals will also become the present dwelling place of God's Holy Spirit.

As one can see, emphasizing the "at-handedness" of heaven is important in our contemporary discussion of heaven. However, the second myth of heaven still stalks in the shadows of eschatology and threatens an accurate biblical portrayal of humanity's future. The "enlightenment stimulus package" or as we referred to in chapter one as the "the myth of progress" suggests that human progress can move history "forward" into the dawn of a new era. In this view, there is little to no emphasis on Christ's literal return to do that which the church cannot accomplish. The issue I am raising is not that human progress is wrong in of itself. In fact, I would assert that the ministry of the church is the means by which Christ prepares the world for his second coming. The concern is rather—which will be the agent by which the world will enter the age of the new heavens and new earth—God or the church? The second myth fosters a hearing of heaven which suggests the latter. I would argue that only the physical return of the slain Lamb will completely eradicate the curse of sin and death and usher in the future age heaven. I am not suggesting that Morse or the other selected theologians hold to the myth of progress mentality. What I am saying however, is that in Morse's attempt to wrestle heaven from the grasp of future-minded thinking, the "not yet" of the future heaven is left relatively unexplored and vulnerable to the second myth of heaven.

In order to challenge the second myth of heaven, my goal is to emphasize the ways God has acted first on humanity's behalf to restore the physical realm back to the original but also glorify the best products of human culture which magnify his Name. The ministry of the church in society is a miniature model of that which God will fully establish on earth in the coming age. The bride awaits her bridegroom to remove every shadow and judge the living and the dead. The physical realm is part of that which God has come to restore and glorify. In the final sections of

this thesis, I will emphasize the importance of a place-centred interpretation of Revelation as I demonstrate why the city of Jerusalem is a twofold eschatological image depicting both a people and a place. In order to do so, I will appeal to three common ways of interpreting the city imagery in Revelation 21:1-4 and demonstrate that they are each important interpretive layers that can point to a coming age of physical resurrection on a physical earth. I will be referring to the book *The Cradle the Cross and the Crown* as the basis for my summary of the futurist, preterist, and idealist interpretations of Revelation. In brief, a futurist reading affirms that Revelation 4-22 describes future events which are yet to take place on planet earth.¹⁹⁷ A preterist reading of Revelation asserts that the events prophesied through John were fulfilled primarily in the first century.¹⁹⁸ An idealist reading views the apocalyptic imagery in Revelation as timeless symbols which represent the cosmic battle between good and evil.¹⁹⁹ As we consider how the Jerusalem imagery in Revelation describes a people and a place, we will begin by considering the futuristic approach.

IIa. Jerusalem to Come: the Futuristic Approach

The futurist approach contends that Revelation chapters 4-22 refer primarily to future events.²⁰⁰ The futuristic approach was first known as chiliasm and upheld by early theologians such as Justin Martyr, Ireneaus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus.²⁰¹ These early Christian writers believed that the thousand year reign of Christ referred to in Revelation 20:2-7 was a description of literal events which would take place on planet earth following Christ's second coming.

¹⁹⁷ Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 845.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 848.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 847.

²⁰⁰ Köstenberger, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 848.

²⁰¹ Chiliasm is a term based upon the Greek word *chilia* which means a thousand. See *ibid.*, 848.

Although I could parse the distinctions within the futurist approach and how various sub-groups differ in their interpretation of future events, my intent is to show how the interpretive consensus within the futuristic approach can impact our analysis of the Jerusalem imagery.

As noticeable in the term itself, the futuristic approach asserts that the majority of Revelation describes future events surrounding the return of Christ. By dividing Revelation into two sections—chapters 1-3 and chapters 4-22—the futuristic approach acknowledges an overlap between the already and the not yet in eschatological discourse. When describing the futuristic approach, C. M. Pate speaks to what has yet to take place in relation to Christian eschatological hope:

John is to write what he has seen which divides into two realities: the things that are—the present age; and the things that will be—the age to come. For John the church of his day lives in the present age (chaps. 1-3), but in heaven, by virtue of Jesus' death and resurrection, the age to come has already dawned (chaps. 4-5). In the future age to come will descend to earth, effecting the defeat of the Antichrist (chaps. 6-19), the establishment of the temporary messianic kingdom on earth (chap. 20), and subsequently the eternal state (chaps. 21-22). Thus the overlapping of the two ages accounts for the continual shifting of scenes between earth (this age) and heaven (the age to come) in Revelation.²⁰²

Theologians would agree that futurism allows for the highest level of literalism when it comes to interpretation. For example, most futurists believe that the establishment of Christ's temporary Messianic kingdom on earth and the subsequent eternal state will be an actual place where Christ's kingdom will be eternally established on earth.²⁰³ Furthermore, futurists assert that Revelation's description of Jerusalem's detailed measurements could easily refer to a literal and spatial city established on the restored earth.

²⁰² C. M. Pate, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. M. Pate (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998) 33. in Köstenberger, *The Cradle the Cross and the Crown*, 850.

²⁰³ David Arthur DeSilva, *Seeing Things John's Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 4.

