

Heaven and Hell

Far from being an outdated idea, Heaven and Hell are very much on the agenda today. Radical Islamic believers think that by committing suicide in their religious cause they will go to heaven where they will experience unlimited joy. Many believers of Christianity believe that one day they will be out shopping and suddenly God will pull them out Wal Mart and they will ascend through clouds to heaven in the rapture.

Later in this Lent course we will think about how heaven and hell have been seen in the literature and in art, throughout periods of history. Today I would like to think about how heaven and hell developed as ideas in the Bible. This will help us to be prepared for some of the representations which Paul and Joany will show you later in this course

I was interested to read today that scientists are bouncing beams off each other in a tunnel underneath the French Alps to try and understand things like matter. It is costing over 2 billion ! The scientist who was explaining why they were doing this said that they wanted to know what happened in the nano seconds after big bang. Then the interviewer said something which made sense, 'surely we do already know about matter'. The scientist said 'but we don't know for example why some things are heavy and some things light'

I thought gosh, don't we! Here we are sending people to the moon and we don't know why some things are heavy !

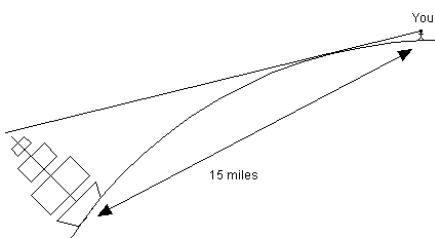
So as we study heaven and hell we need to remember that if we don't know why something is heavy, we must try to remember what limited understanding people had about the world when they wrote the Bible. So when we read the words 'heaven' and 'hell' we have to try and remember the world view of the writers.

Slide 1

That is a picture of the world

It was in Top Gear a few weeks ago that James May was at a test track in Germany. He needed a very long test track because he was going to drive a car at over 200 miles per hour and they needed to have a run up and space to stop at the end. He showed the track and commented that you could not see the end because of the curvature of the earth. Apparently the world curves 8 inches every mile!

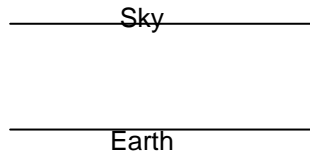
Side 2



Cosmology

I want to start tonight by thinking about what the Biblical writers believed about the construction of the world.

How would you draw the world



We know that the earth curves 8 inches a mile, so things dip away from view. We know all this now, but it was not always so of course. Let me ask, if you did not have the benefit of science how would you describe the world? I am guessing that it would be the way a child draws the world—a tiered picture of sky above, earth below.

Slide 3

Spend some time drawing a world

Genesis 1:6 it describes the creation of the firmament

And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water."

So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was so. God called the expanse "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning--the second day. And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so.

The Biblical view of cosmology

Slide 4

Ancient people thought that the world was flat. This is a very natural assumption, they did not have the benefit of scientific discoveries or of space flight. We see the earth and think now, that they must have been pretty stupid, but it was natural to see the earth a bit like a plate.

The sky appears to enclose the flat vista on all sides and to descend to meet its edges in whatever direction one looks.

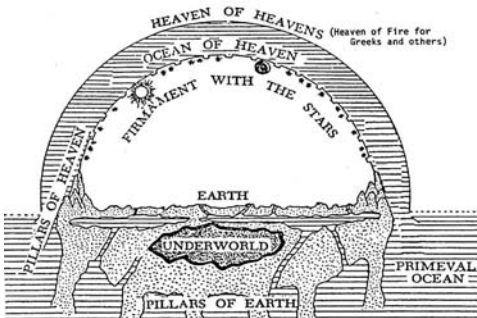
Slide 5

So it is that the Bible writers describe the earth as a flat disk afloat upon a vast cosmic ocean.

The sky is represented as a solid dome with windows and gates, from which the rain and snow comes

The sun, moon, and stars appear to be set into the heavenly vault, to be smallish, and at no great distance from the earth.

Rain falls from the sky and water wells up from beneath. Such a view of the world is not the product of stupidity but rather of shrewd and careful observation.





Slide 7

Speaking of the most ancient representations of a firmament, the ancient Egyptians depicted the firmament in the form of a god's arched body with toes and fingers on the horizons of the flat earth below that was represented by a prone goddess.

