

HEAVEN & HELL: WHERE SITUATED?

A SEARCH AFTER THE OBJECTS OF

MAN'S FERVENT HOPE & ABIDING TERROR.

BY AUSTIN HOLYOAKE.

HEAVEN is the hope of the Christian—Hell is his dread, his fear, his abiding terror. What would Christianity be—that is, the *modern* faith of Europe—without these two ideas, or sentiments, or beliefs, or whatever they may be called? Simply a mild kind of superstition. The hope of an eternal reward for doing right, appeals with much force, there can be no doubt, to the selfish; and the fear of eternal, never-ending torments, will keep many a wretch in awe. But all who are swayed by such motives must be inferior morally to those who do good because it is right to do so, and because it will benefit men individually, and society generally, regardless of all consideration as to whether the doers of good will receive advantage themselves. Man's clear duty is to do right, to speak the truth, not only without reward, but even at his own cost if need be.

I say at the outset, that I do not believe in the Christian's Heaven. It involves too many difficulties and contradictions for me to comprehend, or for anyone to explain. To disturb the Christian's greatest hope, to destroy his fondest illusion, to rob him of his sole consolation, without giving him an equivalent in return, is denounced from every pulpit and every religious tract, as a deadly sin. But if the Christian is trusting to a delusion, if he is self-deceived, who is to blame? Surely not he who points out the error—the blame lies rather with those who have deceived him, or, it may be, with himself, for not having examined more closely the foundations of his belief. Ministers every day in the year preach about and promise to their devotees a heaven of bliss, when they have not the minutest particle of evidence upon the subject to justify their promises. Thus is the world deluded; and out of the delusion thousands thrive and fatten, while the bulk of the nation are taxed to uphold the deception.

For many centuries, and in many countries, the idea of a future state, or world beyond the grave, has existed. How this idea first arose, we have no clear conception. That it has varied in different countries, according to the amount of intelligence or civilisation possessed by each, is certain.

The poor savage, whose untutored mind
Sees God in clouds, and hears him in the wind,

has pictured to himself the happy hunting grounds of the Great Spirit, covered with boundless herds of wild buffaloes and other animals dear to the heart of the child of the prairie, which he will be always chasing and always catching. The Mahomedan of the East believes in and hopes for a Paradise where all his sensuous enjoyments will be increased tenfold—shady groves, refreshing springs, and beautiful hours. The Christian believes in a future state of *spiritual* existence, where all his earthly wants and necessities will leave him, where hunger and thirst, pain and sorrow, will torment him no more. In short, he expects to live in a state of ecstatic delirium for ever and ever. We will examine how far this belief is warranted by facts.

What is the Christian's Heaven? Where is it situated? In what part of the so-called Sacred Writings shall we find a clear and intelligible description of this abode of bliss—this promised land of never-ending pleasures, which is to be the reward of all true believers? It appears to be situated, by common consent, up above—beyond the clouds—beyond immeasurable space—and yet in the clouds. Whether in the torrid or the frigid zone, we are not informed. What its climate will be no man knoweth. Will there be there the severe winter, with its snows and chilling blasts; the genial and budding spring, giving promise of the warm and sunny summer, when all nature, in the plenitude of her wealth and beauty, showers her blessings on mankind; to be followed by the mellow and glowing autumn, when the seasons, resting as it were from the labours of production, smile upon the bounties scattered broadcast over the earth? Men of all climes are to go to Heaven, who believe in the proper number of orthodox nostrums, but how will the Laplander fare in a climate which is suitable to the Asiatic? How will the Englishman live and be happy, where the African can thrive, or the Russian of the wilds of Siberia will be at home? Are all to be dumb there, or are all to speak one language? If all are to have the power of articulation, are those only of one country to talk together, except the happy few who may possess the gift of tongues? If so, it will be but a repetition of the educational inequalities of this world, which the schoolmaster is now making strenuous efforts to rectify. Will all retain the same intellectual power which they possessed when on earth? If so, what gratification will the change bring to the idiots from birth, who are not capable of comprehending anything? They cannot be *restored* to their senses, seeing that they never possessed any. After death they would have to be reorganised. Will the cripples be made perfect, and those who have lost limbs have them restored to them? These may seem to the Christian considerations beside the question, but on reflection he will be bound to admit that they are questions needing an answer.