IIb. Jerusalem Then—the Preterist Approach

Many theologians read the words of Revelation and see a correlation with Jesus' descriptions of Jerusalem's coming siege in Mark 13. By surveying Vespasian's siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 70 CE under Emperor Titus, many theologians surmise that Revelation 11:2 and 13:5 are already completely fulfilled. Jersak states that some maintain that

Even the battle of Armageddon also refers to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70; the lake of fire judgement is a cosmic depiction of the actual carnage in geographic Gehenna after the massacre, as described by Josephus; the new heaven and new earth signify the New Covenant situation, where, by the Spirit's presence, God does truly live with the Bride; and the invitation to the nations to enter the open gates of the New Jerusalem is pictorial of the ongoing work of evangelism.²⁰⁴

The view that Jersak describes is a preterist approach to interpreting the book of Revelation. The word is derived from the Latin word *preter*, which means “past.” The two approaches in the preterist camp—full preterism and partial preterism—each submit that the Olivet discourse in Matthew 24 and Mark 13 were fulfilled in the first century during the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.²⁰⁵ The letters to the churches in Asia Minor found in Revelation 1-3 are literal instructions given by John the Seer prior to the Jewish war in 66-70 CE. Preterists point to several reasons which support this view. First, Jesus stated at the end of the Olivet discourse, “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (Matthew 24:34). A generation usually refers to forty years. Thus, the fall of Jerusalem closely fits the timeframe Jesus predicted. Second, Josephus' detailed record of the fall of Jerusalem appears in several ways to match the

²⁰⁴ Jersak, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut*, 160.

²⁰⁵ Full preterists believe that all the prophecies described in Revelation were fulfilled in 70 CE and that the contemporary church is now living in the eternal state of the “new heavens and the new earth.” On the other hand, partial preterists believe that most of the prophecies of Revelation were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem but that chapters 20-22 point to future events such as a future resurrection of believers and return of Christ to the earth.

symbolism of Revelation. Finally, this interpretation allows the words of Revelation to be directly relevant to John's contemporary readership.

Iib1. The Meaning of the City for its Original Readership

There are several subdivisions within preterist camp and my intent is not to parse the intricacies of this interpretive view. However, a thought-provoking statement made by theologian and commentator Grant Osborne seems to summarize the general consensus among preterists which I believe closely relates to our study. When approaching the symbols and imagery in Revelation he notes that the preterism sees the book of Revelation not as

a timetable for the future but a reinterpretation of the present. It provides spatial interaction between the earthly and the heavenly so as to give new meaning to the present situation. In this case the symbols provide alternative worlds that the readers have to choose between, the transcendent realm of God and the church of the alternative secular world of Rome.²⁰⁶

In other words, the preterist approach asserts that the primary purpose of the book of Revelation is not about giving a timetable of future events but rather about giving correction for comprised worship.

In a preterist reading, the Nicolaitan cult emphasized the worship of the emperor who God would use to move history forward into the dawn of a new age. Although it appeared for first-century Christians that Caesar was in charge of the world, John reminds the seven churches of Asia Minor that only God in Jesus Christ will be the agent of world transformation. The Nicolaitan cult was a type of the second myth of heaven which detracted worship off of Jesus and onto something which stood in place of Christ. An incredible amount of human progress could be credited to the kingdom of Rome. The world had come a long way under the reign of Caesar. For

²⁰⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 19.

the Nicolaitan cult, the necessary infrastructure was being set in place to bring about a universal church that would partner with the emperor to bring in God's everlasting kingdom. Turning to the mindset of the first century Christians is beneficial to our contemporary discourse of heaven. The myth of progress pertains not only to the past but also the future. The slain lamb—not the church partnering with the fallen powers of the world—will usher in the coming age of heaven.

J. Nelson Kraybill is a contemporary theologian who also notices that the theme of misdirected worship is the central theme of Revelation. Although he does not explicitly identify himself as a preterist, his analysis of Revelation in his book *Apocalypse and Allegiance* does indicate that he believes that the prophecies in Revelation have more to do with the political reality of the contemporary readership fulfilled in 70 CE than an apocalyptic forecast of distant events transpiring two thousand years later.²⁰⁷ More will be said on this in the next section. For this reason, I am careful not to label Kraybill's reading as full or partial preterism but rather as an endeavour to locate the historical message of the text as it relates not only to its original recipients but also to the church today.²⁰⁸

Preterist theologians read John's vision in light of literal events that transpired during the Maccabean revolt and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem. Similarly, Kraybill argues that Revelation's seven trumpets, seven bowls of wrath, Babylon, the beast, the thousand years, and the 144,000 saints all have physical antitypes which appeared on earth during the events around 70 CE. Kraybill even entertains the notion that Revelation's two witnesses were perhaps followers of Jesus who remained in Jerusalem while the Jewish revolt gathered momentum. He states,

Whoever the two witnesses are, their corpses lie unburied for three days, and people celebrate their demise (Rev. 11:9-10). This picture fits what we know about the horrendous conditions in Jerusalem during the siege of AD 68-70. So many who were

²⁰⁷ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 22.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

trapped in the city died from famine or internal strife that Josephus says the piles of corpses presented a horrible spectacle.²⁰⁹

To counter the first myth of heaven which treats the earth like a sinking ship, Kraybill also reimagines what the text means when it says believers will be “snatched away” or “raptured” at Christ’s return to earth as described in 1 Thess. 4:16-17. He interprets the second coming (parousia) of Christ as one would understand a king’s arrival in a political sense. He suggests that Christ’s coming could be likened to King Alexander’s coming (parousia) into Jerusalem when Jaddus, the Jewish high priest, had a dream indicating that he felt led to adorn the city with wreaths and cordially invite Alexander through the gates. This warm delegation brought about many gifts which Alexander endowed upon the Jewish people in the city of Zion.²¹⁰ Kraybill suggests that Jesus’ parousia in Revelation and other New Testament writings be understood through this type of political understanding. In fact, he suggests that Christ’s coming takes place when believers escort Christ to earth.²¹¹ He writes,

