

The Meaning of “Paradise” in the Bible

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Today we are pleased to share the latest post in our new weekly series, **Beyond the Book**. This month J. Richard Middleton will be discussing interesting things he learned about eschatology while working on [A New Heaven and a New Earth](#).

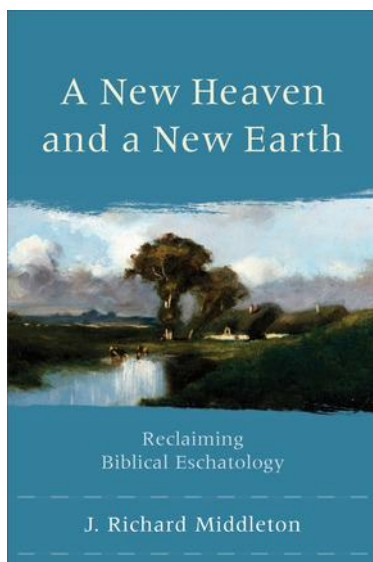
Also, as part of this series we are giving away three copies of *A New Heaven and a New Earth*. The giveaway ends at midnight, and winners will be announced tomorrow. You can enter [here](#).

Paradise is not a reference to 'heaven,' but to the earthly flourishing offered to humanity in the beginning and reserved for the righteous in the eschaton. – J. Richard Middleton

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

These famous words of Jesus to the thief on the cross are often understood as a promise that he would join Jesus in heaven immediately after death.

The first problem with this interpretation is that Jesus did not rise from the dead for three days, and only ascended to heaven some time after that (which makes the promise of “today” problematic).



Paradise as the Garden of Eden

Beyond the temporal problem, the term “paradise” (*paradeisos*) is simply not equivalent to “heaven” in the Bible.

The Greek word *paradeisos* is how the Septuagint translates the Hebrew word for “garden” (*gan*) in the garden of Eden account in Genesis 2-3. According to the end of Genesis 3 humanity was expelled from the garden and denied access to the tree of life, with the way guarded by cherubim with flaming sword (Genesis 3:23-24).

The Present Inaccessibility of Paradise

Various Second Temple Jewish traditions thus developed about the inaccessibility of paradise and the tree of life (some of these texts are cotemporaneous with the New Testament, some earlier, some later). These traditions centered around the idea that God took the garden/ paradise up into heaven or removed it to the top of a high mountain (in the sky/ heaven) at the ends of the earth, in order to guarantee its continued inaccessibility—until the last day, when it would be revealed upon the earth.

The idea of paradise presently inaccessible in “heaven” assumes the ancient Jewish picture of the earth as a flat disk, with mountains at the extremities of the earth that function as pillars holding up the sky/ heaven, which is conceived as a solid ceiling or roof over the earth (for more on the nature of “heaven” in the Bible, see [my previous blog post on the subject](#)).

The association of garden and mountain is found in Ezekiel 28:1-19, in an oracle of judgment against the king of Tyre, who is described as having been “in Eden, the garden of God” (Ezekiel 28:13), which is then identified as “the mountain of God” (Ezekiel 28:14).

Paradise in the Eschaton

It thus makes sense that John is taken to “a great, high mountain” to see the holy city descending out of heaven from God (Revelation 21:10).

Earlier in Revelation, Jesus promises the church at Ephesus: “To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7); and then in chapters 21-22 we have a vision of the New Jerusalem, intertwined with elements of paradise/ the garden, coming down out of heaven from God.

Just as there was a tree of life in the garden (Genesis 2:9), so there is one in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 22:2). But whereas in Genesis 3:23-24 humanity is exiled from the garden, in Revelation 22:14 those who are cleansed from sin “will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates,” which are always open (Revelation 21:25).

Paradise is Not Heaven

This means that we should not identify “paradise” in the New Testament with “heaven”; rather “paradise” more correctly refers to God’s original intent for human earthly flourishing (the garden of Genesis 2), which now comes to fruition in a garden *city* (a new Jerusalem), on a renewed (even grander) Mt. Zion, as the focused center of God’s presence in the new heaven and new earth.

Although there might be an argument for understanding the temporary location of paradise in heaven, as part of what God is preparing for the saints, this is clearly symbolic language meant to say that eternal life is currently inaccessible to human beings.

More importantly, paradise is not simply equivalent to “heaven.” Indeed, paradise is not (in either Jewish literature or the New Testament) an immaterial realm or place, which is the way that “heaven” is typically conceived in contemporary Christian theology.

Paradise as Earthly Flourishing

Even Origen, the church father with the clearest commitment to Platonism, understands the “paradise” promised to the saints as “some place situated on the earth.” This is why he is constrained to portray the afterlife in terms of a journey *from* paradise *to* heaven; being a Platonist, it is unthinkable for him that earth could be the final destiny for those who are truly spiritual (see Origen, *On First Principles*, 2.11.6-7).

Therefore, what Jesus promises the thief on the cross is not “heaven” but access to the tree of life in the garden/ city of God, which is essentially equivalent to resurrection in the new creation.

As to what Jesus means by being in paradise “today,” that’s another story.

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