

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 59 · 2023 · Pages 81 - 108

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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DEGREES OF GLORY: A BRIEF HISTORY OF HEAVEN AND GRADED SALVATION

Jim Hansen

Abstract: *While references to heaven in the Old Testament are sparse, non-explicit, and predominantly cosmological, the New Testament reveals a more complex concept of the afterlife that reflects a rapidly evolving understanding of Heaven. The Jewish apocalyptic literature of the late Second Temple period describes a heaven of multiple degrees that is populated with angels and the righteous dead of varying glories. Those glories also tangibly reflect astral qualities of light and glory comparable to the sun, moon, and stars. Within this worldview of Heaven, several of the Apostle Paul's writings to Corinth can be read with added insight, including his ascent to the "third heaven." Paul's teachings of resurrected bodies assuming astral qualities may reflect the native Corinthians' metaphysical views of the body and soul, which Paul may have shared himself. While Western Christianity would embrace degrees of glory through the Middle Ages, Reform Theology of the Protestant Reformation would affirm a concept of Heaven that supported only a single habitation. It would take a Restoration-era vision to Joseph Smith to restore the doctrine of degrees of glory original to the Jews and early Christians but lost to those of the modern era.*

The current belief in two diametrically opposing post-mortal states — Heaven and Hell — is so ubiquitous within Christendom as to be tacit. However, recent challenges to such a binary conception of the afterlife have sparked debate and discussion in the past few decades.¹ While the Old Testament seldom comments on Heaven and the qualities of the afterlife, it does differentiate between the place where

1. Theodore Sider, "Hell and Vagueness," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 19, no. 1 (January 2002): 58–68, <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol19/iss1/5/>. Sider's Puzzle has generated much debate on the topic.

God resides (for example, Genesis 28:12; Psalms 11:4) and the physical cosmos around the Earth (Genesis 1:1, 17; Exodus 24:10; Psalms 8:3). New Testament discussions of Heaven, in contrast, show that Heaven is a far more complex idea. As Paul discussed the state of the resurrected in eternity, he taught, “There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead” (1 Corinthians 15:41–42). Paul also observed that after Christ’s resurrection he ascended to his Father “up far above *all heavens*, that he might fill all things” (Ephesians 4:8–10). Paul also wrote that a “man in Christ” — who may be Paul himself — was “caught up to the third heaven” in vision (2 Corinthians 12:2). Additionally, The Savior taught that “in my Father’s house are many mansions” (John 14:2). Several of his parables imply a system of graded rewards among the faithful in Heaven — notably the parables of the Pounds (Luke 19:12–27) and the Sower (Matthew 13:1–9).

The peculiarity of Paul’s symbolism (sun, moon, and stars) to Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15:41 leads the inquisitive mind to seek clarification on the associated worldview of first-century Jews and Christians. What was the prevalent view of Heaven in the centuries before and after Jesus? A greater grasp of the afterlife as they understood it would certainly be of value in understanding the frame of reference that underlies several New Testament utterances.

Previous Latter-day scholarship has examined several aspects of the Plan of Salvation, including the three degrees of glory and many aspects of the Latter-day Saint temple, in light of ancient Jewish and Christian literature. Hugh Nibley’s pioneering work on *1 Enoch* and the ancient temple opened the door to many fine recent studies.² Jeffrey Bradshaw has written extensively on Enoch.³ He has also provided an important study of the three rounds of a ladder of heavenly ascent and its relationship to

2. For example, see Hugh Nibley, *Enoch the Prophet*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 44 and 48, for brief discussions of heavenly ascent and “half-heavenly, half-earthly society,” and Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 292, where he asserts that the “Gnostics and their rivals . . . all . . . share the idea of three main degrees of glory.”

3. Jeffrey Bradshaw, “Moses 6–7 and the Book of Giants: Remarkable Witnesses of Enoch’s Ministry,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 48 (2021), <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/moses-6-7-and-the-book-of-giants-remarkable-witnesses-of-enochs-ministry/>. See also “Jeffrey Bradshaw, “The Book of Moses as a Temple Text” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 49 (2021): 72, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-book-of-moses-as-a-temple-text/>, where he relates the “Eden Temple” to the three

the three degree of glory.⁴ (He will be cited and quoted later in this paper.) Likewise, in 2013, Barry Bickmore released a seminal work entitled *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity*.⁵ At the end of 2022, *BYU Studies Quarterly* released a special issue focused on Abraham with one article called “Kolob, the Governing One,” which talked about gradations of celestial bodies with Kolob being “the greatest of all.”⁶

The present study seeks to add to this corpus by Latter-day Saint scholars and to the many works of others exploring early Christian and Jewish thought. It will review the evolving panorama of understanding of Heaven as presented in the Hebrew Bible and then the New Testament, especially the writings of Paul. It then traces the reductionistic understanding of graded salvation through the Reform Theology of the Protestant Reformation, which was a logically forced error caused by the speculations of Knox and Calvin, which reduced Heaven to a permanent and binary outcome. The paper ends with a discussion of the restoration of an understanding of a graded heaven with varying degrees of glory as revealed through the prophetic inspiration of Joseph Smith. I will attempt to demonstrate that elements of the plan of salvation, which were revealed through Joseph Smith, were related to ancient concepts. There will also be some discussion of the concept of Heaven in the Book of Mormon, which, perhaps due to an emphasis on the “two way” nature of the plan of salvation, presents ample examples of heavenly ascent but does not provide clear descriptions of gradations of salvation, *per se*.