This political meaning is how we should understand the parousia of Christ in the New Testament. Rather than imagining that Christians will be whisked away from a planet going up in flames, we should anticipate a day when we will go out to meet Christ ‘in the air’ and welcome him to earth again. This hope has broad implications for how we care for the environment and otherwise share in God’s long-term plan to restore creation.²¹²

As we can see, Kraybill acknowledges that a future hope exists but focuses most of his attention on the situation of John’s contemporary audience and the church today. We will talk more about this future hope as we refer back to Kraybill in our summary of an idealist reading of Revelation. Before we do that however, I will demonstrate why a preterist reading helps us to adopt a holistic interpretation of Revelation’s Jerusalem imagery. Rather than explaining the many benefits and

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 170.

²¹⁰ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 174.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid., 175.

drawbacks of preterism, I will show why this approach can shape our contemporary discourse of heaven.

In the preterist approach, a place-centred view of Jerusalem is emphasized not in the future but in the past. The brick and mortar Jerusalem was a physical reality in place prior to 70 CE. By appealing to the preterist approach, I would suggest is that it is impossible to interpret Revelation 21-22 in a historical vacuum. After Christ's ascension, one could infer that many Jews saw Jerusalem's ancient walls and Herod's temple as a spatial landmark which offered Messianic hope. Surely they believed that their generation would witness the day when Jews and Messianic Gentiles would rule in Jerusalem with Christ and finally be free from the Roman imperial cult. For John's contemporary readership, the city imagery in Revelation would surely be linked to the literal city of Zion which Jews hoped would one day become the centre of their Messiah's kingdom. But for the seven churches in Asia Minor which read John's letter knowing full-well that their Messianic landmark was destroyed, where could they now place such hope?²¹³ The seven churches of Asia Minor would have been aware of the contrast between the earthly city which was just destroyed and the heavenly city which the New Testament writers describe as eternal. It would be only natural that believers' eschatology would have shifted from physical to spiritual in orientation. Not to mention, platonic and gnostic thought was being disseminated throughout the Roman world during this time and would have had a strong influence on early Christian eschatology.

²¹³ Most scholars agree that Revelation was written during the reign of emperor Domitian and therefore written between AD 60-90. We can surmise that John's readership would have read the letter following the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem. See Köstenberger, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 814.

Ib2. The First Jerusalem and the Second Jerusalem

The preterist perspective grounds our reading of Revelation 21-22 in the historical realities that faced John's original readership. Although some outworkings of this approach can bolster the myth that heaven can somehow be attained merely through human, moral effort, preterism helps remind us that Jerusalem and the temple was a literal, spatial reality on planet earth which influenced how the early readership interpreted the letter. I should add that I do not see Kraybill teaching that "the end" is really our completed work and Christ's completed work in us as Yaholo Hoyt maintains. However, it is noteworthy that those like Hoyt who spiritualize Christ's second coming do predominately hold to a preterist interpretation of Revelation.

As the seven churches in Asia Minor lamented over the destruction of their holy city, they must have read John's letter wondering, had the geographical location of Jerusalem become marginal to the gospel message? With the physical city destroyed, what was to become the new landmark of faith and hope? I would suggest that the Old Testament emphasis on the land and physical place was harmonized in the popular New Testament theme of becoming "heaven-oriented." Jesus' words in Matthew 6:20 become the crux of renovated Jewish eschatology. During his earthly ministry, Jesus urged his disciples to lay up for themselves "treasures in heaven" instead of seeking earth's temporal wealth. Similarly, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul urges the church to set their affections on things above instead of on earthly things (3:2). Hebrews even goes so far as to suggest that believers seek a better country which is a heavenly one comprising a city which God himself has prepared for them (11:16). At first glance, it would appear that the New Testament writers introduce platonic ideology which diverges from the Old

Testament paradigm of being devoted to the land and traveling to a worship landmark. Are the promises of the Messiah now spiritual and transcendent instead of spatial and earthly?

In the New Testament, Hebrews 11:9 indicates that this Old Testament paradigm is not discarded but simply transformed. “By faith he [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city [heavenly Jerusalem] which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” Like the author of Hebrews, Paul also attends to the spiritual promises which were made to Abraham. In the letter to the Galatians, the literal city of Jerusalem becomes marginal to Paul’s concern as he explains how the Galatians are now heirs and sons of God through Jesus Christ (Gal. 4:1-7). Later in this same letter, Paul uses an allegorical literary device by speaking of two Jerusalems:

It says that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman, the other by a free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the usual way, but his son by the free woman was born as a result of God's promise. These things can be understood as a figure: the two women represent two covenants. The one whose children are born in slavery is Hagar, and she represents the covenant made at Mount Sinai. Hagar, who stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia, is a figure of the present city of Jerusalem, in slavery with all its people. But the heavenly Jerusalem is free, and she is our mother. (Gal. 4:22-26)

Paul speaks of the present Jerusalem as living in slavery because of her rejection of Messiah's rule of love and liberty. Israel had adopted a spirit of legalism instead of freedom. David Holwerda states, “The unbelief of Jewish Israel has shattered the unified picture of Jerusalem found in the prophets into two distinct Jerusalems: the geographic city in history, now a symbol not of salvation but of slavery under the law, and ‘the Jerusalem above,’ whose citizens are already gathered on earth to inherit the promises.”²¹⁴ Paul and the early church’s first apostles taught that all who repent and are baptized into the name of Jesus Christ can now become citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem and can claim Jerusalem as their true “mother.” Paul introduces a

