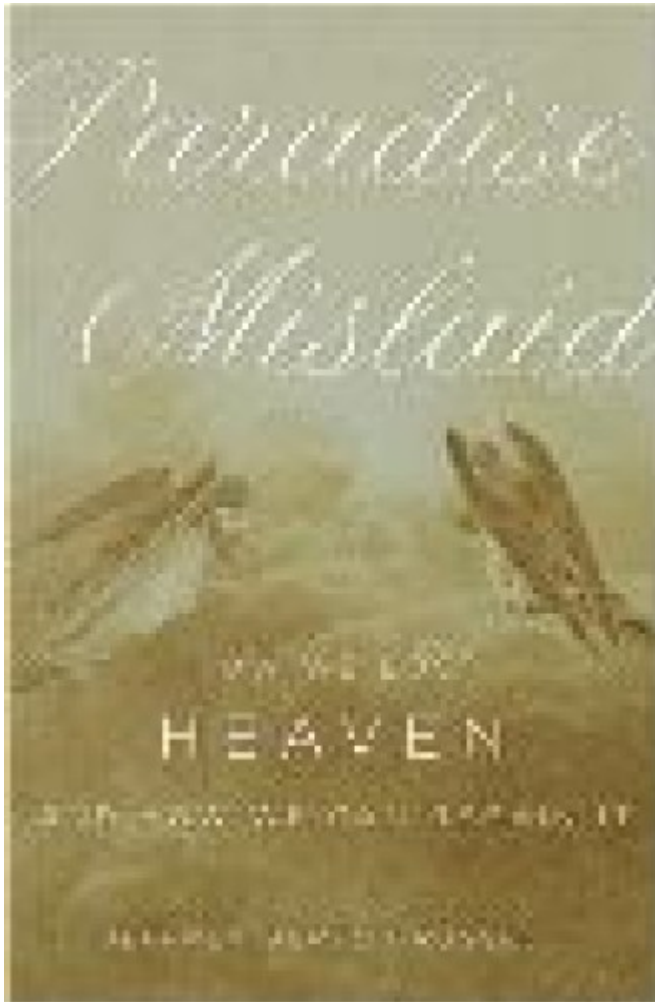


Paradise Mislaid

reviewed by [Mark Ralls](#) in the [July 24, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Paradise Mislaid: How We Lost Heaven—and How We Can Regain It

Jeffrey Barton Russell
Oxford University Press

One of John Updike's novels features a listless minister who spends most of his time at afternoon tea parties. Updike says this about the man's spiritual condition: "God had become for him like a raisin under the car seat, there but forgotten." In *Paradise Mislaid*, Jeffrey Burton Russell concludes that heaven has been similarly misplaced in modern Western culture. A vague notion of heaven remains, but its core meaning has long since been forgotten.

Russell, professor emeritus at the University of California-Santa Barbara, first explored this fundamental Christian belief in *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence*. Here he traces the evolution of the idea of heaven from the early church through the Middle Ages. In this formative stage of the faith, *heaven* simply meant "where God is," and this summation remains the core meaning of the word. As Russell puts it, "To say that the Christian view of heaven is theocentric—centered on God—is an understatement. . . . Heaven is inseparable from God." Thus, heaven cannot be reduced to what we usually assume it to be. It is not merely a celestial realm or a future era. Our common locators for heaven—such as *up* (above the earth) or *ahead* (in the afterlife)—also fall short. They mistakenly imply that heaven is determined by space and time. Worse still, they suggest that the qualitative difference made by God's presence among us can be assessed in quantitative terms.

These misunderstandings made belief in heaven vulnerable to modern skepticism. Russell's subtitle, *How We Lost Heaven—and How We Can Regain It*, reveals that the gradual erosion of belief is his greatest concern. He meticulously surveys skepticism from the early modern nominalism of William of Ockham to the postmodern deconstruction of Jacques Derrida. Between these philosophical bookends Russell considers everything from Marxist social theory and Freudian psychology to natural theology and the social gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch. In all of these diverse movements, he detects a single corrosive element that comes to define the modern project—the removal of God from the center of the cosmos. Once God is displaced, the world can be reconstituted in purely quantitative terms. Only physical objects and forces that can be objectively measured are deemed real. Since heaven does not meet this criterion, its reality is perpetually called into question, and its significance is relegated to the periphery of modern consciousness. Like a raisin under a car seat, paradise has been mislaid.

Russell is not content, however, to merely chronicle heaven's demise. He writes not only as a historian but also as a "lapsed atheist" determined to help us rediscover the lineaments of heavenly hope. In this effort, Russell reveals himself to be a postmodern apologist. While modern apologists defend the citadel of belief against skeptical attacks, postmodern apologists have more modest aims. They arrive on the scene after the walls have already come down and the fortress has crumbled. Their task is archaeological. They seek to gather what has been scattered, to recover what has been lost, and to piece these fragments of faith together into something that reveals their former coherence and beauty.

Russell's first step toward this goal is to challenge the skepticism that exiled both God and heaven to the margins of Western culture; he subjects modern skepticism to his own skeptical inquiry. If this sounds odd, it is important to note that Russell is not against all forms of skepticism. He contends that there are two kinds of skepticism: a healthy skepticism that inoculates us against the fallibility of our own ideas and a cynical skepticism that dogmatically rejects any standard of reason other than our own as incredible. When he applies a healthy skepticism to the assumptions that have permeated our culture, he finds them to be inadequate, for they fail to recognize that even though belief in heaven resists a rationality limited to quantifiable observations, it is nevertheless coherent and reasonable in itself. For Russell, "the deep conceptual meaning [of heaven] remains true."

In a chapter provocatively titled "Here," Russell concludes that "despite centuries of attack and ridicule," heaven can be accessed through the rich metaphors found in scripture and hymns, through poetic images that gesture toward a qualitatively different reality. Russell describes this reality as "life in God with gratitude and generosity." This is good news for those of us who still hope for something beyond this world.

Yet the question remains: Will we who have breathed only the tepid air of modern skepticism be able to appreciate a heaven so broadly defined? Will those of us who long for a new world and a new era—inevitably understood in terms of this space and this time—be satisfied with the traditional notion of heaven? Perhaps not, but if Russell is accurate in his account, then it may also be true that the real heaven provides a deeper consolation than even the object of our most persistent yearnings.