

Heaven and Hell?

These words are used rather often today, even in casual conversation, but do we really know and understand what we mean by using them? These words were developed more than two thousand years ago and have surely changed meaning over these many years. The Hebrew Word: שָׁמַיִם - shaw-mah'-yim, shâmayim, meaning: heaven, sky. The word for heaven in Greek, used in the New Testament, is οὐρανός (oo-ran-os') and means, "vault or firmament of heaven, sky, heaven, as the seat of the gods, anything shaped like the vault of heaven." In the first century C.E. they were spoken when the earth was believed to be flat and was considered to be the center of the known world. The sun and moon rose and set each day as they rotated around the earth above and below. The sky was above the earth, where the Roman and Greek Gods' lived, and the netherworld, as it was called, "(religion) the world of the dead," was located under the earth. Indeed, the concepts of heaven and the earth have changed dramatically in today's understanding from earlier times.

Heaven:

Today we know that the heavens are all around our earth and, no matter where we are on earth, the heavens are above us when we look upward. The sun, in fact, is the center of our Solar System and the earth is just one of the planets in our solar system that rotates around the sun. In addition, our solar system is one of several millions throughout the universe. Even though we still say that the "sun rises and sets," we now understand that our earth is constantly rotating on its axis which makes our day 24 hours. As the earth revolves in its orbit around the sun, taking 365 days, we complete another year. This view of heaven is far different from the one spoken about in the first century and in our scriptures.

In the Bible, depending on the English translation, the word heaven is used more than 550 times, about 293 times in the Old Testament and about 257 times in the New Testament. In all of these instances the Hebrew and Greek words are used in the contextual definitions of the times prior to the 4th century C.E. when the books in our Bible were completed and canonically certified. [http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_canon] When we read the Bible today, we must be cognizant of these dramatic differences from the earlier centuries if we wish to be faithful interpreters of the scriptures.

Hell:

1. In the Hebrew scripture the word is שְׁאוֹל - sheol, "the unseen state, underworld, grave, hell, pit." This is the primary word used in the Old Testament. In most cases the word hell is used in translation which has a lot more colorful and dreadful connotations than in its original context of scripture.
2. In the Christian scripture, the New Testament, the first word in the Concordance is Ἅδης - Hades, "the unseen world", found in Matthew, Luke, Acts, and Revelation.
3. Gehenna (Greek γέεννα), Gehinnom (Rabbinical Hebrew: גֵּהֵנוֹם/גֵּהֵנוֹם) and Yiddish Gehinnam, are terms derived from a place outside ancient Jerusalem known in the Hebrew Bible as the Valley of the Son of Hinnom; one of the two principal valleys surrounding the Old City, used in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and James. NOTE: "In the Hebrew Bible, the site was initially where apostate Israelites and followers of various Ba'als and other Canaanite gods, including Moloch (or Molech), sacrificed their children by fire (2 Chr. 28:3, 33:6). Thereafter it was deemed to be cursed (Jer. 7:31, 19:2-6)."
4. Τάρταρος -Tartarus 1] in ancient Greek mythology, is the deep abyss that is used as a dungeon of torment and suffering for the wicked and as the prison for the Titans, from Greek and Roman mythology and Biblical Pseudepigrapha in the New Testament - used only in 2 Peter 3:4.

When people use the word hell today, the most common English translation in the Bible for the various words above, it causes more confusion when the words noted above have different meanings. In the Gospels, for instance, whenever Jesus was speaking about hell, the word Gehenna was used. It has clear routes in Rabbinical Hebrew that refers to the valleys surrounding Jerusalem where the garbage was discarded and burned that were euphemistically the places where the followers of false religions resided. The word noted in #4 above, Tartarus, most commonly translated in English as hell, was only used once in the New Testament in 2 Peter and is more like the word sheol in the Old Testament. Finally, in both the Old and New Testaments, the colorful and dreadful scenes so prevalent today in sermons and artistic versions about hell are missing.

In more recent history there are many dramatic sermons from the famous to the local country preachers who have waxed eloquently on the subject. The most famous is, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" by Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) in Enfield, Connecticut on July 8, 1741. Since the scriptures themselves lack such colorful and dreadful scenes, these sermons about hell came from other sources. So from where do these unique and dramatic ideas about hell come? They go back to Greek and Roman times, even earlier than the Common Era, in their mythology and allegory. One of the most famous was part of the culture that grew out of the Middle Ages, *The Divine Comedy* (Italian: *Divina Commedia*), an epic poem written by **Dante Alighieri** between c. **1308** and his death in **1321**. The following description, by Dorothy L. Sayers, is a brief portion of the circles of hell in Dante's first part.