²¹⁴ David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 109.

transformative theme into the biblical narrative. There is a heavenly Jerusalem which is now in existence and is the heavenly home for all who believe. Meanwhile the present earthly Jerusalem awaits her redemption and Messiah's coming to set her free and to restore the earth. Holwerda continues,

The earthly Jerusalem is no longer the embodiment of hope. The embodiment of hope is now the heavenly Jerusalem, which God designed and built ([Hebrews]11:10,16). As in the Gospels, the guilt of the earthly Jerusalem comes into view in the crucifixion of Jesus. Because Jesus was crucified outside the gate of the city, the earthly city is no longer the eternal city. Eternity belongs only to the city that is to come (13:14).²¹⁵

The New Testament does not overlook God's spatial promises of a physical Zion foretold by the prophets. Rather, the New Testament offers a complete picture which defines the eschatological hope promised by Israel's prophets. There are two kingdoms on earth. The kingdom of Babylon began under the auspice of King Nimrod at the tower of Babel. Abraham had a choice to remain a patron under ancient Babylon or heed the call of the Creator and come out from among the kingdom of the world and look to a future city what was yet to come.²¹⁶ Similarly, Revelation's readers are urged to reorient their perspective to the place where God now dwells in order that their identity would not rest in the imperial cult of contemporary Babylon.

The preterist perspective reminds us that Revelation is not to be solely read as a timetable for determining future events but as an appeal for properly directed worship. Glory and honour belonged to Jesus Christ, not to the emperor of Rome. Just as patrons of the Roman imperial cult could stand in choral chambers of the nation's countless cathedrals singing praises of the emperor, John contrasts this imagery by describing the heavenly multitudes singing glory to the Lamb. We are reminded that hearing of heaven is not only about the transformation which is to come in the future but also who is to be honoured as the agent of that transformation. By worshipping Christ

²¹⁵ Ibid., 110.

²¹⁶ Kenneth A. Mathews and M. Sydney Park, *The Post-Racial Church: A Biblical Framework for Multiethnic Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2011), 83.

alone, the church aligns herself with Christ's heavenly kingdom at hand. Putting human effort or anything else in the place of unadulterated worship of Jesus Christ will cause the church to look in hope to the kingdom Babylon instead of the kingdom of Jerusalem.

In other words, the landmark of Jerusalem under Roman rule was a physical signpost reminding John's readership that a perfect and free city will one day displace the earthly empire of Babylon/Rome. Kraybill states, "As John navigates through treacherous waters of the first-century world, it is the New Jerusalem—not Rome—for which he yearns. Having abandoned hope that Roman imperial society can be a vehicle for justice and peace, John claims citizenship in a city God himself brings into being."²¹⁷ The heavenly Jerusalem—this universal city of justice and shalom—is where believers were to find their true citizenship. As we have seen, the preterist approach realigns our contemporary understanding of Revelation by putting ourselves in the place of the original hearers. Although it appeared that Caesar was in charge of the ancient world and could move the church into a new age, John's letter reminded believers that only the slain Lamb would do this. Secondly, this essential interpretive layer provides a deeper understanding of how a place-centred hearing of the first and second Jerusalem speaks to the political nature of worship then and now.

IIc. Jerusalem Now: the Idealist Approach

As we have seen, for believers in the first century, Jerusalem was a physical location on earth which was suddenly destroyed. Consequently, Messianic eschatology shifted from looking at the physical city for hope to looking at the spiritual city instead. The message in John's vision

²¹⁷ J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 223.

supports the notion that the original readership was to honour the kingdom of the Lamb instead of the kingdom of the Roman Empire.

IIc1. The Cosmic Drama in Revelation

Another interpretive view of heaven can be found in the idealist reading of Revelation. The idealist approach which is also referred to as the symbolic or timeless interpretation sets aside the historical questions preterism seeks to answer. Idealists argue that John's vision is not necessarily about events in the space-time continuum. Instead, the letter of Revelation symbolically portrays the spiritual and timeless nature of the battle between good and evil on earth.²¹⁸ In an idealist reading, symbolism is loosed from its historicity so that a universal message of hope and victory can apply to the church as it seeks peace and justice in any era. In the words of W. Milligan, "We are not to look in the Apocalypse [of John] for special events, but for an exhibition of the principles which govern the history both of the world and the Church."²¹⁹ This way of reading Revelation was popularized in the third century by an Alexandrian theologian by the name of Origen. Origen assumed that the apocalyptic imagery in Revelation was meant to depict spiritual and timeless truths that were not intended to be interpreted literally. For example, Köstenberger writes, "He [Origen] had no use for speculations about the time and location of the battle of Armageddon because he understood it to refer to the triumph of God over sin and wickedness."²²⁰

One could place Kraybill's interpretation of Revelation under a preterist or an idealist hearing of Revelation. For example, Kraybill addresses elements of both approaches when he

²¹⁸ Köstenberger, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 847.

²¹⁹ W. Milligan, *The Revelation of St. John*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1887), 154-155.

²²⁰ Köstenberger, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 848.

writes, “These images [archetypal images of good and evil] first of all speak to realities of the author’s era. But Revelation also serves as a primer on how good and evil interact in every generation.”²²¹ My aim is not to place theologians like Kraybill into definite camps but allow their approach—whether it be a preterist, idealist, futuristic, or combination of the three—to shape our interpretation of the Jerusalem imagery and advance our contemporary discourse of heaven.