The Babylonians in their creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, depicted the firmament being constructed out of the body of a dead goddess named "Tiamat," who was cut in half to form the firmament and heavens above, and the earth below. One Babylonian tablet fragment even mentions a "*Tiamat eliti*" and a "*Tiamat sapliti*," that is an Upper Tiamat (or Ocean) and a Lower Tiamat (or Ocean) that corresponds apparently to the Hebrew belief in "waters above and below the firmament" in Genesis 1:7." (Ed Babinski)

The Old Testament.

Genesis

So let us put some scriptures to this picture.

It is worth thinking about how creation is described in the Bible in Genesis, because this gives us an idea of Biblical Cosmology—the shape of the universe, where things are. In Genesis 1:6 it describes the creation of the firmament

And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water."

So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was so. God called the expanse "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning--the second day. And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so.

Slide 8

Slide 9

If you think of this as looking a bit like the millennium dome, you won't go far wrong.

Of course God lived at the highest point (Psalm 14:2)

The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.



So in Revelation we read
'The angel showed me the holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. 21:10b

You will understand that with all of that water up there occasionally some of it ended up down here, so we read in Genesis 7:11

In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month--on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.

The biblical authors were men of their time, and lived in a world which was believed to have a ceiling. They knew nothing about the cycle of evaporation, condensation, and precipitation.

Slide 10

Of course, this is precisely what Jacob sees in Genesis 28:12

He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

Slide 11

You can also think of the tower of Babel, reaching up to God

New Testament

This idea of heaven being up continued in the New Testament. Matthew 3:16

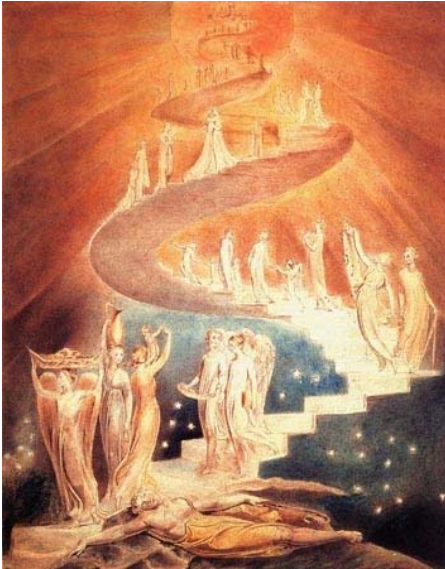
As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Slide 12

This very much gives the idea of three storey universe. This is characteristic of the cosmology of heaven throughout the New Testament. Jesus looks up to heaven, not down.

Fourth, Matthew 4:8 states that

"The devil took him [Jesus] to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world [Greek, cosmos], and their glory." One could see "all" the kingdoms of the world from a very high mountain if the world were flat.





Slide 13

In Ephesians we read that 2:6
And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

God lived at the highest point
(Psalm 14:2)

The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.



Slide 14

God on a cloud



Slide 15

God on a cloud



Slide 16

The ascension
One of the worst festival in the church year is ascension.
This is because people really do believe that Jesus floated up through the clouds



The rapture

Slide 18

We read from Letter to the Thessalonians, "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of an archangel and the trumpet of God. The dead in Christ will rise first; then we, who are left alive, will be snatched up with them on clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

Paul's description of Jesus' reappearance in 1 Thessalonians 4 is a brightly coloured version of what he says in two other passages, 1 Corinthians 15:51-54 and Philipians 3:20-21:

Paul's mixed metaphors of trumpets blowing and the living being snatched into heaven to meet the Lord are not to be understood as literal truth, but as a vivid and biblically allusive description of the great transformation of the present world of which he speaks elsewhere.

What view of the world is sustained, even legitimized, by this theology ?

This idea of heaven being 'up' clearly influenced much of the Biblical writing of the Old and New Testaments, and still does some Christians today.

The Christians who believe in the rapture, imagine that they will literally be taken up. This is a very literal reading of the Bible by many Christians, who often also see the world as being 6000 years old.

There is also danger in this naive view. It presents a dualistic view of reality that allows people to pollute God's world on the grounds that it's all going to be destroyed soon? Wouldn't this be overturned if we recaptured Paul's wholistic vision of God's whole creation?

Slide 19

Points

Get God out of the clouds

Jesus isn't an astronaut

Heaven isn't a place

Conclusions

Slide 19

People still talk about going up, after death people still speak of their loved ones looking down upon them from heaven. They do this even though they know the world is round.

