

***Paradise Mislaid* by Jeffrey Burton Russell**

The title of the book is an illusion to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and provides us a history not only of heaven but also of the endless rewriting of its description. Russell gives us a lot to work with in historical facts, word definitions, and who influenced whom in religion, the church, and philosophies of the day. Well versed in religious and historical information pertaining to Christian belief this book based upon heaven and its religious, philosophical and scientific variations.

He shows us how heaven is where God is, love is, and subsists and not just exists; heaven can only related to in metaphor; and heaven/Christianity has been written and rewritten to better align with current beliefs. Russell also shows us how words, both past and present ineffectively describe heaven; *we* have removed ourselves from God – God did not leave; science/natural philosophy rely on real world proof; and no matter how close we get to one another, there will still be skeptics and disbelievers in heaven.

Heaven has been part of human history long before Jesus Christ appeared and metaphors have only been the only effective and powerful way to describe it. Brilliant as the sun, Light from all the stars, surround all life, in the joys of God could be one way to describe heaven. Is it the same as the person sitting next to me? Despite the fact that it seems bright in my heaven, another individual may describe as such: Full of love, God is Life, Musical notes abound, and nature is green.

Metaphors bring understanding to some people, to give it relevance and a focal point, and since heaven is a fantastic concept, each person's heaven will be different. Neither true or false in its meaning, it connects us to our belief, our understanding, and our goal of an afterlife. It also opens our mind up to explore instead of similes where they point only to one comparison such as: Heaven is like a brilliant star. We only have one visual point, narrowed our idea of our belief, and in some ways made it small.

Russell states literal interpretation of heaven, God et al, is hard to obtain since no real place, person exists in order to describe. Therefore, we must describe in the best way possible with the words we have – brilliance, stars, light, love, and more. Heaven is the ideal, and each person's interpretation of it is full of different language, words, and metaphors. Moreover, since most of the descriptions of heaven are Christian-based, most have stayed with metaphors which are consistent throughout time (e.g., Christ sits at the right hand of God. God sits in a throne.) Heaven is not a place to most, and as a result, there cannot be a throne for anyone to sit in. Metaphorically is the only way to describe something not real and make it so.

Historically, heaven has changed with the eras, with the writers being the swaying factor of what people believed. Christian writers, theologians, and scholars rewrote the ideas of heaven and God many times over. Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Luther, Darwin, C.S. Lewis, and other writers gave us their viewpoints of heaven, their beliefs, and we adapted and incorporated each of them into our belief systems.

In order to fit religion into the real world and make it more appealing to people who believed in the physical, writers adapted and wrote versions of heaven that used more worldly metaphors. While based in Christianity, deviations as seen in many of their writings, are proof of the beliefs of the time. It is similar to the idea of history is written by the winner. Variations of where heaven was, who was there, what it looked like, and what you had to do in order to get there, can be seen throughout history.

Russell gives us many writers version of heaven, evolution, church beliefs, but the one which stayed with me throughout the book was Stuart Phelps, a 24-year old, who wrote about personal satisfaction – getting all you want in heaven. *Why should we not have pretty things in heaven? ... How do we know that the abstract idea of a heaven needs imply anything very much unlike Eden?* His version of heaven is similar to mine; yet different from Twain (said mockingly), *There is no humor in heaven.*

As mentioned above, each writer, each person's view of heaven is different from the rest and continues to change throughout time.

Words being the best way to communicate, it is hard to choose the right phrases to describe heaven. Russell gives us many examples of words, when first used, and that in most cases, the words used were not in their correct context. Our language is ineffective to describe most items in this world. How are we to describe concepts and ideas with words used for tangible items we can see and feel?

Reducing a grandiose idea such as heaven to a mediocre definition shows the inadequacy our words contain. Ideas and concepts are mental and words made to bring them into physical understanding – much in the way, metaphors are used. Many people are able to think what heaven will be like, but to explain it to someone effectively and especially dependant on their education level may not be able to do so.

The church once handled Religious ideas as well as education – the words they used were the ones passed down to lower social castes. Many words known and taught were given generalized meanings in order to have all people understand them. This caused many definition fine points to be lost or incorrectly translated. In my experience, I have used incorrect words where I did not understand the complete meaning.