Early Jewish Conceptions of Heaven

Old Testament mentions of the afterlife are sparse and non-explicit, dwelling on the state of death (*Sheol*) as the underworld locale of the dead more than the quality of life after death. The labeling of the cosmos as Heaven is common throughout ancient literature and the Old Testament,

degrees of glory. These are but two of his contributions in the area of conceptions of a graded heaven that I address in my paper.

4. Jeffrey Bradshaw, “Faith, Hope, and Charity: The “Three Principal Rounds” of the Ladder of Heavenly Ascent,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 39 (2020), <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/faith-hope-and-charity-the-three-principal-rounds-of-the-ladder-of-heavenly-ascent/>.

5. Barry Bickmore, *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Redding, CA: FairMormon, 2013).

6. Stephen O. Smoot, John Gee, Kerry Muhlestein, and John S. Thompson, “A Guide to the Book of Abraham” *BYU Studies* 61, no. 4. (2022); see especially “Kolob, the Governing One,” 142–49.

where Heaven is not flat but hemispheric and the firmament of heaven is used to denote the construction supporting the lowest heavens where the furthest ends of the Earth touch the hemispheric Heaven (see Deuteronomy 4:32; 30:4; Isaiah 13:5; Jeremiah 49:36; Psalm 19:6). According to Rabbinic views, Heaven and Earth “kiss each other” at the horizon with portals that respectively allow passage between the two by the sun and other luminaries.⁷ The concept of heavenly gates or doors is abundant throughout both Jewish and non-Jewish ancient literature (see Genesis 28:17; Psalm 78:23; *1 Enoch* 9:2, 10; 14; 33–36; *2 Enoch* 13, 14, 16, 42, 73, 4 Ezra 3:19, 6:1; *Ascension of Isaiah* 10:24, 25, 27; 6:6, 9, and *3 Baruch* 2, 3, 6, 11, 14, 15), but the number of gates or doors connecting Heaven and Earth varies greatly. The numbers 360 or 365 are found in many sources across the ancient world, probably representing each day in the solar year, with the sun rising and setting through two opposing gates each day.⁸ It is likely that our current definition of a circle having 360 degrees persists today based on these ancient conventions.

When the nations of Israel and Judah were destroyed by Assyria and Babylon in the seventh and eighth centuries BCE, prophets prophesied that the nation would be restored or “raised from the dead” by God at a future day to become once again a holy and sovereign state (Ezekiel 37 for example). Some centuries later during the Second Temple period, the Jews began to understand that this restoration would apply both to the nation on an earthly scale and to the individuals of that nation on an eternal scale. A just God would not allow the sufferings of the righteous to go unrequited, and there would be a future day of judgment when God would bring individuals back to life to live with him forever, not in Sheol, but in Heaven where he dwelt.⁹ Over time, many Second Temple Jews increasingly embraced an interest in Heaven and the afterlife as an end state (the *eschaton*) in a period of Jewish history called Apocalyptic Judaism. This personal restoration motif is reflected in the Old Testament apocalypse of Daniel:

And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as

7. Alexander Kulik, “The Enigma of the Five Heavens and Early Jewish Cosmology,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 28, no. 4 (April 2019): 239–66.

8. *Ibid.*, 6.

9. Bart Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 13–14.

the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever. (Daniel 12:2–3)

Here, “them” likely refers to individuals (rather than the nation of Israel) who are wakened broadly into two categories of “life” and “shame and contempt.” While verse three is likely Hebrew parallelism at play, the “life” population might be additionally differentiated where the “wise” get to shine, while those who “turn many to righteous” get to be as the stars forever.

The Book of Mormon is equally vague about discussing the afterlife and Heaven. Consistent with most Old Testament references, the Book of Mormon predominantly identifies Heaven with the cosmological (i.e., non-spiritual or scientific) realm and acknowledges God as its creator (2 Nephi 23:5, 31:21, Mosiah 3:8, 4:9, Helaman 10:7, 14:12, among others). Lehi’s understanding of Heaven and the afterlife typically reflects that of pre-exilic Israel in recognizing Heaven as the dwelling of God and angels (but not people) in the early vision where “he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God” (1 Nephi 1:8). His subsequent vision embodies God’s presence not as a heavenly realm or temple (as Ezekiel eventually would) but rather the earthly form of a “tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10). Nephi realized that the tree “is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men” (1 Nephi 11:22) but does not understand the afterlife state of those who “fell down and partook of the fruit of the tree” (1 Nephi 8:30) as dwelling in the presence of God. Even if he did, the vision does not in any way communicate that the fruit-eating faithful dwell in Heaven. For Lehi and Nephi, abiding with God and receiving his love is envisioned as an earthly experience of a belly and soul filled with delicious fruit, which resonates well with God’s promise to a wilderness-famished Israel that their love and obedience would not grant heavenly rewards but rather earthly prosperity: “If ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, that I will give you the rain of your land in his due season ... that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil. And I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full” (Deuteronomy 11:13 – 17).

Concurrent with the Jews’ receptivity to progressive revelation from God in adopting a concept of Heaven in the few centuries before the Savior, the Nephites also manifested an understanding of Heaven at

about the same time, with King Benjamin (124 BCE) desiring “that ye should consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God. For behold, they ... are received into heaven, that thereby they may dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness” (Mosiah 2:41). Four decades later, Amulek, in his confrontation with Zeezrom, also reflected the understanding that the righteous would ascend to Heaven to be with God, affirming that God “hath said that no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of heaven; therefore, how can ye be saved, except ye inherit the kingdom of heaven? Therefore, ye cannot be saved in your sins. Now Zeezrom saith again unto him: Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father? And Amulek said unto him: Yea, he is the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth, and all things which in them are” (Alma 11:37–39).

