

CALVIN 40

HEAVEN, the HABITATION of ORDER

Eternal is thy word, O Lord, planted firm in heaven. Psalm 119:89

Have you ever thought about the Bible as occasionally an exciting detective story? Well today's text from Psalm 119:89 leads you to a very interesting one. Actually it is Calvin's interpretation that makes all of today's readings into a detective story. How? All readings are about heaven. And there is much in the Bible about heaven.

Calvin's exegesis of Genesis 1:16 (sermon 37) resolutely dismisses the creation story and its implied view of heaven as a location in the universe. To him the Genesis story shows Moses' obligation to do justice to his job of also enlightening the uneducated. But then Calvin goes on happily endorsing the astronomer's view of creation.

Yet if this is the case, Calvin's view of heaven as not a place located somewhere in the universe must be reflected in his interpretation of the numerous instances in the Bible where the heavens are mentioned. If it is not a geographic location, what else is it? What are its characteristics? In other words, do the Bible and Calvin explaining today's readings to us take heaven as a symbol of something else? This is our detective story.

Adopting the astronomer's view of creation must have had a strong influence on Calvin's thinking in our readings for today of Isaiah 55:1-13, Psalm 119:89-96, the ascension of Jesus in Acts 1:6-11 and the kingdom of heaven parables in Matthew 13:44-52. As usual let us follow this line of thinking by tracing (1) what the Bible says, (2) how Calvin interprets the passages and finally (3) how relevant all this is in light of present day social scientific thinking about religion.

Isaiah 55:9 compares God's thinking with heaven and human thinking with earth. Heaven here is decidedly not spatial or physical. It is the sphere where God dwells, where God is sovereign. The contrast is stressed in this verse. God's thinking is as broad and comprehensive as human thinking is narrow and limited.

Yet contrast does not mean irreconcilability. Jacob's dream at Bethel (Genesis 28:12) connects, reconciles, heaven and earth. Heaven here is God's dwelling place. It is the symbol for God's order and the ladder, Calvin suggests, is Christ, the mediator, 'who connects heaven and earth ... through whom the fullness of all celestial blessings flows down to us and through whom we in turn ascend to God.'

Further, commenting on Isaiah 55:9, Calvin compares heaven and God with whatever is pure/infinite and earth and Satan with what is corrupt/finite. He says: 'Are men, who are corrupted and debased by sinful desires, not ashamed to compare God's lofty and uncorrupted nature with their own, and to confine what is infinite within those narrow limits by which they feel themselves to be wretchedly restrained? In what prison could any of us be more out rightly shut up than in our own unbelief?'

Psalm 119: 89 speaks about heaven in a similar way. The psalmist begins the section 89-96 with pointing to what supports him in all his troubles. It is God's word, the eternal, immutable, all-encompassing element that is secured in heaven. Yet it has also been planted in the earth and sustained all previous generations thanks to God's faithfulness and concern (verse 90).

Without this faithfulness the psalmist would have perished (verse 92). Yet he continues to depend on God's precepts which give him life (verse 93). And save him from destruction by evil men (verse 95), thanks to God's protection. Again the astronomer's view of creation stands its ground.

Calvin has a very interesting interpretation of Psalm 119:89. 'As we see nothing constant or of long continuance upon earth (the prophet) elevates our minds to heaven, that they may fix their anchor there. David, no doubt, might have said, as he has done in many other places, that the whole order of the world bears testimony to the steadfastness of God's word – that word which is most true. But as there is reason to fear that the minds of the godly would hang in uncertainty if they rested the proof of God's truth upon the state of the world, in which such manifold disorders prevail; by placing God's truth in the heavens, he allots it a habitation subject to no changes. That no person then may estimate God's word from the various vicissitudes which meet the eye in this world, heaven is tacitly set in opposition to the earth. Our salvation, as it has been said, being shut up in God's word, is not subject to change, as all earthly things are, but is anchored in a safe and peaceful haven.' In other words, heaven is where God's word and order are put out of reach to preserve their integrity.

Turning to the New Testament: what does the Bible have to say about the ascension and what does heaven mean here? Acts 1:6-11 tells the story. Jesus spoke to a gathering of the disciples (verse 6) who had asked him whether he would restore the kingdom to Israel (verse 7). Jesus answered that this was up to the Father (verse 8), but that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Then Jesus ascended into heaven (verse 9). While they were still looking to heaven, two men in white apparel appeared (verse 10) and promised the disciples that Jesus would return (verse 11). Isn't heaven here the sky?

To Calvin 'it was only by his ascension to heaven that Christ's reign truly commenced.' and that 'his departure might be more useful to us than that presence which was confined in a humble tabernacle of flesh during his abode

on the earth (*Inst.* II xvi 14)' Commenting on Acts 1:11 Calvin insists 'that we must not seek Christ either in heaven, either upon earth, otherwise than by faith; and also, that we must not desire to have him present with us bodily in the world; for he that doth either of those two shall oftentimes go farther from him.'

Still commenting on verse 11, Calvin regards heaven as 'opposite to the frame of the world; therefore it doth necessarily follow, that if he be in heaven, he is without (beyond) the world.' To Calvin it is the invisibility, otherness, of Christ which is essential rather than geographic location. Christ 'is spread abroad everywhere by the power of his Spirit, not by the substance of his flesh.'