Translating an idea into form does not render well when you cannot find the words to apply. This happens with religion, politics, story lines, and experiences in every day life. In some cases, the word does not exist yet. However, we are always progressing.

Progress was something that both the scientific community and the religious community were both taking part in. While religion wanted spiritual advancement, science wanted material and humanistic advancement. Both wanted more for their beliefs; however, the division between religion and science became greater.

Science/natural philosophy began focusing on the real world and tangible proof. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, science and natural philosophies became the way to understand the world. Truth and knowledge obtained by observation, and substantiated with evidence was the new way to believe.

Mathematics, the most prevalent of the sciences, left no room for proving heaven. All items had weight, mass, size and structure and measurability. With no actual place for heaven, no land, water, or any other quantifiable items, the biblical heaven could not exist. Physicality of life, things that could be touched, felt, seen, and measured were how people knew they were real and therefore believable.

Russell gives us a great illustration in the book with *essence* – and uses the Eucharist as an example with the bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ. Certain faiths of the time would believe that upon taking Eucharist, the wine would turn to blood. Not being able to prove the essence changed skepticism (doubt) become more common.

The divide between science and religion proving and disproving heaven, God, and the afterlife started, and with science and real world proof becoming the way to view life and existence, heaven slowly disappeared and skepticism grew. In addition to skepticism, the influence of religion over politics and visa versa breed as well.

With all the arguments for heaven and God existing, there are equally as many for the non-existence of either. Doubts in an actual location of heaven began in the early 1500s.

With political manipulation and friendships between kings and popes, the power of the church and the quieting of skeptics ruled for a long time, and escalated in the mid-1600s in jailing non-believers.

Witch-hunts, Crusades, and other fighting in the name of religion have usually been religion eliminating skeptics. While not able to prove this the case, skepticism against the church has always been an interesting play. No one was safe and caused departure from the one Catholic belief. Other religions sprung up, weakened belief in the original views of God and heaven, and caused people to question and seek other ways of believing.

Natural philosophies, brought out in the age of reason, was a way to show ways of not believing in the existence of an afterlife, heaven, god, or anything promoted by the church. If evidence was unconfirmed, it could not be true, and skepticism flourished and undermined the teachings of the church.

Even though skeptics may not be best for religion, my viewpoint is that they are good for their members or as proof of their argument. The use of their life, their disbelief, and their wayward ways can be proof that you need a goal – or your life will go nowhere. They are a good argument of how not to live your life, that God will take care of all, and if you leave and believe in God and his direction, you will be in heaven in the afterlife.

Removing ourselves from God is one point I liked in Russell's book. We have removed ourselves from God – God did not wander off and forget about us. We choose to discount

heaven, our belief, and our viewpoint of what happens to us when we die. Belief in heaven, what it means to us, are ours daily to believe or not. We can read many writers observations, but choosing what to do with it is ours.

Russell points out God is always there, many religions have that as a tenet – God is all-around and in everything. How can someone/something that is in everything get up and leave? We, as non-believers are the ones who walk away, look away from beauty, shun truth, and wonder where God has gone. Most religions believe God is Love, Heaven is God, and Love is all there is for us.

Heaven in full of love, God is all around, and we are joyful. Why would we choose suffering instead of love? Choosing to believe in a heaven gives hope to some, knowing that their life is not lived in vain. My belief in heaven is similar to certain religions, we are immortal and surrounded by God and family. I believe God is all around and in everything beautiful. While I cannot take apart a flower, and show you God, I know the essence of God is there.

Russell in his extensive research and writings does point out some interesting facts of how religion, science, and time have all changed our perceptions of heaven. The book was remarkable in how many words used are far removed from their original meaning. We do not use the word “evolve” correctly, as it was first used to describe the change in plants from one stage to another in growth.

I have a hard time knowing that many people will continue to discount heaven because they cannot see it. I know each of has their own belief, but how can you discount all the happy, wonderful, and beautiful things in this world? For me, my concept of God and heaven exist based on what is true and valid to me.

**References cited:**

Russell, Jeffrey B. (2006). *Paradise Mislaid: How we lost heaven and how we can regain it*