It is in vain for the Christian to say that man in Heaven will be a *spiritual*, and not a material being. In the first place, we have no conception, and cannot possibly convey to another, an idea of what a *spiritual being* is. There is a contradiction in the very terms, and we have no analogy by which to judge. This involves the interminable controversy about *spiritual substance*, etherealised bodies, and so on. But is it not manifestly absurd to promise to man eternal happiness in a future state of existence, when you take away from him all those faculties whereby he will be alone capable of feeling either pleasure or pain, joy or sorrow? See the insurmountable difficulties involved in this notion of life after death. I am promised all this bliss; then, unless I go to that land beyond the grave *as I am*—that is, with all my human faculties unimpaired—I cannot enjoy it? I am known from others to all who see me by my outward form, and by what they hear me say and see me do. I receive pleasure from certain things, and experience pain in virtue of being what I am. Destroy my individuality, my body, and where am I? I no longer exist. That same principle of life which animates my body has animated countless millions of other human beings; but my form as it now exists has never been possessed by another. What attraction is it to me to be told that when I die I shall go to another and a better world, if I am not to be I when I get there? It is a place clearly intended for a different race of beings or existences, whose happiness will depend, not upon what they may have believed or disbelieved here, but upon the suitability to their constitution or organisation of the circumstances surrounding them. No Christian can imagine himself to be other than he is on this earth. Disguise the fact as

they may, those who desire a life after death believe it will be one calculated to promote their own special enjoyments.

Some time ago, the Rev. J. C. Ryle, B.A., Vicar of Stradbroke, published in the *Quiver*—a publication issued by Cassell & Co.—an essay entitled "Shall we know one another?" in which he singularly confirms this view of the matter. He is a Churchman, and of course quite orthodox. He quotes three short passages from Thessalonians (1, iv. 13, 14), which he says "all imply the same great truth, that saints in heaven shall know one another. They shall have the *same body and the same character* that they had on earth—a body perfected and transformed like Christ's in his transfiguration, *but still the same body*—a character perfected and purified from all sin, *but still the same character*. But in the moment that we who are saved shall meet our several friends in heaven, we shall at once know them, and they will at once know us." But this declaration complicates the subject farther than ever. What does he mean by the *same body*? How can it be the same body if it be "perfected and transformed?" It is as unintelligible as Daniel's dreams or St. John's visions. The rev. gentleman candidly remarks:—"I grant freely that there are not many texts in the Bible which touch the subject at all. I admit fully that pious and learned divines are not of one mind with me about the matter."

The best Scriptural description to be found of Heaven, appears to be in the Revelation of St. John; and as it is put as the grand climax or peroration to the sacred writings, we must accept it as the only authoritative account to be had. St. John "writeth his revelation to the seven churches of Asia, signified by the seven golden candlesticks." What light does John put into these said candlesticks, which is supposed to illumine a benighted and ruined world? This revelation is the most incoherent jumble that perhaps ever came from the mouth of a sane man. In fact, it is only equalled by the insane ravings continually heard from those unfortunate creatures, now too often to be met with, who have been stricken with the revival mania. We shall be told that some parts are *symbolical*, and are not to be taken as written. As they stand, there is no earthly meaning in them; but where does the symbolical end, and the literal begin? There is no internal evidence to guide us; then who is to be the sworn interpreter? The Catholic Church has settled that question for itself, but in the Protestant Church we go upon the principle, if not the practice, of each judging for himself. We in England have some thousands of ordained and self-appointed ministers and expounders of the Gospel, who do the interpretation business for the multitude, and for such as are too indolent or too much occupied to think for themselves. What light do we get from them to guide us through the perilous paths of life which lead from the cradle to the grave? Too many of them are like St. John's seven candlesticks—they are merely *sticks*, and have no light in them, not even so much as the glimmer of a rushlight to shed on the dark pages of Gospel history.

Any one who takes the trouble to search for *authentic* information about the locality and nature of the Heaven in which all Christians profess to believe, will find a total absence of any knowledge upon the subject. Like the alleged existence of God, it is simply a *belief*, and not a reality. Yet all the Churches speak of this phantom of the imagination with as much confidence as though the "celestial regions" had been surveyed and mapped like a tract of country, and their boundaries placed beyond the possibility of dispute. But so long as people will not *think*, but content themselves with believing, there will be no lack of traders upon their credulity.