Jewish and Early Christian Apocalyptic Literature (300 BCE–200 CE)

For the Jews, apocalyptic literature began to flourish from the third century BCE onwards and would in due course become important within the first two centuries of Christianity as well. Because there was no widely accepted orthodoxy regarding the nature of the afterlife before the Second Temple period, one encounters a great deal of diversity in this body of writing. Despite this variability, there are several common themes that emerge:

1. there would be a future embodied state (i.e., resurrection),
2. there would be a future day of judgment beyond death, and
3. there would be various post-judgment rewards for the righteous, including restoration to paradisiacal state, joy, and astral transformation to “starlight” status of brightness and glory.

While some Jews (including the Sadducees) held to the traditional “national restoration” philosophy and had no faith in an afterlife at all,¹⁰ others (including the Pharisees) embraced the newer concept of individual restoration as a corporeal existence. The apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees (second century BCE) contains the most graphically physical account of resurrection, especially for those who die in battle defending the law of God. Although it contains no detail on the timing or ultimate locale of resurrection (Heaven or Earth), the righteous fallen

10. Alexey Somov, *Representations of the Afterlife in Luke-Acts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 4.

are eventually blessed with receiving “members of the physical body” back, being raised up, invoking “the Master of breath and life,” and restoring “their entrails” that have been removed.¹¹

An important early Jewish apocalyptic work from this period is *1 Enoch*.¹² This work is canonical in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and is a good introduction to apocalyptic literature. It is the oldest work in the corpus and seemingly served as a prototype that succeeding apocalypses drew upon and reworked. The work, *1 Enoch*, is a pseudepigraphic collection (i.e., written by someone other than Enoch but attributed to him) of five smaller writings that date from the first to third centuries BCE and preserves a more diverse panorama of ideas regarding life beyond death than any other work from this period.

The *Book of the Heavenly Luminaries* (chapters 72–82, third century BCE) is the oldest portion of *1 Enoch* and provides a purely cosmological (non-spiritual) narrative of the sun, moon, lunar year, and the portals linking Heaven and Earth through which these bodies pass. Its contents largely represent the best scientific astronomy of the day. However, in the *Book of the Watchers* (chapters 1–36, second century BCE), Enoch transcends in vision to a three-tiered representation of Heaven that easily recalls the three sections of the Jewish temple: the vestibule (*ulam*), sanctuary (*hekhal*), and holy of holies (*devir*).¹³ He first encounters an outer/lower wall “built of crystals and surrounded by tongues of fire” that encloses “a large house which was built of crystals ... and its groundwork was of crystal.” Upon entering, Enoch sees

a second house, greater than the former ... built of flames of fire. And in every respect it so excelled in splendor and magnificence and extent that I cannot describe to you its splendour ... And I looked and saw therein a lofty throne: its appearance was as crystal ... and the Great Glory sat thereon, and His raiment shone more brightly than the sun and was whiter than any snow. (*1 Enoch* 14:15–21)

11. Casey D. Elledge, *Life after Death in Early Judaism: The Evidence of Josephus* (Tübingen, DEU: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 18.

12. One online source is *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, ed. R.H. Charles (Oxford: Clarendon Press), at Christian Classics Ethereal Library (website), https://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/enoch/ENOCH_1.HTM.

13. Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.

Within these three realms, “ten thousand times ten thousand” angels function as heavenly priests and clothed in priestly garments that evidence their glory and status (see also Daniel 7:10 and Revelation 5:11).

The other writings within *1 Enoch* contain less of Heaven and the destiny of the righteous but still contribute understanding to some degree. The *Apocalypse of Weeks* (second century BCE) mentions that righteous souls will dwell in joy and their souls will not perish (103:3–4), with the implication that the righteous rise and shine forth among and alongside the angels.¹⁴ In the *Dream Visions* (chapters 83–90, second century BCE), the righteous dead are gathered together at the temple (literally “His house”), while the Earth will be returned to an Edenic state (90:33–36). The *Similitudes of Enoch* (chapters 37–71, first century BCE) sees all the dead — righteous and wicked — returned to God from a temporary grave where the just and holy are promoted to heavenly beings. Here, the righteous are clothed with “garments of glory ... and life from the Lord of Spirits” (62:15–16) that never fade, representing a physical change that enables participation in the world of Heaven alongside the angels and God.

Heaven in the Judeo-Christian Era

Prophets such as John the Baptist and Jesus both embraced and promoted the ideas of apocalyptic Judaism with its ideas of a personal restoration and the ensuing Kingdom of God. Delivering a solidly apocalyptic message, they continued to proclaim that individuals who did the will of God would be raised from the dead and live forever in God’s heavenly kingdom. This kingdom also had an earthly analog that was “at hand” and ready to be established here on Earth. Thus, the Savior’s early followers inherited from him an apocalyptic view with a new and expanded set of beliefs in the afterlife than had been commonly understood by earlier Jews.

