

## The Afterlife



In the original teachings of Buddha and Jesus, **heaven** and **hell** are scarcely mentioned. When they are, the references are **figurative** or **didactic**, and they differ greatly from the concepts we commonly imagine today. Heaven and hell do not, in fact, exist as places; they are locales that clergy have planted in the **imagination**s of believers. The problem is that religious institutions have **amplified** these notions and **concretized** them in order to make ordinary people take them as literal fact.

In John 6:38 Jesus says, "For I have **come down from heaven**, not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me," thereby claiming to have come from heaven. Yet nowhere in the Gospels does he **describe** heaven. From this we may infer that although Jesus said he came from heaven, he either **did not know** what heaven was like and spoke loosely, or judged that heaven's conditions were **unsuitable for description**.

"Greek philosophers held that after death souls proceed to a **specific place**, are **judged** according to their deeds in this life, are then sent to a corresponding abode where they receive **rewards or punishments** for a time, and afterward return to this world." 1) In Plato's *Phaedo* we read: "When the dead arrive under the guidance

of their guardian, all—those who lived nobly and piously and those who did not—are **judged**. Those who lived without great crimes go to the river **Acheron**, secure passage on a boat, reach the **lake**, and remain there **purifying** the wrongs they committed. They receive **punishments** for the harms done to others and are freed from their guilt; for their good deeds they receive **individual** rewards. But those whose crimes are **grave**—who have grievously or repeatedly committed **impiety**, or have perpetrated **heinous murders**—are cast into **Tartarus**, never to emerge."

2)



Unlike the common religious claim that judgment in the afterlife is **eternal**, the Greek philosophers thought that, unless the crime was **extreme** or **incorrigible**, the offender could go to Tartarus **for a time**, then seek forgiveness from his victims; if they **accepted**, he would return to the lake, be **purified**, and then **reincarnate**.

In the existing Christian Scriptures there is very **little** about heaven and hell. As already noted, once Rome adopted Christianity as the **state religion**, Gospels and Greek-influenced writings that conflicted with the new orthodoxy were branded **heretical** and **burned** or banned. Despite this cultural purge, some Greek philosophical works passed into **Arabic** regions; **Islam** incorporated such ideas and produced a scripture (the **Qur'an**) whose doctrine includes an **afterlife**.

From the **late Middle Ages** onward, Christianity encountered Greek philosophers through texts circulating in Arab lands, and subsequently **systematized** concepts of the afterlife and spirit, weaving them into doctrine. The **Renaissance** (14th–16th centuries) is known as the bridge from the medieval dark ages to the early modern period—a **revival** of learning aimed at recovering Greek philosophy long condemned as heresy. It is no accident that **Dante** (1265–1321) composed the *Divine Comedy* from about 1308 until his death. Heaven and hell, as popularly imagined, are indeed indebted to Greek philosophy and **Zoroastrianism**.

Catholic teaching is similar to the Greeks'. "In **1999** Pope John Paul II confirmed that **heaven and hell are not spatial places** but **states of the soul** in **communion** (or not) with God. The 'heaven' or 'blessedness' we encounter there is neither a physical locale among the clouds nor an abstract notion; it is a living, personal relationship with the **Trinity**." 3)

Heaven cannot be a place where, by earthly standards, we live **well-fed and rich**; nor can hell be a place where we live **in pain and poverty**—for there is **no body** there to experience such things. If there is no body, then the **mind**, which functions only in intimate connection with the body, is likewise absent. A purely **spiritual state** without a body is a state of **nothing at all**. In other words, the "spiritual world" would be **absolute nothingness**. If so, there is **no point** in debating the afterlife.

Moreover, if the environment there differs from life on earth, then life **there** would change accordingly, and those who go there would become **entirely different beings** than they were here. If, as some scriptures suggest, life in heaven were one of **unbroken plenty**, people would soon **forget hardship**, and their **character and mindset** would inevitably be transformed.

## Pascal's Wager

"The great French mathematician **Blaise Pascal** (1623–1662) reasoned that even if the probability that God exists is very low, the **cost** of being wrong [**falling into hell**] is far greater; if you are right, you enjoy **eternal bliss** [**go to heaven**], and if you are wrong there is **little difference** in the outcome—so it is more advantageous to **believe**." 4) This so-called **Pascal's Wager** concludes that believing in God to go to heaven is preferable to not believing and going to hell.



