

Our idea of heaven wrong, says N. T. Wright

by [John Murawski](#) in the [June 13, 2012](#) issue

An oft-clichéd notion of heaven—a blissful realm of harp-strumming angels—has remained a fixture of the faith for centuries. Even as arguments go on as to who will or won't be “saved,” surveys show that a vast majority of Americans believe that after death their souls will ascend to some kind of celestial resting place.

But scholars on the right and left increasingly say that comforting belief in an afterlife has no basis in the Bible and would have sounded bizarre to Jesus and his early followers. They have plumbed the New Testament's Jewish roots to challenge the pervasive cultural belief in an otherworldly paradise.

The most recent expert to add his voice is the prolific Christian apologist N. T. Wright, a former Anglican bishop who now teaches about early Christianity and New Testament at Scotland's University of St. Andrews. Wright has explored misconceptions about heaven in previous books but has now devoted an entire volume to the subject, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*.

Wright's book could mark a turning point for the serious rethinking of heaven. He's not an academic iconoclast bent on debunking Christian myths. Wright takes his creeds very seriously and has even written an 800-plus-page megaton study setting out to prove the historical truth of the resurrection of Jesus.

“This is a very current issue—that what the church [says about heaven], or what the majority conventional view of heaven is, is very different from what we find in these biblical testimonies,” said theologian Christopher Morse of Union Theological Seminary in New York. “The end times are not the end of the world; they are the beginning of the real world—in biblical understanding.”

Still, the appearance of a recent cover story in *Time* magazine suggests that the putting-the-heaven-myth-to-rest movement is gaining currency beyond seminaries. Wright and Morse both say they have lectured on heaven at churches and were

surprised by the public interest and acceptance. “An awful lot of ordinary churchgoing Christians are simply millions of miles away from understanding any of this,” Wright said.

Wright and Morse work independently of each other and in very different ideological settings, but their work converges on key points. In classic Judaism and first-century Christianity, believers expected this world would be transformed into God’s kingdom—a restored Eden where redeemed human beings would be liberated from death, illness, sin and other corruptions.

“This represents an instance of two top scholars who have apparently grown tired of talk of heaven on the part of Christians that is neither consistent with the New Testament nor theologically coherent,” said Trevor Eppehimer of Hood Theological Seminary in North Carolina. “The majority of Christian theologians today would recognize that Wright’s and Morse’s views on heaven represent, for the most part, the basic New Testament perspective on heaven.”

Of the first-century believers who accepted Jesus as Messiah, many were convinced that the world would be transformed in their own lifetimes. This inauguration, however, was far from complete and required the active participation of God’s people practicing social justice, nonviolence and forgiveness to become fulfilled, Wright said.

Once the kingdom is complete, he said, the bodily resurrection will follow with a fully restored creation here on earth. “What we are doing at the moment is building for the kingdom,” Wright explained. Indeed, doing God’s kingdom work has come to be known in Judaism as *tikkun olam*, or “repairing the world.” This Hebrew phrase is a “close cousin” to the ancient beliefs embraced by Jesus and his followers, Wright said.

“We are so fortunate in this generation that we understand more about first-century Judaism than Christian scholarship has for a very long time,” Wright said. “And when you do that, you realize just how much was forgotten quite soon in the early church, certainly in the first three or four centuries.”

On the idea of heaven, things really veered off course in the Middle Ages, he said. “Our picture, which we get from Dante and Michelangelo, particularly of a heaven and a hell, and perhaps of a purgatory as well, simply isn’t consonant with what we find in the New Testament,” Wright said.

Wright notes that many clues to an early Christian understanding of the kingdom of heaven are preserved in the Gospels, most notably the phrase “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” from the Lord’s Prayer. Two key elements are forgiveness of debts and loving one’s neighbor. While heaven is indisputably God’s realm, it’s not some distantly remote galaxy hopelessly removed from human reality. In the ancient Judaic worldview, Wright notes, the two dimensions intersect and overlap so that the divine bleeds over into this world.

Other clues have been obscured by sloppy translations, such as the popular John 3:16, which says God so loved the world he gave his only son so that people could have “eternal life.”

Wright offers a translation that shows how the passage would have been heard in the first century: God gave his son “so that everyone who believes in him should not be lost but should share in the life of God’s new age.” According to Wright, “It’s not a Platonic, timeless eternity, which is what we were all taught. It is very definitely that there will come a time when God will utterly transform this world—that will be the age to come.” —RNS