In the first two centuries after Jesus, the shift to alternate and elevated conceptions of Heaven began in earnest as the apocalyptic literature from this period suggests a Christian reworking of earlier Jewish texts. Two examples are the *Testament of Levi* and *2 Enoch* (both second century CE), which appear to depend on the *Book of the Watchers* as source material. Featuring seven heavens instead of three, these works label some heavens as cosmological rather than spiritual realms. In this period, the most developed model is that of seven heavens (an idiom still used today

14. Elledge, *Life after Death*, 10.

— “I’m in seventh heaven”), although the number varies from one to as many as ten. The number seven is deeply rooted in Jewish thought and is thought to denote completeness or perfection as the final state of heaven as God establishes it. In several seven-heaven apocalypses, cosmological heavens are lower-tiered, and highly spiritual beings inhabit the highest two or three heavens with God. Since later apocalypses seem to draw upon or re-work material from works such as *1 Enoch*, it seems plausible for later apocalyptic writers to take cosmological spheres and categorize them as lower heavens while reserving the highest three for the heavenly temple. The *Ascension of Isaiah* (first century CE) illustrates this principle with the highest heavens being characteristically different in holiness from the lower ones, which share more similar characteristics and are less distinct.¹⁵ Barry Bickmore writes that there were several schemes in this period for the structure of the heavens and variances in the contents of those heavens, but even where different degrees are not explicitly described, it was maintained that various gradations of the elect exist. For example, Similitude 8 of the *Pastor of Hermas* discusses many kinds of elect and repenting sinners and how they received graded rewards proportionate to their good works. Likewise, the *Epistle of the Apostles* makes a distinction between the “elect” and “most elect.”¹⁶

The Glorious Cosmos

In the apocalyptic literature of this period, angels inhabit each of the heavens, including the cosmological ones, where it is their lot to pull the chariots containing the sun and moon through the sky (as in *2 Enoch* and *3 Baruch*, both second century CE). Generally, the angels’ specific heaven is a manifestation of their own degree of glory and godliness. In *2 Enoch*, the second heaven contains lesser-glory angels who mourn that they turned from the Lord to their own will (*2 Enoch* 7:3), while the fifth heaven contains the armies of the *Egrigori* — fallen ones who mourn because they descended to Earth, broke covenants with God, and defiled themselves with human wives (*2 Enoch* 18:1–5, see also Genesis 6:4). In contrast, the angels in the sixth heaven are those brilliant and very glorious ones who study and serve the archangels of the seventh heaven and administer over the seasons and the years, rivers and seas, and the fruits and grass and everything that teems (*2 Enoch* 19:1–5). The seventh heaven is also graded, with the fiery armies of angels and

15. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 55.

16. Bickmore, *Restoring the Ancient Church*, 175.

archangels assembled by rank, advancing and worshipping the Lord (2 *Enoch* 20:1–4).

Through the heavy use of angels, the apocalyptic literature blends the two concepts of Heaven (cosmological and spiritual) together. The previously mentioned *Book of the Heavenly Luminaries* contains a detailed and visionary revelation of the movements of the sun, moon, and stars with an explanation of the calendar year based on them. Similarly, 2 *Enoch* designates the first heaven as the realms of the sea/atmosphere and stars and the heaven to the movements and displacements and all the light of the sun and moon, which are carried by chariots, supported by stars, and pulled by angels continuously through the sky (2 *Enoch* 11:1–5). Echoing the motif, 3 *Baruch* describes the sun as a chariot being drawn by 40 angels (3 *Baruch* 6:1–13).¹⁷

This angelic blending of Heaven is heightened with the angels being manifestations of light and glory (in their respective heavens) synonymous with astral bodies. The Jewish philosopher Philo noted that stars are embodied and intelligent “divine souls” and wrote of the early patriarchs as being constellations. He additionally affirmed that righteous souls share “the eternal life of the sun and moon and the whole universe.”¹⁸ This view, however, was not original to Jews and reflected the commonly held Hellenistic ideas of the period.¹⁹ The Pythagoreans believed that the human soul was pre-existent and of celestial origin and substance. It originated in the heavens and would return to a place among the divine stars after death. A common Stoic view understood that after death a human soul would return to the region of the cosmos that corresponded most closely to its own nature and substance, and that the universe was divided into a hierarchy of regions of differing purity with the attending living souls inhabiting the same substance and region.

In the apocalyptic literature, Enoch notices that the dead have been physically transformed into a new state for participation in the eschatological world and various rewards are given including elevation to eternal light and paths of righteousness (1 *Enoch* 92:3–5). Scholars have interpreted Daniel’s “shine” (Daniel 12:2–3) as a literal transformation into angels as astral beings that inhabit the heavenly world. They also

17. Alexander Kulik, *3 Baruch: Greek-Slavonic Apocalypse of Baruch* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2010), 227.

18. Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 118.

19. Alan Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars: A History of an Idea* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 24–38.

comment on the probability that astral immortalization and angelic status would be the future state of the righteous, as mentioned in Daniel.²⁰ Similarly, chapters 3–14 of 2 Esdras (second century CE) clearly divide the wicked and righteous in the final judgment, with the righteous shining like the sun and resembling the light of the stars, being incorruptible (7:97). In 2 *Baruch*, the righteous are changed to the “brightness of angels” and are “like unto the angels ... equal to the stars” (51:10) and their excellence is greater than the angels (51:12). This equates astral existence with angelic existence, in essence if not in degree.²¹ Nibley also recognized these same parallels within the Book of Mormon, with Nephi depicting Lehi’s initial vision containing the “One descending out of the midst of heaven” that has a “luster was above that of the sun at noon-day” (1 Nephi 1:9). The “twelve others following him” had a “brightness [that] did exceed that of the stars in the firmament” (1 Nephi 1:10). Hugh Nibley affirms according to ancient Jewish patterns “the correct and conventional way of designating holy persons who descend to Earth to carry out assignments among men is to call them stars, or the stars that shine above the stars.”²²

Paul’s Third Heaven and Astral Immortality

With such a worldview of Heaven established, several of the Apostle Paul’s writings can be read with added insight. 2 Corinthians 12:1–7 notes a “man in Christ” (understood to be Paul himself) was:

caught up to the third heaven ... and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities ... And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh.