We now turn to the second part of our subject. What shall we say about that other place of abode for departed spirits, the climate of which is so warm that the natives of central Africa will find it uncomfortable? Where is it situated? Oh, down below, of course; all Christians say so, and they alone know. Did not Christ *descend* into Hell? And yet it cannot be far from Heaven, for did not Dives and Lazarus hold a conversation together from their respective abodes? We are not quite sure that Hell is not in Heaven itself, for in Revelation xiv. 9 and 10, it says, "If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb." We are not to suppose that a little hell is kept among the holy angels for special use, or that they often go where Lucifer alone is King; and yet we cannot tell how men are to be tortured in their presence unless Hell *is* in Heaven. However that may be, we are assured that God himself is in Hell. If you doubt it, you need do no more than go to that royal prophet, that inspired writer, that man after God's own heart, who, in one of those sacred oracles which the Holy Spirit itself has dictated to him, acknowledges and owns it. "Whither shall I go," says David, "from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into Heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in *Hell*, behold thou art *there*." We have Psalm 139 for our authority, and no one dare dispute *that*.

There seems to be no doubt in the minds of Christians, that the brimstone pit is somewhere within the interior of *this* planet, but that the Abode of Bliss is up in the clouds, or beyond them. Now if the other planetary bodies are inhabited by human beings—and scientific men are not aware of any reason why they should not be—if the Maker of all things punishes his children with burning torments who do not believe in Christ and Him crucified, where are the inhabitants of other planets to be sent when their hour comes? Are they sent here, or has each of the other vast worlds in space a nice little Hell of its own in which to put its erring subjects? If they come here, an enlargement of the premises must be constantly taking place. If Heaven is not upon this earth, and is never to be realised here—I prefer believing that Hell also is far up in the clouds, and a very long way too, so that the journey thither may take as much time as possible in its accomplishment.

The warm world beyond the grave is popularly known by many names. Hell is perhaps the most general term used by Christians; though it is sometimes designated by the appellations of Infernal Regions, Perdition, Abode of the Damned, and so on. Most orthodox Christians mean by the term Hell the everlasting lake of brimstone and fire; though there are still some in the Church, and we believe they are of the best, who do not believe at all in a literal Hell of fire. The Catholics have a place which they call Purgatory, which is a sort of House of Detention, and not the penal settlement our Hell is supposed to be. There sinners can be released on tickets-of-leave after certain regulations have been complied with; our religious convicts are condemned for life (or death, whichever it may be) without the slightest hope of pardon. The Catholics themselves admit, that once in Hell, you are in it for ever. Michael Angelo, the celebrated painter, executed, by command of Pope Julius II., a splendid picture representing the Day of Judgment. Now Michael Angelo had placed among his other figures in his scene of Hell, several cardinals and prelates. They had probably been guilty, like Bishop Colenso and some of the most intelligent men

of our Church, of thinking for themselves, and, worst of all, of publishing the result of their thinkings. And this, we know, has been sufficient in all Christian ages to render any man quite unfit for the company of saints. However, some of the dignified and proper churchmen of Julius's time, who had probably never been guilty of an original thought in their lives, were extremely enraged at the picture, and made complaint of it to his Holiness, and entreated that he would lay his injunctions on the painter to efface them. To whom the Pope replied—"My dear brethren, Heaven has indeed given me the power of recovering as many souls from Purgatory as I think proper; but as to Hell, you know as well as I do, that my power does not extend so far, and those who once go thither, must remain there for ever!"

What is Hell? Where is it? Is it really the lake of fire some represent it to be? You will be eternally bewildered and completely confounded if you try to determine this question from the Bible itself. If Hell be *below*, it must be contained *within* the earth, for wherever you go on the surface of this globe, you will find the firmament still above and around you. If *within*, which is the way to it? Strange that no one has ever even by accident discovered it. The only entrance one can imagine to it, is the mouth of Vesuvius. But that cannot be the way, as it is not a brimstone pit, though sulphurous exhalations arise from it. No devil that we ever heard of, was seen to emerge from it—not even by the miracle-working monks who infest the country round about. We know the right place has a door or grating, and that St. John saw the angel who kept the key. But it is *bottomless*, and therefore who knows but that Vesuvius is the other side—the front door in the rear, out of which the Devil pops when he wants to go roaring up and down the world? A bottomless pit full of liquid must be like a pot without a bottom filled with water, where all things are not only in a state of solution, but the solution itself is held in suspension!