How does this happen? Christians become schizoid, they think with two minds — a religious mind and a scientific mind. And when they are in conflict with one another, they just stop thinking.

There is nothing wrong with child like faith, but it can become childish when we take such ideas literally. If we do, we end up with the sort of nonsense that has proved so effective at putting most thinking people off Christianity altogether.

People have to be weaned off the idea of the Ascension of Jesus into Heaven as a time when Jesus became an astronaut.

It is ridiculous to think of Heaven as a place. In the days when little was known about the universe, such an idea may well have been reasonable: to hold it now is simply to invite ridicule. Heaven is not a place, hell is not a place: they are spiritual rather than physical realities. This doesn't mean they're not real, but it's the sort of reality explored by poets and painters and novelists, rather than cosmologists.

Heaven is best thought of as the place where God is.

The ancient worldview thought of heaven as up and the earth as down. They were separate from one another. But the integral worldview says, along with science, there is no such thing as up! As our planet sails through space and spins about, it is inconceivable to think of heaven—of God—as being up there somewhere.

The ancients, from the biblical writers to the Greeks, were pointing toward the truth, but their metaphors no longer work for us.

Today we think of God as being within us and permeating the permeates, within everything. The universe is suffused with the divine.

We've got to get God out of the sky. He's not up

there, because there is no such thing as up

There we go again, not him, that is another piece of human language which gets us into problems.

Slide 20

The Kingdom of God/heaven is now , wheat, yeast, mustard seed.

If we listen to the teaching of Jesus it is clear that whilst he can speak of a kingdom of heaven, Jesus is not thinking about a physical place in the future.

The Kingdom is something which is future 'Thy kingdom come...'

The Kingdom is also present it is like yeast, it is like weeds and wheat growing in the same field, it is like a mustard seed, growing slowly

The kingdom is about the authority of the King.

The development of Heaven and Hell

Slide 21

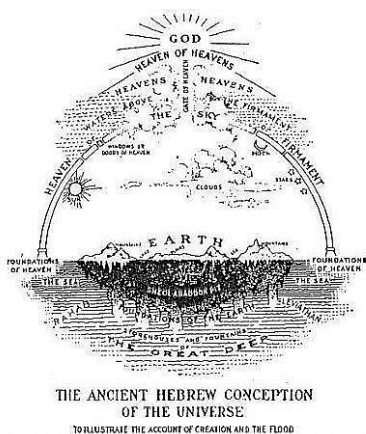
Ideas of people going to heaven were not normal in the earlier part of the Old Testament. It was thought that everybody, good or bad ended up in the shadowy world of Sheol. The Hebrew word Sheol means 'the collective abode of the dead', a shadow land where men were ghosts, but with no concept of punishment. We put bodies in the ground it is natural to think that the dead live there. Sheol is not Hell and bibles which translate it as such are wrong.

Following the exilic period, between the Old and New Testaments, apocalyptic writing sprang up. It is fantasy writing in which God is seen as vindicating his people and punishing the oppressors. There was a feeling that somehow God would vindicate his people from oppression and there would be a judgement. One like the Son of Man would judge the nations. Some of this writing is found in the new Testament, we see it in Revelation.

There did develop however a concept of future vindication and by the time of the New Testament and Jesus, people like the Pharisees believed in a resurrection.

So we have a whole raft of theology which is built up on the concept of people going to a good place or a bad place

Slide 22





Calvinism, Arminianism, purgatory, etc. But in the same way that public hangings and floggings were popular spectacles (and doubtless would be again, if they were provided) there are good reasons to think that very many people (including Christians) get considerable satisfaction at contemplating others 'getting their just deserts' - and if this goes on indefinitely, so be it. The idea of hell, in other words, has an unhealthy appeal to the baser instincts of disturbingly large numbers of people, and on these grounds alone its fading away would be welcome.

Slide 23



The belief that Saint Peter meets the soul at the "Pearly Gates" is an artistic application of the belief that Christ gave Peter, believed by Catholics to be the first Pope, the keys to Heaven.