The ascension of Jesus is reported not only in today's reading of Acts 1:6-11, but also in Luke 24:50-53 and in Mark 16:19-20 where Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God (verse 19). Calvin suggests that this 'is the same as if he were called God's deputy, to represent the person of God; and therefore, we must not imagine to ourselves any one place, since the right hand is a metaphor which denotes the power that is next to God. This was purposely added by Mark, in order to inform us that Christ was taken up into heaven, not to enjoy blessed rest at a distance from us, but to govern the world for the salvation of all believers.'

To Calvin the crux of the story is the stark contrast between the situation after the crucifixion compared with the one after the ascension. He describes it as follows: 'Every person would have thought that, by the death on the cross, Christ would either be altogether extinguished, or so completely overwhelmed, that he would never be again mentioned but with shame and loathing. The apostles whom he had chosen to be his witnesses, had basely deserted him and had betaken themselves to darkness and concealment. Such was their ignorance and want of education, and such was the contempt in which they were held that they hardly ventured to utter a word in public. Was it to be expected that men who were unlearned, and were held in no esteem, and had even deserted their master, should by the sound of their voice, reduce so many scattered nations into subjection to him who had been crucified?'

By contrast, after the ascension, 'the miracle of heavenly power was displayed', according to Calvin. So much so that in his opinion all miracles should be regarded as 'appendages of the word of God.' If this is not done, Calvin fears, 'God's holy order is subverted' or 'corrupt modes of worship are disguised.'

Calvin describes the situation after the ascension as follows: 'They went out and preached everywhere – men who but lately shut themselves up, trembling and silent, in their prison. For it was impossible that so sudden a change should be accomplished in a moment by human power; and therefore Mark (16:20) adds, 'The Lord working with them'; by which he means that this was truly a divine work.

Our final reading comes from Matthew 13:44-52. Here Jesus explains what the kingdom of heaven is all about. It is like a treasure hidden in a field. It is so precious that the man, who found it, sells all he has to buy the field (verse 44). It is also like a beautiful pearl (verse 45) again so precious, that the man who found it, sells everything to possess it (verse 46). Or the kingdom of heaven is like a net full of fish (verses 47 and 48).

Again it is not a physical location somewhere in the sky. Calvin is therefore justified in thinking about heaven as a symbol of something very precious: order, perfection, spirituality, goodness, etc. He stresses its hidden, invisible part. He says: 'The natural meaning of the words is, that the Gospel does not receive the respect which it deserves, unless we prefer it to all the riches, pleasures, honours, and advantages of the world, and to such an extent that we are satisfied with the spiritual blessings which it promises, and throw aside everything that would keep us from enjoying them.'

In his comment on verse 47 Calvin compares the kingdom of heaven with 'a net sunk beneath the waters, to inform us that the present state of the Church is confused. Our God is the God of order, and not of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33) and, therefore, recommends to us discipline; but he permits hypocrites to remain for a time among believers, till the last day, when he will bring his kingdom to a state of perfection.'

Here our detective story finishes. Indeed Calvin remains consistent to the position he has carved out for himself in the exegesis of Genesis 1:16. Heaven is not a physical abode. It is more. It is where God is enthroned and that may be as close as the human heart.

Both in his treatment in the *Institutes* and in his interpretation of the biblical story of the ascension into heaven, the latter is described as a releasing and universalizing of the Holy Spirit. In other words, Christ's physical crucified body, the very strong impact He left on his team of disciples and followers, the deep sense of loss and defeat on those close to Him when he died on the cross, are now replaced by a very concrete, unifying, electrifying, Holy Spirit, emanating from Him and God the Father. It is this spirit which actually more than fills the gap of his physical absence.

So far our biblical exegesis and Calvin's comments have proved to be consistent with his endorsing the astronomers' views. What is the social scientific relevance? In the social sciences the search is for latent, hidden, rather than manifest, obvious, functions. Heaven represents the latent part of social functioning. Order, peace, perfection are all elements hidden in the phenomena we see with the naked eye. Yet unless they under-gird our thinking and acting, unless they are our basic frame of reference, our social system drowns in the meaninglessness it has elevated as the only acceptable form of reality.

The impact of the entire Christian movement since its early beginnings lies partly in its fitting into a vacuum left by both ethnic and therefore non-global rigidification of Judaism at the time and dissatisfaction with the official, narrow, religion of emperor worship. It created a new, inspiring return to, and ever revitalizing tradition of, Hebrew prophecy. It also meant a resurgence of those sections of the population who were least part of, and least comfortable with the religious and political powers and establishments of the time.

To sum up: heaven in the Bible and Calvin's interpretations are a symbol of purity (Isaiah 55:9), the habitation of order (Psalm 119:89), the universal peace, perfection, spirituality of heaven (the ascension story), the undergirding, hidden, meaning provision (in the heavenly kingdom). Yet all this is not enough. Intellectual apology and deep understanding can only go so far. It has to be anchored in comprehensive commitment to God who is represented in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Calvin, true to the Bible, speaks of this 'faith' in the word of God as the strongest and safest anchor in a world which is dangerously devoid of stability and order.

Do we need a physical location of heaven? Given today's reading Calvin implies that we do not. Actually he persuades us that the more spiritual interpretation is the more accurate one. This is also expressed in our final Hymn 330 (ARB):

The heavens declare your glory,
 Lord. In every star your wisdom shines
 But when our eyes behold your word
 We read your name in fairer lines.