But Pascal himself considered the probability of God's existence **very low**. And to accept the wager's force one must account for **all variables**: the **definition** of God, evidence for or the **probability** of God's existence, God's **attributes** and fickleness, the **credibility** of claimed revelations, the **existence** and nature of an afterlife, and whether its environment would be **bearable**. From this angle, before embracing doctrines touted by traditional religions, one must examine their **scriptures** to see how credible they are and whether the being they call "God" is worthy of belief. Only then should we ask whether a place called the **otherworld** exists and, if so, whether living there would make us **happier**.

Suppose **you alone** go to heaven but many of your earthly companions **do not**. The resulting **ruptures** in human relationships would mean you experience a kind of **disorder**, unlike your (ideally) harmonious life here. Such a heaven would make us **miserable**, not happy.

Or suppose you must live **forever** in the same place with someone who was your **enemy** here. If people who died fighting over different religions—or even different **denominations** of the same religion—end up together in the **same heaven**, can they be **happy**?

Physics gives us the **law of inertia**, describing how a body once set in motion tends to **keep moving**. Pascal's wager is a kind of **gamble**. When gambling to win or to minimize loss, one must first recognize and avoid the dynamic of **escalating commitment**—a kind of psychological inertia: once we have invested much effort (including **time**) and resources, it becomes **hard** to pull out.

Faith may be important, but it is not confined to this life alone; it can have **enduring** effects—even long-term effects on one's **descendants**. Therefore, **before** committing to a religion, we should at least **verify** the basics. Then we will avoid **escalation traps** and make a sound decision with Pascal's wager **in view**.

## The Book of Revelation

The **heaven** (New Jerusalem) described in **Revelation** is often cited as the afterlife's heaven. On its own terms, its **area** is about **4.84 million km<sup>2</sup>**—a little less than **half** the size of the **United States**. It is enclosed, with **walls** and a **ceiling** for protection

from the outside; the **height** (about **2,200 km**) may sound ample, but compared to the natural world it would impose **severe constraints**. As noted above, even if all humanity rose again to live on **earth**, the space would be **cramped**; how much more so if only the “elect” entered a realm **half** the size of the U.S.—life there would hardly be **comfortable**.



If Revelation's description is accurate, one must wonder whether people **not** of Israel could enter at all. The city's twelve **gates** bear the names of the **tribes of Israel**; those not from these tribes could only feel **out of place** upon entering.

Revelation further orders that from the descendants of the original twelve tribes of Israel, **12,000** be chosen from each—**144,000 Jewish virgins**—to have a **seal** on their foreheads and exercise **rule** over the world. By this account, those Christians who struggle to gain salvation and enter heaven will live **under the dominion** of these sealed ones.

Revelation 5 gives a clue about the environment of afterlife living. “Myriads and myriads” of angels cry with a **loud voice** that the “**Lamb**—slain” is worthy to receive **power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and praise** (5:11–12). If such

**shouting** and praise continue without rest, one foresees severe **noise pollution**. Revelation 5:14 adds, "The four living creatures (**lion, ox, eagle, and human**—author's note) said, 'Amen!' and the **elders** fell down in worship." If **elders** fall prostrate, what postures will be expected of **ordinary** believers?

Among the promised benefits, **wealth** appears **second**. One wonders what **use** wealth would have in heaven. And the phrase "a **Lamb** slain" evokes images of extremist youths martyred in **suicide bombings**. Islam offers **houris** or white **raisins**; Christianity promises **wealth** near the top.

Revelation 22:5 says, "There will be **no night** there. They will need **no lamp or sun**, for the Lord God will **give them light**, and they will **reign forever and ever**." Then, beyond noise, there would be relentless **light pollution**. In a place where neither **eyes** nor **ears** find rest, neurosis or mental illness would soon follow.

The New Jerusalem of Revelation is **not** the heaven to which Christians go **after death**, but a **millennial kingdom on earth** for the **Jews**. It depicts a **utopia** for Israel alone—the realization of the hope for a "**new heavens and a new earth**" in Isaiah 65. A careful reading of Revelation leaves **no space** for other nations within this realm.

---

## Sources

1. Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo*, Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 1988, pp. 128–129.
2. Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo*, Prometheus Books, 1988, p. 134.
3. Michael Shermer, *Heavens on Earth*, Henry Holt and Company, 2018, p. 57.
4. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Bantam Press, 2006, p. 130.