Here, Paul speaks about being “caught up to the third heaven” as if the ascent was involuntary or unexpected. The mention of the third heaven has added meaning based on Paul’s specific frame of reference. The *Book of the Watchers* in 1 *Enoch* predates Paul by centuries and was likely known to him, as it was to Jude.²³ It mentions three spiritual

20. Elledge, *Life after Death*, 14.

21. *Ibid.*, 41.

22. Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, 228.

23. Jude 1:14 quotes a prophecy from 1 *Enoch* 1:9, so Jude was at least familiar with the work and likely thought highly of it.

heavens, none of them cosmological (non-spiritual). If Paul possessed a three-fold concept of Heaven, then it is plausible that he was allowed to attain the highest heaven where “unspeakable” knowledge was given to him.

An alternate view may be inferred by the observation that Paul makes no description of the third heaven, and more importantly there is no mention of God or Christ in the vision at all. The central figures of the highest heaven figure prominently in the apocalyptic literature and the notable lack of mention raises the question of whether Paul’s ascent was somehow incomplete or arrested at the third heaven. As previously mentioned, apocalypses of the first and second centuries frequently describe seven heavens that include cosmological realms. While the dating of these later works generally places them at a time after Paul, some estimates do project their writing to the mid-first century. That being said, it is less likely that he would have been familiar with them. That doesn’t necessarily mean that the concepts weren’t in the public mind, as the source material for these works certainly was extant even if the ideas wouldn’t be written down until decades later. If Paul possessed a seven-fold concept of Heaven, then his third heaven ascent would be incomplete and naturally omit mention of God or Jesus. As the number seven is symbolic of perfection and completeness, three (or 3½) could symbolize being cut short of perfection or of something incomplete.²⁴ If so, it is possible that Paul’s mention of a spiritual weakness — his “thorn in the flesh” — would prevent him from being “exalted above measure” (2 Corinthians 12:7) to the highest heaven. Here Paul may be teaching that his own weakness inhibits his own heavenly glory during mortality but his personal revelation that the Savior’s “grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness” gives him solace and hope to “glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me ... for when I am weak, then am I strong” (vs 9–10). In citing this very personal experience, Paul evidences its great effect on his life, and the divine teaching that “my grace is sufficient” and “my strength is made perfect in weakness” may likely be one of Paul’s most profound revelations.

24. Recall the ministry of two prophets in Revelation 11, where their ministry of 3.5 years and death of 3.5 days are symbolic of a complete ministry and death cut short.

Astral Bodies in the Resurrection

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul addresses several concerns about the resurrection that had surfaced among the early Corinthian believers. While we don't know the exact nature of the concerns these early Christians had, Paul takes the opportunity to teach aspects of the resurrection that include his Pharisaic Jewish view of the resurrection as an eventual transformative revivification.²⁵ The body that is raised and the body that perishes are one and the same. Paul does not refer to resurrection as an event in which a mortal body is buried (sown) and a different body — similar to but nevertheless completely distinct from — is raised as imperishable. He views the resurrected body as the exact same body that died but raised and changed into an immortal and imperishable state. For Paul, the changes made in a resurrected body are qualitative rather than substantive and an “enhancement of what is, not metamorphosis into what is not.”²⁶

In 1 Corinthians 15:35–42, Paul includes several examples from the natural world to represent differing qualities of the resurrected, such as three seeds that are sown (grain, wheat, and “other grain”) and three kinds of animals (beasts, fishes, and birds). Paul's deliberate use of astral imagery in verses 40–42, however, is likely an empathetic gesture to the native Corinthians' metaphysical views of the body and soul, which Paul may have shared himself. He writes:

There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. (1 Corinthians 15:40–42)

Dale Martin persuasively argues that first-century Corinth was influenced by the philosophies of the Stoics and Epicureans in viewing the human being as a “hierarchy of essence.”²⁷ He argues that these ancients believed that the various elements of a human soul — body, mind, and spirit — were not distinguished dualistically as material/immaterial but existing as a single material on a spectrum of coarseness/refinement

25. James Ware, “Paul's Understanding of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:36–54,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 4 (2014): 809–35.

26. Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 8.

27. Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 9, 15.

with the body as most coarse and the spirit as most refined.²⁸ This metaphysical view of the human body extended to society as well, reflecting the more Platonic view of an elite cadre of philosopher-kings leading society (spirit), a small body of auxiliary police/military enforcing the philosophers' directives (mind), and a large population of workers/merchants/producers sustaining the society (body). This balance was delicate, and a society could destabilize if there were too many philosophers (spirit) or not enough workers/producers (body). More importantly for this discussion, the mainstream Corinthian view held that this same continuum existed at the cosmic level, with human souls germinating from Heaven before birth (or more specifically the various elements of the heavens prior to birth) and returning to a level of elemental purity after death that they had embraced in life: spirit/sun, mind/moon or body/star.

For the Corinthian believers in Jesus who were beginning to embrace a doctrine of a personal resurrection, it would seem natural to reconcile the new concept of a personal resurrection with the commonly held notion of three-fold astral purity in society. Based on this, their concern with resurrection that prompts Paul's response in chapter fifteen may have been due to a potential for a person to be resurrected with a body of lesser purity than their station in life warranted, which would be seen as unfitting and beneath their dignity. Paul's message, ultimately then, would be to teach that the grace of the Savior allows all people to progressively live a "spiritual" life and therefore be entitled to a spirit body of the highest purity in the resurrection. Paul would accomplish this using language and astral imagery that the Corinthians were already familiar with. Bickmore writes that initially, Christian thought was quite foreign to Greek philosophy, and Paul would evidence his disdain for the deceptions of philosophy in his culture clash on Mars Hill (Acts 17) and his warning to "beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Colossians 2:8). At the same time, however, Paul likely acknowledged that it was not possible for the church to stay completely sheltered from Greek culture and thought. If the gospel was to be taken to the Hellenistic world, it had to be done on Hellenistic terms, and his use of Stoic metaphysics to teach doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ evidences he was doing just that.²⁹