The stark contrast between Jerusalem and Babylon in Revelation portrays the spiritual characteristics of the cosmic battle between good and evil which spans the centuries of time. The idealist reading of Revelation helps one to acknowledge the timeless nature of the battle which faced the church then and that which faces the church now. By embracing this view of Revelation, the Jerusalem imagery becomes bifurcated in nature. In other words, the words of Revelation were not only meant for believers facing the whore of Rome in the first century, but it also applies to the believers today who constitute a counterculture in contemporary Babylon. As we shall demonstrate, the characters in this spiritual drama are symbolized through two personified cities.

IIc2. The Two Personified Cities in Revelation

In this section, I intend to show that in addition to interpreting Jerusalem historically and geographically as I described earlier, an idealist approach illustrates why the Jerusalem imagery should also be interpreted as a people. A few verses after our highlighted passage, one of the seven angels promised to show John the bride of the Lamb (v. 9). Interestingly, what appears before John is not a woman but the city of Jerusalem (v. 10). In the chapter previous, John is told that the marriage of the Lamb has come “and his bride (or “woman” [*gynē*]) has made herself

²²¹ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 15.

ready.” (Rev. 19:7). The text makes use of symmetrical imagery to contrast the lifestyle of two particular people living on earth. Yeatts states,

The word translated *bride* here is literally ‘woman’ (*gynē*), rather than the normal word for bride (*nymphē*) (18:23; 21:2, 9; 22:17). This symbol makes a significant contribution to the symmetry of Revelation’s imagery. On the one hand, the bride is an equivalent image to the New Jerusalem and stands for the saints (Matt. 23:37; Rev. 14:4); on the other hand, the whore is Babylon, composed of the unfaithful ‘inhabitants of earth’ (17:1-6).²²²

The celestial victory of the woman who “makes herself ready” is compared to the demise of the great prostitute which constitutes the city of Babylon.²²³ To say that the New Jerusalem symbolizes the saints is not a new concept in theology. In fact, Robert H. Gundry argues that to interpret Jerusalem as symbolizing anything other than the saints would be a misinterpretation.

For Gundry, the eschatological city is to be interpreted as a symbol for a people rather than a place. He writes, “John is not describing the eternal dwelling place of the saints; he is describing them, and them alone... The New Jerusalem is a dwelling place, to be sure; but it is God’s dwelling place in the saints rather than their dwelling place on earth.”²²⁴ I would agree that Jerusalem should be interpreted as the saints since the nuptial imagery which is ascribed to the city in our passage of study (21:2) was previously attributed to the bride of Christ in Revelation 19:7-8. One should note that 21:2 does not compare the city itself to a bride but rather the adornment of the city to the nuptial preparation of believers. Although Gundry does not intend to go into specifics describing the place which the saints will inherit on the new earth, his approach does give room for a spatial view of life to come. He explains,

²²² Yeatts, *Revelation*, 354.

²²³ Some theologians look at the contrasting imagery between the evil whore and the spotless bride and suggest that the women in Revelation have been used to reinforce the dangerous stereotypes used to reference women. Yeatts engages other theologians who argue that Revelation supports the gender stereotypes of its day which caused women to be seen as persons who had difficulty controlling their appetites for food and sex. It should be noted that my referencing Revelation’s use of gender imagery is by no means intended to reflect or encourage gender stereotyping. See *ibid.*, 368.

²²⁴ Robert H. Gundry, “The New Jerusalem: People as Place, not Place for People,” *Novum Testamentum* 29 (1987): 256.

But how can the saints be the city when 21:7 says they will inherit it? On the contrary, 21:7 says they will inherit “these things,” which more naturally refers to the “all things” made new in 21:5, to inherit which things the saints come down as the New Jerusalem. Above all, however, does not the portrayal of the New Jerusalem as a place through whose light the nations will walk and into which the kings of the earth will bring the glory and honor of the nations (21:24-26) point to a city that is the saints’ residence rather than the saints themselves?... Perhaps so originally, but not in the present context of Revelation. For here the unbelieving nations and kings of the earth have met their doom in the lake of fire. The ones who were redeemed from those nations have now become the nations of the new earth. And because they rule it (22:5), they have become the new kings of the earth, all of them, whole nations of kings. The political side of the promise here complements the economic side. To be outside the city, then, is not to be outside it on earth. It means to be on earth not at all.²²⁵

Gundry’s interpretation of Jerusalem offers a compelling way to read Revelation’s description of the city of Babylon (18:10).²²⁶ If the city of Jerusalem represents not a literal city but rather New Testament saints, the same could be said regarding the inhabitants of Babylon. The city of Babylon constitutes the evil activity of unrepentant persons on the old earth while Jerusalem represents the heavenly commonwealth ruled by resurrected saints.²²⁷

In presenting this interpretation of the Revelation’s city imagery, we can see that an idealized/allegorical interpretation of the city of Jerusalem imagery still aligns with a place-centred interpretation of heaven. Jerusalem was once a physical reality located on earth and despite its destruction, the commonwealth that it represents is still present in the lived places of believers. An idealized reading of the text reminds us that the saints of earth are now citizens of this heavenly city and allegorically personified by it. Just as Jesus told his followers in Matthew 5:14 that “you are the light of the word” and likens them to a city on hill which cannot be hidden,

²²⁵ Gundry, “The New Jerusalem: People as Place, not Place for People,” 263.