We continually hear pious Christians say that the souls of unbelievers have gone, or are going, to *Perdition*. But there is a consolation in knowing that it is not Hell. Revelation xvii. 8, says that the beast which was so obliging as to carry the scarlet lady of Babylon, "shall ascend out of the bottomless pit and shall go into Perdition." Perhaps Perdition is the Catholic's Purgatory! Who knows? But then there is no mistake that Hell is Hell, and that the Freethinker will go there! Not quite so sure. Read Revelation xx. 14—"And Death and *Hell* were cast into the lake of fire." Where does this lead us? We have heard of a house being turned out of window, but we never heard of a pit being thrown into itself! This is one of those mysteries which "passeth all understanding." We still have the lake of fire, where human beings are to be burnt for ever and ever, and yet never consumed. Now this is simply an impossibility. The human body, if thrown into a large fire, would be utterly destroyed in a very short time, and nothing could prevent it. "Men cannot live in fire. It is the nature of fire to burn up, to destroy, to decompose any animal or vegetable substance that is cast into it. It would require the properties of life to be altered before men could live in it for ever. Some will say, God can work a miracle. But we have no reason to suppose that he can. We know nothing of what God *can* do—we only know what *is*, and miracles do not take place." We must discard the idea of a burning Hell as a fiction conceived by a brutal and revengeful monster in human form, and afterwards taken up and added to by fanatics, whose minds had been worked upon by superstition, till they believed as a reality, that which existed only in their own disordered imaginations.

The believers in what is called philosophical religion, to the credit of their better nature, reject the brimstone part of the Bible, but cling to the fascinating hope of an abode after death of everlasting bliss. But they occupy a wholly illogical position. They have no more *reason* for believing in the existence of the one place than in the other, as both rest on precisely the same foundation—that of *belief* and not *knowledge*. They say that the Heaven of the Bible is real, but that the Hell is figurative, and that the suffering will be only *spiritual*, and not material. But it is in vain to say that men in Hell will suffer all the torments promised to the damned, *in the spirit*, and not in the flesh. This is absurd. Besides, the Bible, with its usual disregard of probabilities or possibilities, says that in the regions of the damned will be heard weeping, and wailing, and *gnashing of teeth*. These are material operations, and who knows what are phantom grinders, spiritual molars, or immaterial jaws?

There are some sects of Christians who reject the brimstone Hell as a fiction, but they scarcely go so far as to say that all mankind will go to Heaven. They firmly believe that man is immortal, therefore he must go somewhere after he leaves this earth. Wherever it may be, it must be a region inhabited by the choicest spirits the world has produced. By painters, poets, sculptors, orators, statesmen, warriors, authors, reformers, philanthropists, beautiful and gifted women, and innocent children, who died without the redeeming blessing of Baptism. Every man, woman, and child, without exception, born before the Christian era, must be in this glorious land. They had no Christ crucified to take them to the Heaven of St. John, inhabited by angels and *beasts*. In this new world (assuming that men live after death), may be expected to be met with, all the most grave and gifted personages of antiquity—Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, Demosthenes, Pythagoras, Epictetus, Seneca, Pliny, Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Livy, Suetonius, Tacitus, Plutarch, Anaxagoras, Ptolemy, Cicero, Homer, Pindar, Euripides, Sophocles, Ovid, and Horace, all assembled in one grand philosophic academy. And what a glorious phalanx of earth's mightiest intellects and greatest benefactors have been sent thither since their day! And only think that of all those who are alive now, and who adorn the age in which we live, how few will find their way into the heaven of Revelation. St. John and his beasts will have none but the saints, the hypocrites, the miserable sinners, the priests, the criminals, both on the throne and in the hovel. They will reject John Stuart Mill, and accept Richard Weaver; shut the door in the face of Bishop Colenso, but open it wide for Wright the converted thief; receive Louis Napoleon with a flourish of trumpets, but hurl anathemas at Garibaldi; welcome the Pope with incense, but threaten with brimstone and fire the noble Joseph Mazzini.

Who, with human sympathies and affections, would like to go to a place where the nearest and dearest ties are broken? Where the husband is separated from the wife, the parent from the child, the brother from the sister? And not only separated, but where you will know that those you loved are writhing in agony unutterable. It is a doctrine which requires a fiend or a saint to believe it. We are told that a certain king of the Frisons, named Redbord, when on the very point of being baptised, took it into his head to ask the Bishop, who was preparing to perform the ceremony, whether in the paradise which had been promised him in consequence of his changing his religion, he should find his ancestors and predecessors. The Bishop having told him, that as they had all died Pagans, they could enjoy no portion of the heavenly inheritance, but were all in Hell, "Nay, then," replied the King, lifting his foot out of the font into

which he had already dipped it, "if that be the case, take back again your baptism and your paradise; I had much rather go to Hell, and be there amongst a good and numerous company, with my illustrious ancestors, and other persons of my own rank, than to your Paradise, from which you have shut out all these brave people, and filled it up with none but paupers, miscreants, and people of no note."