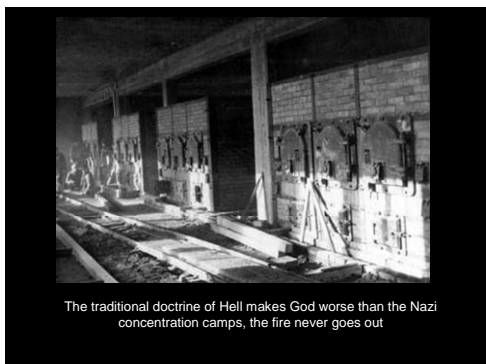
Since then Christians have used the words of Jesus to create a feel bad factor. We have suggested that there is neat division between those allowed into heaven and those who are refused entry. A literal understanding of hell brings with it the very real difficulty about the kind of God who would be willing to inflict unimaginable torment on his creatures throughout the whole of eternity. Whatever the merits might be of punishment over a limited period, there can surely be no possible justification for everlasting punishment.



Slide 25

This became a prime means of social and spiritual control. In some ways it is quite modern. Compliance with set targets assured a heavenly passage and avoidance of the 'other place.'

Are you happy to worship a God who does this ?



The traditional doctrine of Hell makes God worse than the Nazi concentration camps, the fire never goes out

Slide 26

God is seen as worse than those who commit genocide. IN the traditional doctrine of hell the fire never goes out

Can we get rid of hell ?

Slide 27

Slide 28

Don't blame Jesus

Does Jesus envisage a place of punishment ?

Slide 28

It is important to state at the outset that most of what we think about hell is not from the Bible or from Jesus, it is from the church, it is often medieval. Jesus does mention hell. When in the New Testament a place of punishment is intended, the word which is used is Gehenna.

So we read Jesus say things like

'It is better to lose your hand or your eye, than with your whole body to be thrown into Gehenna.' (Matthew 5:29-30).

'It is not necessary to fear those who can kill the body; it is necessary to fear him who can cast soul and body into Gehenna.' (Matthew 10:20).

First let me ask a question.

- In the Gospels the word heaven is mentioned 131 times
- In the Gospels the word hell (Gehenna) is mentioned how many times ?

Actually it is 12. Jesus only refers to hell on a dozen occasions. This is not to say that therefore it doesn't matter, I am just suggesting that punishment is not at the top of his agenda. When we think about all the teaching which Jesus gave, he wasn't in the position of threatening people to choose heaven. And his worst criticism was for those who clearly thought that they were righteous.

Slide 29

Mark 9

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. Mark 9:43

Now let's look at what Jesus meant when he used the word hell. Was it a place of real eternal torment. ?

I can't look at all 12 tonight, but let's look at two texts to get a feel, from Mark and repeated in Matthew

Slide 29

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. Mark 9:43

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. Matthew 5:28-9

Jesus used the word Gehenna for Hell. So what or where is Gehenna?





Slide 30

Gehenna is Ge Hinnom, the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem. In that valley those who worshipped Moloch had burned their children as offerings. Josiah had stopped this worship and made the Valley of Hinnom desecrated territory. (2 Kings 23:10).

Slide 31

It had then become the official rubbish dump, the waste incinerator of Jerusalem. It smouldered continuously and in it a worm bred and multiplied. That valley, a horrible place became the popular idea of hell. You can still go there today. In fact I am off to Jerusalem in May and I joked with Corinne that I was going to take her to hell and back !



This is Hell or 'Ghenna'Ge Hinnom outside Jerusalem. Where Israelites had burned their children. 2 Kings 23:10. It became an official rubbish dump in Jesus day, it smouldered and had bad worms.

Sheol is a place of the dead, Gehenna is a place of punishment.

Jesus was a man of his time, he believed the world was flat. Jesus simply uses the world view of his listeners at the time to point to a spiritual reality. There is no more reason to believe that there is a place of eternal burning than that the world is flat. The need for spiritual repentance is the message which we need to take to heart, not the threat. The importance is dealing with sin, not hell.

If you wish to dispute this version of Jesus teaching. If you wish to adopt a literal understanding, then I think you have problems. First of all I would ask you to take Jesus at his literal word and go and chop your hands off.

Text of

Slide 32

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let

It's a parable

them listen to them.' "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" *Luke 16:19-31*

Slide 33

This is a parable !

It is a story to give spiritual truth. Jesus knew that his hearers believed in a three tier universe, like we saw earlier. Of course he would use this as a picture. Of course he would speak of heaven being above.

Spiritual language is metaphorical, a metaphor conveys truth, but not literal truth.

We say Jesus is a door, not a literal door, but a spiritual door.

Parables take pictures of the day, conventions of the day and use them to make spiritual points.

Don't blame Jesus

Hell is a place we have made.