²²⁶ I agree with Gundry’s interpretation of Revelation 22:5,15 in that the political side of the promise indicates that to be outside the city of Jerusalem means to be outside the commonwealth of the new cosmos. In other words, these verses indicate that whoever is not found in the Lamb’s book of life will not be found on the new earth at all but in the lake of fire. Secondly, my personal interpretation of Revelation 22 sees the tree of life as a physical witness of the healing the nations were offered prior to the new heaven and new earth being established. The verb tense used to describe the tree of life in verse two shifts from the past into the future tense in verse three. The curse which caused the nations to previously need healing is irradiated through the age of the Lamb becoming “all in all.”

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

Revelation personifies the city of Jerusalem as the saints who overcome the Beast and the harlot of Babylon.

In the second section of this chapter, we have emphasized that the city of Jerusalem imagery in Revelation points to the “already” and “not yet” of heaven. Could it be that the ministry of the church organism is a miniature model of that which God will fully establish on earth in the places of the coming age? We have demonstrated that the futurist, preterist, and idealist interpretations of Jerusalem show that life as we know it desperately needs to experience redemption and renewal. Although human progress has brought about great advances in medicine, architecture, education, and technology, people and places still experience sickness, selfishness, pain, and death. With the increasing turbulence felt in economic, geophysical, political, religious, and military realms, the present proves to be just as uncertain as before. The activity of the church which constitutes the present commonwealth of Jerusalem must shine brighter in the darkness instead of grow dimmer. The ministry of believers must draw the body and soul of individuals into relationship with the One whose return will usher in the age of resurrection and new creation.

III. The New Jerusalem: a People and a Place

In order to recover a place-centred understanding of resurrected life in the age to come, the following section will demonstrate why Revelation’s Jerusalem imagery should be interpreted as a people and a place. As we conclude, our survey of the contemporary discourse of heaven in chapter one will be brought alongside our emphasis of place-centred theology in chapter two. In doing so, we will focus on the “not yet” of heaven by emphasizing a place-centred interpretation of Jerusalem insofar as the urban imagery is also heard historically and allegorically.

As Gundry has already noted, the context of Revelation 21:1-4 indicates that although Jerusalem symbolizes the saints, the text also appears to refer to the city as a place the saints will inherit (21:7) yet also dwell together with God (21:3, 24-26). Commentators like Aune points out that although the Jerusalem imagery is meant to personify believers, it is at the same time distinguishable from the saints. He refers to Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza's three reasons why a place-centred interpretation must be held in careful tension with a metaphorical interpretation of Revelation 21-22: "(1) Rev. 21:2 *compares* the city to a bride; the city cannot be that bride. (2) Rev. 21:7 mentions that the saints will inherit the city; they cannot be the city. (3) The city is described as a *place* where the saints dwell (21:24-26)."²²⁸ The one thing that is certain regarding the Jerusalem imagery is that resurrected saints will be inheriting a place to live on the new earth. Celia Deutsche suggests that John uses physical imagery to point to a glorified physical reality to come:

In identifying the New Jerusalem with a new creation, indeed, with a new Paradise, John reassures his community of the ultimate victory of order over chaos. Moreover, he describes this victory as both fulfilling and surpassing the primeval order of things. And John implies that this new order, in which the transcendent and earthly orders are united, will occur in a transformed world rather than in a "spiritual" realm.²²⁹

Deutsche makes her readership aware that a place-centred interpretation of Revelation's city imagery allows for a definite "not yet" in eschatology. A new order of things is still yet to come. The image of the New Jerusalem descending between a new heaven and new earth functions as a marker of Christ's bride coming to dwell on a restored earth. In fact, when John is told by the angel to come and see the bride of the Lamb (v.9) verse ten states, "And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God." The direct connection between the city and the saints

²²⁸ Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1122.

²²⁹ Celia Deutsche, "Transformation of Symbols: The New Jerusalem in Rev. 21:1-22:5," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 78 (1987): 126.

becomes even stronger in verse nine. At this point in human history, all of Christ's followers are inhabiting the present, dwelling place of God and enjoying the pleasure of the political commonwealth just above the dimension of earth. In the future age, Jesus will return to consummate his marriage and completely vanquish the powers of darkness. In doing so, the political commonwealth of heaven will completely overtake and glorify the dimension of earth. As already proposed, Revelation's city imagery is a multi-faceted image also demonstrating the "not yet" of the age of heaven. As I will establish in this next section, the New Jerusalem will become the physical place in which all of creation will be compatible with the unimpeded glory of God.

IIIa. The New Jerusalem: the Dwelling Place of the Saints

I would suggest that the descent of the New Jerusalem is quite literally the present dwelling place of God accompanied by departed saints descending onto the transformed earth. Could it be that John saw the commonwealth of the future capital of God's earthly kingdom bustling with resurrected, glorified saints—the bride of Christ? Grant R. Osborne advances a similar interpretation by noting that just as Babylon was a political image for a people and a place, the same also applies for Jerusalem and the saints. He states,

It [Jerusalem] is a people in 21:9-10, when the angel shows John the New Jerusalem as "the bride, the wife of the Lamb," and in 21:13-14, when the twelve tribes and twelve apostles are the gates and the foundations of the city. But it is a place in 21:3 where God "dwells" with his people, in 21:7-8 where the readers either "inherit" it or face the lake of fire, and in 21:24, 26 where the glory of the nations are brought into it. In short, it represents heaven as both the saints who inhabit it and their dwelling place.²³⁰

Thus, the image of the New Jerusalem descending onto earth functions as an important transition in the state of the cosmos. As I indicated earlier, the new earth constitutes not only the new

²³⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 733.

physical environment for the saints but also God's new dwelling place. In other words, the new heaven is earth and the new earth is heaven. Jan du Rand suggests that the Jerusalem imagery is meant to serve as an "integrative symbol" implying a movement from a dimensionally fragmented world to that of cosmic wholeness.²³¹ I would suggest that there will be only one glorified dimension in the age to come and God has given his church the privilege of inheriting it with him.