"Inferno (Italian for "Hell") is the first part of Dante Alighieri's 14th-century epic poem *Divine Comedy*. It is followed by *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. It is an allegory telling of the journey of Dante through Hell, guided by the Roman poet Virgil. In the poem, Hell is depicted as nine circles of suffering located within the Earth. Allegorically, the *Divine Comedy* represents the journey of the soul towards God, with the *Inferno* describing the recognition and rejection of sin." [http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorothy_L._Sayers] The colorful scenes by artistic renderings, obviously not photographs, are one of the main sources for the allegory of Christian souls seeing this reality of sinful variety.

Allegory in the Middle Ages was a vital element in the synthesis of biblical and classical traditions into what would become recognizable as medieval culture. People of the Middle Ages consciously drew from the cultural legacies of the ancient world in shaping their institutions and ideas, and so allegory in medieval literature and medieval art was a prime mover for the synthesis and transformational continuity between the ancient world and the "new" Christian world. People of the Middle Ages did not see the same break between themselves and their classical predecessors that modern observers see; rather, they saw continuity with themselves and the ancient world, using allegory as a synthesizing agent that brings together a whole image.

[[http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inferno_\(Dante\)](http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inferno_(Dante))]

Middle Ages - Ideas begin to change dramatically:

By the time of the Age of Enlightenment, around the 16th century, our perceived understanding was not much more than myth, allegory, intuition and revelation, even our interpretation of scripture.

"On February 19, **1473**, **Nicolaus Copernicus** is born in Torun, a city in north-central Poland on the Vistula River. The father of modern astronomy, he was the first modern European scientist to propose that Earth and other planets revolve around the sun.

Copernicus was born into a family of well-to-do merchants, and after his father's death, his uncle--soon to be a bishop--took the boy under his wing. He was given the best education of the day and bred for a career in canon (church) law. At the University of Krakow, he studied liberal arts, including astronomy and astrology, and then, like many Poles of his social class, was sent to Italy to study medicine and law.

While studying at the University of Bologna, he lived for a time in the home of Domenico Maria de Novara, the principal astronomer at the university. Astronomy and astrology were at the time closely related and equally regarded, and Novara had the responsibility of issuing astrological prognostications for Bologna. Copernicus sometimes assisted him in his observations, and Novara exposed him to criticism of both astrology and aspects of the Ptolemaic system, which placed Earth at the center of the universe.

Copernicus later studied at the University of Padua and in 1503 received a doctorate in canon law from the University of Ferrara. He returned to Poland, where he became a church administrator and doctor. In his free time, he dedicated himself to scholarly pursuits, which sometimes included astronomical work. By **1514**, his reputation as an astronomer was such that he was consulted by church leaders attempting to reform the Julian calendar." [<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/copernicus-born>]

Perhaps the next important person in the middle ages was Galileo. "Born on February 15, 1564, in Pisa, Italy, Galileo Galilei was a mathematics professor who made pioneering observations of nature with long-lasting implications for the study of physics. He also constructed a telescope and supported the Copernican theory, which supports a sun-centered solar system. Galileo was accused twice of heresy by the church for his beliefs, and wrote books on his ideas. He died in Arcetri, Italy, on January 8, 1642."

[<http://www.biography.com/people/galileo-9305220>]

The reaction by the Church against his ideas was swift, and Galileo was summoned to Rome. The Inquisition proceedings lasted from September 1632 to July 1633 in which he was treated with respect and never imprisoned. The Church tried hard to break him because of his support for the Copernican theory while they kept him under house arrest. While under house arrest Galileo wrote Two New Sciences, summaries of his life's work on the science of motion and other materials that were finally printed in Holland in 1638. The following two parts give a brief history leading up to the Enlightenment.

"Science and the Enlightenment - Part 1

While the Renaissance, with its roots in Christian art and doctrine, created solid foundations for the flourishing of art, architecture, philosophy, science and mathematics, free thought was still restricted. This period of restriction continued until the Enlightenment, a period where, free of the shackles of religious dogma, free thinkers could expand human knowledge at a rate never before seen.

Science and the Enlightenment - Part 2

By the start of the 18th Century, the hold of the Catholic Church had begun to slip and scholars found that the Protestant Churches, on the whole, were less inclined to impose their views. The Catholics still attempted to ban heliocentrism and were quick to criticize the findings of geologists that conflicted with the Bible, but this politically guided influence was waning."

Part 1 & 2: copied from the Explorable App [<https://explorable.com/science-and-enlightenment>]

Relationship between Religion and Science:

The relationship between religion and science has been a subject of study since Classical antiquity, the time of ancient Rome and Greece. A variety of perspectives come from different regions and cultures and from their myths and observations.

