



April 14, 2025

Easter is about the Reality of Heaven

Back when newspapers had Religion Editors, the Record Eagle invited me to respond to a book that had just been published in our area. This is what I sent to the newspaper:

Comments on *“The God Awful Truth About Heaven”* by Jack Beam

Jack Beam provides a cleverly delightful little book outlining his religious, ethical and political views on heaven, raising good questions and issues that need to be addressed. His views are in the tradition of current evangelical atheists such as Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great*) and Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*) whom he quotes.

According to Beam, *The God Awful Truth About Heaven* is that because Jesus hardly says anything good or useful about it, it most likely doesn't exist. Unfortunately, his argument rests on literal interpretation of the Gospels, without metaphorical understanding of the words of Jesus. For instance, he claims that the “kingdom of heaven” has something to do with an after-life, when it is simply Matthew's way of saying “the kingdom of God” or “the realm of God,” as Mark and Luke did. And he does not mention the resurrection of Jesus.

The serious omission in Beam's book is recognition of the historical context of “Heaven.” People in ancient times, including Jesus, understood the structure of the universe to be three tiered: earth was flat, between the earth and the sky was the “firmament,” and above the sky dome was “heaven”. Some cultures at that time understood Hell to be under the earth, and the poet Dante made it stick. It took Galileo in the 16th century to demonstrate

our current model of the universe, for which he was persecuted by the church because it didn't fit the biblical model.

When the New Testament was written in the first and second centuries, the dwelling place of God was clearly thought to be in the highest tier, namely heaven. So, references to heaven in a modern universe must be understood metaphorically as "where God is." When Jesus was said to have ascended "into heaven", this was in keeping with the three-tiered universe model, and the only way to describe his "going to be with God" after the resurrection. Elijah had a similar ascension.

Most modern Christian theologians understand the teachings of Jesus to mean that heaven (the realm or kingdom of God) is about life on earth, here and now. "Thy kingdom come", a petition from the Lord's prayer, is really a political statement challenging the oppressive rule of the Roman government. For Jesus, heaven was where the poor were fed, the sick were healed, the prisoners were freed, and love and compassion ruled the day. That's a far cry from a place you go after you die, or where the weather comes from.

Jack Beam is right that the Bible does not and cannot prove anything. The Gospels are portraits of Jesus painted by four different Greek authors, none of whom had ever met Jesus in person. They are there to help us see the kind of person Jesus was, the core values he lived and taught, and the integrity he expressed in both life and death. They are the product of the early Church tradition in its competition with Roman imperial theology and Egyptian life-after-death theology.

But Jack Beam needs to do a little more homework, perhaps read Marcus Borg's book *Jesus*, or Bishop John Shelby Spong's book: *Jesus for the Non Religious*, to understand the Gospel.

For us to think today of our deceased loved ones as being "in heaven," that is, "with God," is not a bad idea. In fact, it is a very compassionate and loving idea, sort of like *The Beautiful Truth About Heaven*, which is what I would name my book.

~Written by Ned Edwards

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