IIIb. The New Jerusalem: the Dwelling Place of God

The essential meaning of the New Jerusalem is explained by a loud voice directed at John from heaven (Rev. 21:3). Jerusalem is to be understood as the dwelling (*skene*) place of God which will rest eternally with humanity. One should note that the word used for "dwelling" in the Greek Septuagint is translated from the Hebrew word "tabernacle"—the transportable structure which functioned as God's sanctuary during Israel's wilderness journey (Ex. 25:9, Num. 1:50-54).²³² Though later superseded by the temple, the concept of God's glory (*shekinah*) resting with Israel was originally associated with the tabernacle. When analyzing the historical background of Revelation 21:3, Mark Stephens writes, "It is this association between the tabernacle and the manifold presence of God which is foremost in John's mind. Through employing such terminology, John taps into a rich vein of Jewish covenantal and eschatological hopes concerning the dwelling of God in the midst of his people."²³³ Aune expounds upon the connection between the Jewish concept of *shekinah* and the tabernacle. "Here the eschatological reality of the presence of God is no longer just metaphorical but actual."²³⁴ This truth that Aune points out relates

²³¹ Jan A du Rand, "The Imagery of the Heavenly Jerusalem (Revelation 21:9-22:5)," *Neotestamentica* 22 (1988): 81.

²³² Mark B. Stephens, *Annihilation Or Renewal?: The Meaning and Function of New Creation in the Book of Revelation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck Press, 2011), 234.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 235

²³⁴ Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1124.

perfectly to the concept of heaven “at hand” and heaven “not yet.” In the present, believers constitute the temple or the dwelling place of God’s Spirit (1 Cor. 6:9) but in the future, Jesus will become the temple of the new earth (Rev. 21:22). In other words, the *shekinah* of God’s Spirit presently inhabiting each believer is a microcosm of the glory of God which is about to cover the restored earth as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14).

Moltmann’s eschatological view of the Sabbath reminds us that redemption is not liberation from the physical place but liberation within place.²³⁵ Just as God completed his original creation by dwelling with it on the seventh day, the glorious presence of God will fill his new creation to complete it. Moltmann argues in several of his theological works that the outworking of eschatology, Christology, and ecclesiology all of have a singular focus: to host the glory of God in the places of creation.²³⁶ He focuses on the biblical theme of “dwelling” by observing the tradition of the Sabbath. He views the weekly Sabbath and Sabbatical years as consistent celebrations acknowledging the rhythm of God’s presence overtaking what is passing away in the physical dimension of earth.²³⁷ Sabbath is a sign of God’s eternal presence dwelling in place and therefore offering us “a foretaste of the world to come.”²³⁸ In the same way, the invisible God took on flesh and temporarily dwelt in place so that he could offer us a foretaste of what is yet to come. Christ’s redemptive ministry points to the ultimate eschatological promise of God dwelling in place eternally. In the Messiah’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension, the transcendent God initiated the first stage of redemption and invites human beings to join him in preparing for the second stage of redemption.

²³⁵ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 259, 307.

²³⁶ We discussed earlier that several of Moltmann’s works use the concept of Yahweh’s *shekinah* resting in creation to depict this singular purpose of redemption. Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, viii.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 138, 276.

²³⁸ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 276.

The New Jerusalem constitutes the place in which God will one day dwell with resurrected saints. The city not only describes the people of God but the very place of earth which God's people will inherit. The foursquare shape of the city in 21:16 creates a symbolic association between the city that John's contemporary readership knew so well and the new earth. For example, throughout the book of Revelation, the number four is regularly used to describe the spatial dimension of planet earth with regard to its corners (7:1; 20:8) and its four winds (7:11).²³⁹ Whether Jerusalem should be interpreted as a literal cube serving as the capital city of earth's future government or a symbolic depiction of the renovated planet is marginal to our discussion. What we have demonstrated however is that Revelation's depiction of the city should be interpreted metaphorically and also literally. By the term literally, I suggest that the Jerusalem imagery should be interpreted as a physical place for resurrected saints to inherit on a physical earth. John Inge concludes that the very hope of the Christian faith is resurrection of the flesh and new creation. He notes that to abandon our hope of glorified place

is to abandon the creed in which we speak of the resurrection of the body. Such terminology implies that our ultimate destiny is to be embodied— that bodies are no temporary delight or encumbrance. If we are to have bodies, we must, as now, have places in which to put them. The ultimate importance of the material that the Christian faith declares is something to which sacramental encounters in the church and world point. They point toward our ultimate destiny which is to be implaced, where the nature of the places in which we will find ourselves will be a transfigured version of the places of the here and now.²⁴⁰

Inge reminds us that talking of bodily resurrection involves the biblical image of a “new heaven and a new earth” which is founded in God's initiative to usher in this forthcoming age. Although currently in a fallen state, the physical realm is an eschatological foretaste of the glory that is to be revealed in the redeemed creation of the future. As we have demonstrated, a futurist, perterist, and

²³⁹ As is well known, the cubical shape of the city also matches the shape of the Holy of holies in the tabernacle of the temple (1 Kings 6:20). This coincides with the concept that God will be the temple of the future creation since he will become “all in all.”