28. A view taught by Joseph Smith; see D&C 131:7, Moses 3:5, and Genesis 2:4–5.

29. Bickmore, *Restoring the Ancient Church*, 32–33.

This idea of spiritual progression along a continuum of body/star, mind/moon, and spirit/sun would not have been a foreign concept to the Jewish disciples of the Savior, who saw the “three theological virtues” of faith, hope, and charity in three principal rungs of Jacob’s ladder of heavenly ascent (Genesis 28:12).³⁰ Jesus’ declaration that “hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God *ascending and descending upon the Son of man*” (John 1:51) and his later teaching that “I am *the way*, the truth, and the life: no man cometh *unto the Father*, but by me” (John 14:6) would draw upon this same imagery to assert the necessity of a staged spiritual progression. Jeffrey Bradshaw writes that Joseph Smith equated these same three virtues with Jacob’s ladder, where

Paul “ascended into the third heavens, and he could understand the three principal rounds of Jacob’s ladder — the telestial, the terrestrial, and the celestial glories or kingdoms.” The three kingdoms of glory, of course, naturally correlate to symbolic representations of these three differing glories within the temple.³¹

After Paul: Heaven in Western Christianity

After the New Testament era, Christianity continued to affirm degrees of glory and graded salvation in Heaven. Origen, writing about 230 CE to an audience of newly catechized believers, taught that bodies in the resurrection exist in different grades or degrees of purity using Paul’s verses. He taught:

How will they show that statement to be true, that there is one flesh of birds, another of fishes; bodies celestial, and bodies terrestrial; that the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial another; that one is the glory of the sun, another the glory of the moon, another the glory of the stars; that one star differs from another star in glory; and that so is the resurrection of the dead? According to that gradation, then, which exists among heavenly bodies . . . Our understanding of the passage indeed is, that the apostle, wishing to describe the great difference among those who rise again in glory, i.e., of the saints, borrowed a comparison from the heavenly bodies,

30. Bradshaw, “Faith, Hope, and Charity,” 213, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/faith-hope-and-charity-the-three-principal-rounds-of-the-ladder-of-heavenly-ascent/>.

31. *Ibid.*, 223.

saying, One is the glory of the sun, another the glory of the moon, another the glory of the stars.³²

As Christianity continued to grow and flourish throughout the Roman world on its way to becoming the dominant religion of the empire, the rapid influx of people into the flourishing faith revealed the difficult reality that not every professed Christian was equally genuine in their discipleship. As such, the model of heaven-as-degrees continued to find relevance. Jerome, writing in the late fourth century from a position of orthodoxy, refuted Jovinianus' teachings of a single heavenly state for all believers by writing:

The fourth proposition of Jovinianus, that all who are saved will have equal reward, is refuted by the various yields of thirty, sixty, and a hundred-fold in the parable of the sower, [and] by the "stars differing in glory." ... As there were differences in Ezekiel between cattle and cattle, so in St. Paul between those who built gold or stubble on the one foundation. The differences of gifts ... of the produce of the good seed, of the mansions promised in heaven, of the judgment ... [and] of those called at different times to the vineyard are arguments for the diversity of rewards.³³

Here, Jerome recalls six different biblical passages that "argue for the diversity of rewards" and differing glories in Heaven: 1 Corinthians 15:41; Ezekiel 34:17; 1 Corinthians 3:12–13; Matthew 13:1–9; John 14:2; and Matthew 20:1–16. Jerome takes a conservative position in refuting a concept that other church leaders (including Irenaeus and Augustine) found to be heterodox if not outright heretical.³⁴ Another highly influential fourth-century church father, John Chrysostom, taught similarly, saying:

For as in the earthly bodies there is a difference, so also in the heavenly; and that difference no ordinary one, but reaching

32. Origen, *On First Principles*, 2:10:2, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/04122.htm>.

33. Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, 2:3:18–34, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/30092.htm>.

34. Augustine polemized Jovinianus' ideas in his own letters, albeit more tactfully than Jerome. Irenaeus argues for graded rewards in Heaven based on the differing yields in the Parable of the Sower and ascribes the view to the apostles as directly taught by the Savior in *Against Heresies*. 5:36.1–2, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103536.htm>.

even to the uttermost: there being not only a difference between sun and moon, and stars, but also between stars and stars. For what though they be all in the heaven? yet some have a larger, others a less share of glory. What do we learn from hence? That although they be all in God's kingdom, all shall not enjoy the same reward."³⁵

Among the more popular and influential portrayals of Heaven from this period is the *Apocalypse of Paul*, another pseudepigraphic narrative that was written around 400 CE. It takes many ideas from the second-century *Apocalypse of Peter* but provides a much richer description of the multiple glories in Heaven that await believers. In chapters 19–31, Paul ascends to the third heaven (1 Corinthians 12) to the “places of the just” where Christ spends a thousand years with his saints in a “land of promise” — a land with rivers of milk and honey and fruit trees abundantly producing. There he learns that this is a temporary place for those who stayed chaste outside of marriage and faithful to their spouse within marriage. He then ascends to the “City of Christ” — the place for those who have fully repented of their earthly sins. The golden city is encompassed by twelve concentric walls, each higher than the one before it, separating the parts of the city. The righteous dwell within these twelve realms for eternity according to their level of righteousness on Earth — the more righteous the disciple, the more glorious the realm. Widely read and highly esteemed, the *Apocalypse of Paul* would become a weighty resource in the western church for hundreds of years, even influencing Dante as he wrote his own immensely popular tour through the various degrees of Heaven and Hell in the *Divine Comedy* in the late fourteenth century. In the Heaven of the Middle Ages, good works allow for a hierarchy of exact blessings in accordance with good deeds done in this life. The notion of equal heavenly habitation played no part in the medieval concept of the hereafter.

