

“Caught up to the third heaven”

(2 Cor. 12:2)

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“**I**KNEW A MAN IN CHRIST”, Paul told the Corinthians, “above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven”.

This is the only time the form of words “third heaven” is used in the Scriptures. We cannot expect, therefore, Paul’s words to be *directly* explained by other scripture. However, Paul’s following words help us in our understanding (v. 4), where he writes about being “caught up” to paradise. These words are helpful because we have extra Scriptural information about paradise; we know from the conversation between Jesus and the thief on the cross that ‘paradise’ refers to Jesus’ coming Kingdom (Lk. 23:42,43).

It is important to notice the thief’s recognition that Jesus would ‘come’ to his Kingdom. There is no suggestion that the Kingdom would be in heaven. I make this point to counter the idea that Paul’s words “caught up” indicate that the man mentioned actually went to heaven to enjoy paradise. It is quite common for us to use the phrase ‘caught up’ to indicate ‘involve’, as for instance when we talk of being ‘caught up’ in some project. We may also note that being “caught up to the third heaven” precedes being “caught up into paradise”.

The use of the word ‘heaven’ in Scripture

We can start our look at this subject in Deuteronomy 32, where, in the opening verse, Moses addresses the “heavens” and the “earth”, calling on them to hear his voice. The identity of the heavens and the earth is made clear when we link the final verse of chapter 31 with the opening of chapter 32: “And Moses spake in the ears of all the congregation of Israel . . . Give ear, O ye heavens . . . and hear, O earth”. From these two verses it is evident that it was “all the congregation of Israel” who were represented by the heavens and the earth.

The same figures of heaven and earth are also used in Isaiah 1, where in verse 2 there is a call in the same terms as in Deuteronomy 32: “Hear,

O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken”; and then in verse 10 the heavens and the earth are plainly identified: “Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah”. In the previous verses, Israel (v. 3) is likened to Sodom and Gomorrah. Here we have the indication that the word “heavens” is sometimes to be understood symbolically as denoting ‘rulership’. In Deuteronomy and Isaiah the rulership was that exercised over Israel.

World rulership

We can now extend the application of this symbolism to the New Testament, beginning in 2 Peter 3:7, where Peter, still living under Israel’s rulership, writes of “the heavens and the earth, which are now”. But in this chapter Peter has already written of “heavens” that existed previously to that system of rulership under which he lived. This earlier rulership over the earth had ended when God judged it in the Flood. From these facts we may deduce that the system of rulership under which Peter lived was in Scriptural terms the *second* heaven. The first lasted from Creation to the Flood, the second from the time of Abraham, the progenitor of the nation of Israel, until at least Peter’s day.

Yet, as Peter proceeds to say, the *second* heaven was about to come to its end in judgement. And a few years from Peter’s day those Jewish heavens and earth did come to their end.

The third heaven

What then of the third heaven? We have already noted that the catching up to paradise was looking forward to the Kingdom of God, and that there was to be a third “heaven” before that. I conclude therefore that the span of time governed by the third heaven concerns the period between the ending of Israel’s heavens under which Peter dwelt and the establishment of the Kingdom of God; that is, that period known as “the times of the Gentiles”. This, of course, is in agreement with Jesus’ prophecy that after the destruction of Jerusalem there would be a limited period

known as “the times of the Gentiles”, though he said that heaven and earth would “pass away” (Lk. 21:24,33).

The Lord’s day

When we come to the book of the Revelation, we find that, after his introduction, John begins to address his readers by saying that he was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day” (1:10). In general we find that in Scripture the “day of the LORD” is a day of judgement, for example Isaiah 13:6,9. It often refers to God’s judgement on Israel. Here in Revelation I suggest it refers to the judgement on Israel in A.D. 70, and that it was on that day that John found himself “in the Spirit”. This would date the book of Revelation at or around A.D. 70.

This would fit well with the fact that John had to *turn* towards the seven ecclesias of Asia (vv. 10-12); in so doing he would *turn away* from Jerusalem, from Jewish to Gentile concerns. The focus of Scriptural attention turns to the third heaven, to Gentile times.

It is therefore relevant that the vision seen by Paul, as described in 2 Corinthians 12, echoes

that seen by John when he, too, was called up to heaven. John was called to see “things which must shortly come to pass” (Rev. 1:1, cf. 4:1), that is, to consider rulership during Gentile times. He was instructed to reveal details which Paul was not, perhaps because in Paul’s day the Gentile times had not yet begun, nor had the Jewish times fully ended.

In the first vision in the book of Revelation (ch. 4) the ‘heavenly’ power is all attributed to God, the One seated on the throne (v. 2), but when we come to consider chapter 12 onwards there are other powers seen in ‘heaven’. There is a dragon and there are beasts. In general, in Old Testament prophecy wild beasts are likened to nations, for example in Daniel 7, and a dragon refers to the Gentile power of Egypt (Ezek. 29:3). Now in Revelation we have the prophetic picture of the rule of God over the Gentile nations of the earth, but that rule principally exercised through the overruling of the policies of the Gentile nations, “the times of the Gentiles”, or the “third heaven”.

Is there not good cause for us Gentiles to interest ourselves in the book of Revelation?

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