²⁴⁰ Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, 141.

idealist interpretation of Revelation can coincide to point to Jerusalem as a people in place now and the place people will inherit in the future.

Conclusion

Developing a Place-centred Strategy to Hear of Heaven Already and Not Yet

My aim is to summarize chapters one through three by providing a balanced view of heaven already and not yet. By basing this conclusion on Morse' strategy for the hearing of heaven, this place-centred treatment of heaven will combat a placeless or platonic understanding of the coming age. Secondly, this strategy for hearing of heaven will challenge the inadequate attention given to the inauguration of heaven "not yet." In light of the place-centred hope of Jesus returning to offer the gift of bodily resurrection and new creation, I emphasize that human progress will not move history "forward" into the dawn of a new era. Only the physical return of the slain Lamb will do this. In the meantime, the ministry of the bride is meant to glorify the Lamb, invite others into intimate relationship with the Lamb, and serve as an eschatological foretaste of the perfect, physical age to come.

Morse's first hearing of heaven indicates that heaven is the course of God's forthcoming activity here on earth. He suggests, "[Heaven] sounds like nothing less than God taking a new course of action in coming events to make the kind of home with us that will ever prove to be the right home for us."²⁴¹ Morse focuses on the forthcoming activity of heaven "at hand" to combat the Christian attitude of passively waiting for Christ's return and neglecting to bring heaven to

²⁴¹ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 13.

earth. Throughout this study, we have called this mishearing the first myth of heaven. If we adapt Morse' first hearing of heaven and make it place-centred, we end up with something that looks very close to what the Bible describes as the hope of bodily resurrection and new creation. Through his forthcoming and redemptive course of action, the incarnate God atoned for sin and made it possible for individuals to receive the gift of his Holy Spirit. By dwelling within believers, Jesus prepares his bride for his physical return which will allow her to experience the kind of home that will ever prove to be the right home for her. Throughout chapter three, we have demonstrated that the true home for the believer is best represented by the New Jerusalem. This home will be God dwelling in the places of his new creation. The city of Jerusalem not only describes people embodying the forthcoming characteristics of heaven "at hand" but also the place which constitutes the new course of action God will take in the forthcoming age "not yet."

Morse' second hearing of heaven sees heaven as a multi-leveled cosmological reality existing above earth. He views the kingdom of heaven as a forceful movement of God overtaking the evil and fallen characteristics of the present cosmos.²⁴² Eventually, every evil spiritual force will be replaced by God's unimpeded dominion of love and freedom. In this hearing, Morse argues that the material realm should not be treated as something we need to escape but something which can be transformed by the church "at hand." If we adapt Morse' second hearing and adopt a place-centred hearing of the future heaven, the physical realm is not seen as the opposite of heaven. The places of creation will be transformed and glorified when God makes the new earth his chosen dwelling place. As we demonstrated in chapter two, the way place is understood in God and God in place is crucial to the way we care for the planet and for each other. We referenced the words of Acts 17:28 to describe the glorification of the future cosmos, "For in him we live, and move, and have our being." By drawing on the biblical understanding of

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 16.

God being “all in all,” we noted that the glorification of the human body and the cosmos will allow believers to encounter God “face-to-face.”²⁴³ The Jerusalem imagery is the Creator’s way of telling us that place is not something that will be annihilated since it has its true and intrinsic ground in God.²⁴⁴ From the very beginning, God has placed humanity in place so that we could enter into physical relationship with him. This will surely continue in the age to come.

Morse’ third hearing of heaven sees heaven as a place of community which constitutes heaven “at hand” in the commonwealth of God’s people.²⁴⁵ Having a place-centred view of heaven “at hand” most certainly points to believers as the present dwelling place of God. However, we have demonstrated that the ministry of believers in place should not be confused with the dwelling place of God “not yet.” In order to combat the second myth of heaven— that the activity of the church in the present will bring about the fullness of heaven in the future—we have considered a place-centred interpretation of Revelation 21:1-4. I have demonstrated why a three-fold hearing of Jerusalem will keep biblical interpretation free from the second myth of heaven. First of all, the city speaks to the geographical setting and historical reality of the first century church. Secondly, the city of Jerusalem is a typological image for the bride of Christ in this cosmic battle between good and evil. Lastly, I have demonstrated why Jerusalem should be interpreted not only as believers in place “at hand” but also the place Christ will one day give to resurrected saints upon his return.

Through this study, I have emphasized why a place-centred hearing of heaven already and not yet is important for the life of the church. An accurate depiction of heaven can motivate more effective Christian witness. Secondly, it can foster excitement instead of uncertainty for the age to come. Like the elderly woman with whom I had the honour of speaking before her passing, many

²⁴³ Thiselton, *Life After Death*, 191.

²⁴⁴ Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, 42.

²⁴⁵ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 21.

wonder if the reality beyond will consist of bodies, buildings, fields, animals, food, and trees.

Although there are a plethora of unknowns regarding how exactly believers will physically cohabitate with Christ, our contemporary hearing of heaven must not treat the present age as the complete opposite of life to come. Neither can we believe that place can be transformed solely through the work of God through his church without the physical return of the Lamb. By way of Christ's second coming, the places we now encounter will one day become glorified and transfigured versions of that which we once knew so well. In the age to come, the redeemed will finally dwell with God in perfect proximity.

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