During the Reformation of the sixteenth century, however, that began to change. Reformists viewed the salvific efficacy of works very differently than Catholic teachings which endorsed pious acts and charitable donations as effective in absolving sin and granting easier passage through Purgatory to a more exalted heavenly abode. In contrast, theologians such as Luther and Calvin held that eternal life cannot be achieved by human efforts. Because all are born in sin and continue in

35. John Chrysostom, *Homily 41 on 1 Corinthians*, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/220141.htm>.

sin even after baptism, all ultimately deserve damnation but are saved by the complete love of a merciful God, upon which we can only throw ourselves and hope. If all men are ultimately sinful and undeserving of eternal life, then degrees of glory within the kingdom of God are surely even more unobtainable. Thus, Calvin rejected the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, affirmed the grace of God as primal in salvation, rejected the merit of works in justification, and logically affirmed that there were only two afterlife states for mankind: Heaven or Hell. According to them, if Heaven is the eternal abode of those completely cleansed of sin, then how could there be more than one Heaven? How can a person be more than sinless? If salvation or damnation depended solely upon the will of God, then good or bad deeds were ultimately irrelevant to the ultimate destination of the faithful. If works play no part in salvation, then degrees of reward based on works ultimately becomes an irrelevant concept as far as Heaven is concerned.

Not all protestants were united in these affirmations, however. Some, holding to the immense weight of Catholic tradition, held that degrees of glory in Heaven existed but works simply did not play a part in salvation. For them, Jesus and early Christians had indeed mentioned degrees of glory but the old Jewish idea of works in salvation had been transcended by the Savior. With Christ, the concept of works having salvific merit in and of themselves overshadowed the Savior's teachings on the love and mercy of God. God's blessings are lavish and incomparable, and His blessings are just that — an undeservedly received divine gift. God's grace alone determined salvation or damnation, and God alone could manifest his favor upon the elect in granting them degrees of glory in Heaven. Thus, they denied that degrees of glory were merited by good works and that the scriptural doctrine of heavenly reward comes by God's free gift which he bestows upon the righteous because he has promised to do so.

Reform Theology of the sixteenth century heralded a move away from degrees of glory in Heaven, as the protestant rejection of both the merit of works in regard to justification and the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory naturally led to a binary concept of the afterlife — eternal bliss in Heaven or eternal burning torment in Hell.³⁶ Reformers denied that degrees of reward in Heaven were merited, and the notion that we

36. For example, the 1647 *Westminster Confession of Faith* rejected Purgatory and affirmed that after the great judgment day, "the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fulness of joy and refreshing which shall come from the presence of the Lord: but the wicked ... shall be cast into eternal torments, and

could earn any heavenly reward — be it eternal life or varying rewards in the afterlife — was absolutely rejected by orthodox protestants.³⁷ As the centuries progressed, Reform doctrines continued to gain greater weight as western Christianity moved away from Roman Catholicism toward new protestant denominations. The move was geographic as well as theological. As Germany embraced Lutheranism, and England established the Church of England, many earnest Christians left their prior homelands to seek religious and political freedom in America — a new country with no theological or ecumenical ties to old world in Europe.

Joseph Smith and the Restoration of the Doctrine of Degrees of Glory

From its earliest days, America was a land that appealed to those who were eager to free themselves from the economic and ecumenical legacy of western Europe. As such, the Puritans, Baptists, Anabaptists, and many others turned anew to the scriptures (now widely available for reading in English by a more literate audience) for guidance and direction on how to return to the original and pure Christianity described in the New Testament. Affirming that European churches had bloated themselves with centuries of human accretions that cluttered and obscured the primitive church of Jesus Christ, many Americans were zealous to restore early Christianity once again to the Earth. Roger Williams, the seventeenth-century Puritan and founder of Rhode Island, was convinced that Christ's true church had ceased to exist because the New Testament taught that only apostles (or those commissioned by them) had divine authority to establish churches. The chain of apostolic authority had been severed, and no authority existed on Earth to establish churches according to New Testament patterns. Faithful Christians could only wait for God's eventual restoration of lost Zion by commissioning new apostles to proclaim the ancient gospel with divine authority and establish authentic congregations once again on Earth.³⁸

be punished with everlasting destruction" (33:2), <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-confession-faith>.

37. Emma Disley, "Degrees of Glory: Protestant Doctrine and the Concept of Rewards Hereafter," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 42, no. 1 (April 1991): 77-105.

38. C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1998), 57-59.

The American Revolution not only established liberty from political rule, it also granted independence from European churches that were government-established and backed by law. America was a pristine, uncorrupted, and undefiled land. Many religionists saw the new experiment in American democracy as the kind of government God would intend for people to flourish both temporally and spiritually. America's Edenic qualities and abundant resources further fueled the idea that this new nation would be the one to launch the millennial dawn of a *novus ordo seclorum* — a “new order of the ages” — still emblazoned on the Great Seal of the United States today.