"Science and religion generally pursue knowledge of the universe using different methodologies. Science acknowledges reason, empiricism, and evidence, while religions include revelation, faith and sacredness. Despite these differences, most scientific and technical innovations prior to the Scientific revolution were achieved by societies organized by religious traditions. Much of the scientific method was pioneered first by Islamic scholars, and later by Christians. Hinduism has historically embraced reason and empiricism, holding that science brings legitimate, but incomplete knowledge of the world. Confucian thought has held different views of science over time. Most Buddhists today view science as complementary to their beliefs."

"Events in Europe, like during the time of Galileo to the Scientific revolution and the Age of Enlightenment, many scholars postulated conflicting thesis that held religion and science in conflict in methodology, factually, and politically. Today, these same postulations remain in people like Richard Dawkins, Steven Weinberg and Carl Sagan along with many creationists. Even though this posture remains popular for the public, it seems to have lost favor among most contemporary historians of science."

"Public acceptance of scientific facts may be influenced by religion; many in the United States reject the idea of evolution by natural selection, especially regarding human beings. Nevertheless, the American National Academy of Sciences has written that "the evidence for evolution can be fully compatible with religious faith," a view officially endorsed by many religious denominations globally."

[http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Relationship_between_religion_and_science]

The reality of Heaven and Hell:

Here is how the dictionary defines reality: "all of your experiences that determine how things appear to you, the state of being actual or real, the state of the world as it really is rather than as you might want it to be." As you can see, there is no definitive definition presented in the dictionary. Reality is rather diverse according to how experiences appear to you or your evaluation and how actual or real you determine them to be. It does also say that the world as it really is may be rather different from the way you might like it to be. The definition seems to support that idea that reality is more about believing than actual or real fact.

I tend to sense this idea of believing when I speak with people about heaven and hell. As a clergy person, I have had lots of people ask me if I am certain that I will go to heaven and that I am sure about not going to hell. My answer usually shocks them when I declare that I am already in heaven right now. Most assume that heaven or hell is for later on after one passes from this life, so they are confused.

I then try to explain that, while I believe that heaven and hell are real life experiences, they are not specific locations on a map of the universe in a "go to" kind of way. We often use names for concepts or life situations in speaking that name where we are and how we are feeling. Take, for instance, someone speaking about their recent experience of a sunrise or a sunset and automatically realize that they are sharing the reality of how they were moved by the experience. We immediately translate their words and relate the beauty of these scenes rather than a lesson on why they are happening because of the easterly rotation of earth on its north and south axis. We have yet to more accurately rename the rising and setting of the sun according to our modern scientific heliocentric awareness of our solar system.

More importantly, we do not need to lose the value of mythological and allegorical concepts in our language today in order to fully express many aspects of life and living that we have yet to fully comprehend. Revelation and intuition are also concepts that should not be dismissed too quickly either. When we use the words heaven and hell today they clearly fit into the realm of these four concepts of mythology, allegory, intuition, and revelation. In the definition of reality we may use these expressions to signal aspects of life of which we are aware but cannot fully explain or comprehend.

When I simply looked up the words heaven and hell in the dictionary, here is what I found. You will notice in each case the difference between the words when they are with a capital and lower case definition:

- Heaven - the abode of God and the angels
- heaven - any place of complete bliss and delight and peace

- Hell - (religion) the world of the dead
- hell - noisy and unrestrained mischief, violent and excited activity, a cause of difficulty and suffering, any place of pain and turmoil

Closing Remarks:

As a retired Episcopal Priest I have experienced heaven and hell in my own life and counseled with many others who were enjoying heavenly experiences and hellish ones as well. Here are a few closing remarks:

When Heaven is capitalized it gives the traditional and earlier view of the location of God, angels and the home of the Greek and Roman gods. When we use the lower case definition of heaven, especially in today's understanding, we are talking about any place of complete bliss and delight and peace. There are a significant number of scripture verses throughout the whole of the Bible that say that the presence of God is always with us, will never leave us, and will always remain with any who are open to God's presence. When God is present with us then we are in heavenly bliss, delight and peace.

When Hell is capitalized it is basically speaking of the world of the dead. When we speak of hell in the lower case, we are noting mischief, violence, difficulty, suffering with pain and turmoil. In my way of thinking, it is simply the absence of the presence of God in the way we think and act. When the Creator of life, in all its

abundance and possibilities, is uninvited or diminished in any way from who we are and what we wish to become, then that void provides an opportunity, as they say, 'for all hell to break loose.'

This modern version of an historic blessing hopefully will bring closing and blessing to this discussion and invite the presence of God to always be present with us.

May the caring peace of God that goes beyond human comprehension, declare God's love for you in your heart and mind as we see it in Jesus Christ; and may the blessing of God, loving Creator, gracious Liberator, and life giving Spirit keep you steadfast now and always. Amen.

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