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## DIGGING DEEPER

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### Heaven: Ascension

*“When the disciples find themselves staring into the sky, confused about what to do after Jesus’ ascension, I think we can identify with the feelings these men and women felt that day. Sometimes we still feel like we are staring at the sky waiting for Christ’s return, don’t we? In this introduction to our series on Heaven, we are going to begin to question where our ideas about heaven come from and start to see if what we imagine is what appears in the Bible. Where did Jesus go to “prepare a place for us?” What is this “paradise” we go to when we leave this world? Let’s find out together as we do a deep dive on “heaven” in the Scriptures.”*

## Christianity’s Platonic Heaven

The early Christian church was heavily influenced by Plato, and the effects of Plato’s teaching can still be seen within Christianity today. This is particularly true when it comes to the topic of heaven. Many Christians today would be surprised to learn that they hold a Platonic view of heaven which is not Biblical. This brief paper [QR code on the right] will explain who Plato is, his main philosophical views, and how those views have shaped popular opinion about heaven today.



## CJ's Blogpost

***"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." (Rev. 21:1 ESV)***

As I read this verse, I am reminded of other passages like Romans 8, where I see "creation itself," longing to be set free from its bondage to corruption, desiring to be renewed. Acts 3:21 telling of a time for the restoration of all things. The wisdom literature even speaks of the eternity of the earth (Ecc. 1:4) and the cosmos (Ps. 89:37; 148:3-6).

This Renewal view is not new; it was held by Irenaeus, Origen, and Methodius, not to mention many (if not all of the) New Testament authors. Yet, as a Western culture, it seems that we have embraced an ejection-seat view of this world. Must we be reminded that it was created "good," even "very good" (Gen. 1)? The Creator did not target creation itself in the flood (Gen. 6). It seems our God's plan has always been for the redemptive renovation of His good creation.

Revelation 21:1 says that the old heaven and the old earth (and the sea as well- SUPER interesting rabbit trail (see below)) "passed away" or were "gone." A literal approach to this obviously poetic description can lead us to believe that we have to embrace a re-creation view of the coming Kingdom fully realized, but there are many interpretive questions one must answer when seeking to understand this and any biblical text:

- How does this translation fit with the rest of Scripture?
- What are the theological implications of the translation, and how do those fit with the whole of Scripture?

We must remember that translative choices are made with care but often can reduce the rich nuance of the original language. The word used in this passage for "passed away" (*ἀπέρχομαι* (*aperchomai*)) is often translated "went away," or "ceased to exist," or "depart," or "withdraw." The phrase "passed away" in our modern culture has but one meaning- it has died. After the vivid visions described earlier in the book, our assumption can lead us to think that the earth was dead, destroyed.

If we look at how the author paired the usage of the terms "old/new" or "first/new" or "former/new," a richer understanding of *aperchomai* is illuminated. The former earth ceased to be because a new/better version replaced it. It had become obsolete. Creation itself received an upgrade; it had become a "new kind of heaven and earth." (Bruce Metzger).

A perhaps, more accurate translation would be something like;

***"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth were gone/obsolete and the sea was also gone." (Rev 21:1)***

Okay, so what? Why is this significant for us as we read these closing remarks in John's Revelation? Having a redemptive view of this world, first and foremost, fits with the rest of the passage (note the behaviors/practices listed that are not welcome in the New Creation because they mar Creation itself (21:8)). It also reorients the back-half bookend of Revelation to the centrality of Christ's redemptive work both on the cross and in His earthly ministry.

Jesus didn't merely save us from this world; He saved us for it. Even a cursory look at the red letters in the Gospels highlight Jesus' redemptive Kingdom centrality. Jesus Himself ushered in the new creation (the Kingdom of Heaven) and began the restorative process He will complete in His return. We, His church/body, are commissioned to participate with Him in this venture, empowered by His Spirit. The "former/first" earth we live in today will cease to be, but the new creation we bring to bear on this earth will live through to eternity. We can begin to live in new creation now. We can bring it to bear in our relationships, families, workplaces, and communities.

For me, this was a beautiful reminder of the Gospel of the Kingdom realized at the eschaton. I love getting lost in the Scriptures. I appreciate the depth but recognize that it only comes with the breadth. If we can't grasp

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the Bible at 30,000', it will surely confuse us as we go through it with a microscope. It takes time and intimacy with both the text and God to mature in our understanding of God's Word.

The task can seem daunting, but it isn't impossible. Look at your time in the Scriptures as an opportunity to plunge the depths of an infinite God. Dive deep. Chew on the teachings you find. Ask questions. Wrestle with the text. Let the truth weigh on you.

As we focus our eyes on Him in the text, our minds are awakened, and our spirits are uplifted. Our spiritual practices become organic outpourings of a transformed heart inclined toward our Savior. Prayer becomes effortless, generosity- a natural reflection of His gracious charity with us. We begin to live as one renewed, as witnesses to the work of Christ as He redemptively restores Creation. We are unworthy and yet welcomed on this Adventure. I'm really glad that we get to go on it together. Thank you for letting me share.

[\*I promised a short rabbit trail. Note that I didn't augment the second "gone" in the translation of Rev. 21:1 ("...sea was also gone."). The inclusion of the sea being no more is a strange addition from our modern perspective, but this is a bolded, blue-texted, and underlined hyperlink to a Jewish reader. The waters of Genesis 1:2, the chaos (*tohu wa-bohu*) of the undeveloped world, are seen as sinister, untameable, and uncontrolled. The sea was not seen by an ancient audience as a place to vacation in the summers; it was dangerous and deadly. In the New Creation, God's reign rights the riot. Disorder no longer dominates. The chaotic waters are brought into order. We are returned to the garden; the bookends are complete.]