And is not Heaven filled with miscreants, if the Christian theory be correct? Who is the most acceptable to Heaven? Is it not the repentant sinner? Have not men of the most notoriously abandoned and profligate lives, who, when they were too ill to sin any more, expressed their sorrow for what they had done, in the hope of being rewarded with happiness in another world? And have not priests in all times assured these monsters of a sure and certain resurrection to eternal bliss? How forcibly, how beautifully has Thomas Moore depicted this hateful doctrine in his enchanting poem of "Paradise and the Peri." A Peri in the East is supposed to be one of those beautiful creatures of the air who live upon perfumes, but still is a kind of fallen angel, who mourns after Paradise—

" And weeps to think her recreant race
Should ere have lost that glorious place."

The Peri is represented as hovering about the entrance to heaven, and the angel who keeps the gates hears her weeping, and taking pity on her, gives her a chance of re-entering Paradise. The angel imagined by Moore, who is a much more estimable person than St. Peter, speaks thus:—

" Nymph of a fair but erring line!"
Gently he said—" One hope is thine.
'Tis written in the Book of Fate
The Peri yet may be forgiven
Who brings to this eternal gate
The gift that is most dear to heaven!
Go, seek it, and redeem thy sin—
'Tis sweet to let the pardoned in."

She then starts on her mission, and with a true human instinct, thinks that the patriot who dies nobly for his country, will be a welcome guest among the blessed. She goes to the field of carnage, where a battle for freedom has been raging, but where *might* and not *right* has triumphed. She catches the dying sigh of the patriot, who has fallen in his country's cause, and takes that to the celestial gatekeeper:—

" 'Sweet,' said the Angel, as she gave
The gift into his radiant hand,
'Sweet is our welcome of the Brave
Who die thus for their native Land.
But see—alas!—the crystal bar
Of Eden moves not—holier far
Than e'en this drop the boon must be
That opes the gates of Heav'n for thee! "

Oh no! Heaven is no place for patriots. They are disliked there. They have been meddling people, disturbing the reign of divinely-appointed rulers—a thing very obnoxious to the ministers of God's holy word. Lazarus, as soon as he got to heaven, refused a drop of water to cool the parching lips of Dives, showing what moral effect that place had upon him. Now comes the orthodox climax to this tale of injustice. The Peri takes

her last flight over the vale of Balbec. She there sees a ruffian dismount from his horse, with a brow—

“ Sullenly fierce—a mixture dire,
Like thunder-clouds of gloom and fire!
In which the Peri's eyes could read
Dark tales of many a ruthless deed:
The ruined maid—the shrine profaned—
Oaths broken—and the threshold stain'd
With blood of guests—*there* written, all,
Black as the damning drops that fall
From the denouncing Angel's pen,
Ere mercy weeps them out again.”

This guilt-stained wretch sees a child at play, who, when the vesper calls to prayer, begins to pray. He thought of his own childhood:

“ He hung his head—each nobler aim
And hope and feeling which had slept
From boyhood's hour, that instant came
Fresh o'er him, and he wept—he wept!”

And it is with this crocodile tear that the Peri returns to the Gates of Light, and instead of its being spurned with contempt, it is pronounced the gift most dear to heaven, and she is rewarded with admission into the Eden which is made up of such characters as this. Well might Redbord exclaim, that such a heaven is filled with none but paupers, miscreants, and people of no note.

This Heaven, for which Christians yearn, and for which they fight, persecute, and murder, is a creation of the brain, appearing to each what each desires. There is no line in the Revelation which will warrant the belief that it is the abode of bliss some would have us believe. There is no love, no sympathy, no warmth of affection, which can alone make life endurable. Who would be happy in the presence of angels, who pour out the vials of the wrath of the Lord upon all mankind? We have had too much of this wrath from his ministers on earth, who seem never able to exhaust the vials.

The Bible, or any other book, which teaches the doctrine of Hell torments, is not, cannot be, a revelation from a God of mercy and love. It is the crude production of an ignorant, a superstitious, a priest-ridden, and brutal people. The Bible alone, of all books in the world, first promulgated the monstrous, the fiendish doctrine of eternal, never-ending torments prepared for all men, not one-millionth part of whom ever saw or heard of it. This doctrine, so far from keeping men good, makes good men bad, and brutalises all who believe in it. It distracts men's minds from the duties of this life, and deludes them into the belief of another which, when looked at calmly and with reason, will be seen to contain no element worthy of their acceptance, or capable of promoting their permanent happiness.

PRICE ONE PENNY.