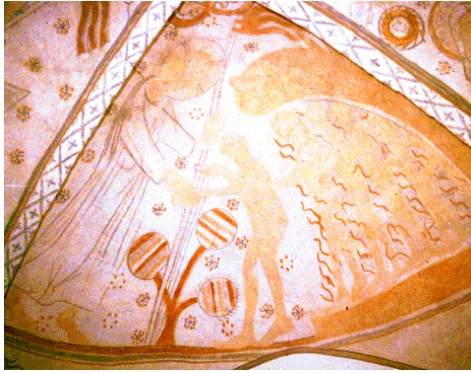
Hell then became our word for the place for sinners after death. The church has traditionally been guilty of creating a place for itself between people and God as a sort of 'fixer' with the divine, like a heavenly immigration service, it handed out passports to the deserving.

Richard Holloway the Bishop of Edinburgh called this the 'theology of the crushed testicles'.

This was where the church gained ultimate respect. I feel particularly uncomfortable with the concept of a theology of hell which sees God like a Nazi commandant ordering people to be burned alive continuously in ovens.

I find it remarkable that this doctrine still exists and can only wonder at how Christians can live with themselves and a belief in such a God. I am speaking only from a personal perspective of course, but I do find this to be remote from the Christ of the Gospels one who goes and searches for the sheep which is lost and forcibly taking it back home on his shoulders, whether it wants to be found or not. I would suggest that it is we human beings who in our dark moments like the idea of hell, it appeals to our sense of retribution and anger.

We must not use the words of Jesus to justify this view



Harrowing of hell.

Slide 34

'He descended to the dead'

Many ideas have followed this phrase. There developed the idea of the 'Harrowing of Hell' Jesus invaded hell and destroyed the power of death and sin. The Devil was overthrown. Others believe that the descent into hell accounts for the problem of God's justice by providing an opportunity for all mankind--in eternity as well as in time--to hear the message of redemption from the Word, Jesus himself. To put this simply, it would be unthinkable that Jesus would not speak to anybody he met, wherever it was that he went, so he preached to them and offered the chance of salvation!

Some biblical passages might help us

For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit. 1 Peter 4:6

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; 1 Peter 3:18

Conclusions

Is the grace of God limited by this earthly life ?

Slide 35 a

Could it be that there is room for salvation for all from this work of Jesus? Surely there are no limits to the grace and goodness of God, either in space or time?

Origen c185-254

Believed that the final and ultimate triumph of Jesus would result in the eventual submission even of Satan himself

We can only hope and pray that the grace of God continues to operate in whatever other world and whatever life there may be.

It is to me a great concern to hear preachers proclaiming who will and who will not be saved. We have no right to state what fate will befall the god fearing worshippers of other faiths who have followed the religion of their forebears. Who can say how God will deal with those who through no fault of their own have failed to practice their faith like us. It is surely a human failing to try and restrict the grace and mercy of God, yet his love is wider

Origen c185-254
Believed that the final and ultimate triumph of Jesus would result in the eventual submission even of Satan himself

Slide 35

Origen c185-254

Believed that the final and ultimate triumph of Jesus would result in the eventual submission even of Satan himself

It was Clement of Alexandria in the second century, who believed in a 'Universal movement and translation'.

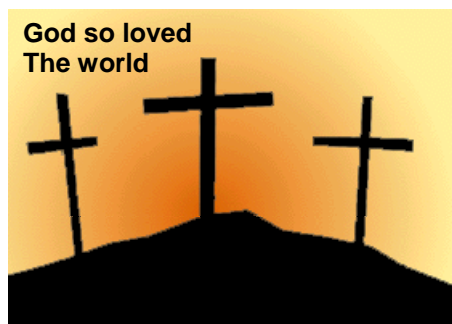
than the heart of man.

Who knows what other world there might be in which we might experience the unlimited grace of God, God has all of eternity to draw people to himself. We must be less inclined to proclaim the judgement of God and more willing to hope with such great thinkers as Origen (c185-254) He suggested that the final and ultimate triumph of Jesus would result in the eventual submission of even Satan himself to the love of God.

This is speculation only and perhaps for some, also a prayer.

Slide 35 b

It was Clement of Alexandria in the second century, who believed in a 'Universal movement and translation'.



Slide 36

All people are offered the love of God. The sphere in which the grace of God may operate is beyond human limits. God has all eternity to win people to himself. This may be a helpful way to understand seemingly impossible passages such as Philippians 2:10

'That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'