In nineteenth-century America, so many religious groups worked to restore ancient Christianity that religious historians now refer to the endeavor as the *Restoration Movement*. Some historians acknowledge that within that movement, “no group used the language of ‘restoration’ more consistently and more effectively than did the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”³⁹ The commitment to the restoration principle was unrelenting as Joseph Smith worked to restore “the very same order of things as observed by the holy Apostles of old.”⁴⁰ More importantly for this discussion, Christianity had almost universally embraced protestant notions of an immediate post-mortem judgment and two diametric afterlife states — Heaven and Hell. The qualifiers for such, however, continued to be strenuously debated by religionists throughout Western society, especially in light of the popularity of the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg circulating throughout New England, who affirmed a Heaven of three distinct degrees.⁴¹

Such was the environment in 1832, when Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were working on an inspired translation of the Bible and pondering specifically on the significance of John 5:29 when “the Lord touched the eyes of our understandings” and they witnessed a sweeping vision of what awaited humankind after death.⁴² The Vision, now

39. *Ibid.*, 94.

40. *History of the Church*, 1:85–86; from “History of the Church” (manuscript), book A–1, p. 42, Church Archives.

41. Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish mystic (1688–1772), was best known for his book *Heaven and Hell*, trans. John C. Ager (Westchester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2009).

42. “The Vision,” in *Revelations in Context: The Stories behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2016), 148–49, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/revelations-in-context/the-vision?lang=eng>.

canonized as D&C 76, outlined varying degrees of glory divided into three kingdoms as the inheritances for almost all of God’s children.

The Celestial Glory

In 1 Corinthians 15:40, Paul used the Greek words *somata epourania* (“bodies heavenly”) that in time would be translated to *corpora caelestia* in the Latin Vulgate and eventually “celestial bodies” by the King James translators. Joseph Smith also used “celestial” in the Vision to denote the highest kingdom of glory in the afterlife, symbolically represented by the sun. In the vision, Joseph learned that those who merit this heavenly abode:

are they who received the testimony of Jesus, and believed on his name and were baptized ... That by keeping the commandments they might be washed and cleansed from all their sins ... And who overcome by faith, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, which the Father sheds forth upon all those who are just and true. ... They are they into whose hands the Father has given all things ... Wherefore, all things are theirs, whether life or death, or things present, or things to come, all are theirs and they are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s. ... These shall dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever and ever. ... These are they who are just men made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood. These are they whose bodies are celestial, whose glory is that of the sun, even the glory of God, the highest of all. (D&C 76: 51–70)

Joseph additionally came to understand two years later in 1834 that “Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom” (D&C 105:5) and two years after that in 1836 that “all who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God” (D&C 137:7). Later, when working to restore the doctrines and ordinances associated with the temple in 1843, it was revealed that “in the celestial glory there are three heavens or degrees; And in order to obtain the highest, a man must enter into ... the new and everlasting covenant of marriage ... He may enter into the other, but that is the end of his kingdom; he cannot have an increase” (D&C 131:1–4). He also learned that those who possess the highest degree would “be

gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them” (D&C 132:20). This further delineation of the Celestial Kingdom into three degrees is notable for two reasons. First, it introduces the idea that there were further divisions within kingdoms as Paul may have intimated with his teaching that “one star differeth from another star in glory” — stars differ in degree from each another and not just differ from the glory of the sun and moon. Second, three degrees within the Celestial Kingdom may have biblical precedent, as the Savior’s parable of the Sower, when viewed eschatologically, mentions that seeds in “good soil” produce differing yields of thirty, sixty, and a hundred-fold among seeds (Matthew 13:8). This three-fold fruitfulness of those celestial (“good soil”) souls would conceivably align the parable as a whole with Joseph Smith’s Vision of kingdoms of glory — outer darkness (wayside), telestial (rocky), terrestrial (thorny), and celestial (good) glories.

Terrestrial Glory

In 1 Corinthians, Paul used the Greek words *somata epigeia* (“bodies earthly”) that in time would be translated to *corpora terrestria* in the Latin Vulgate and eventually “bodies terrestrial” by the King James translators. Paul’s contrast of *epourania*/celestial and *epigaia*/terrestrial bodies (vs 40) may simply reflect his emphasis on the differences between mortal, earthly bodies and immortal, heavenly bodies in the resurrection. Alternately, he may allude to a resurrected “earthly” state that is not heavenly, *per se*, but not purely worldly either. The Jews and early Christians envisioned a future “new earth” as a literal return to an Edenic paradise as originally created (see Revelation 21:1). As such, people that dwell in and on such a paradise would have greater joy than available on Earth, but not have the same glorious experience of those in Heaven. While the doctrines of the Restored Gospel understand this “new earth” paradise state to be temporary (i.e. the Millennium; see Tenth Article of Faith), this sub-celestial realm was seemingly one of permanence to the early Christians. Irenaeus, writing in the late second century CE, quotes the earlier church father Papias in observing that:

Those who are deemed worthy of an abode in heaven shall go there, others shall enjoy the delights of Paradise, and others shall possess the splendour of the city [New Jerusalem]; for everywhere the Savior will be seen, according as they shall be worthy who see Him. ... There is this distinction between the habitation of those who produce an hundredfold, and that of those who produce sixty-fold, and that of those who produce

thirtyfold; for the first will be taken up into the heavens, the second class will dwell in Paradise, and the last will inhabit the city; and that on this account the Lord said, “In my Father’s house are many mansions:” for all things belong to God, who supplies all with a suitable dwelling-place.⁴³

Regardless of Paul’s intent in his writing to the Corinthian saints, Joseph Smith also adopted the word “Terrestrial” in the vision of 1832 to articulate those souls of this glory:

are the spirits of men ... who received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh, but afterwards received it. ... These are they who receive of his glory, but not of his fulness. These are they who receive of the presence of the Son, but not of the fulness of the Father. Wherefore, they are bodies terrestrial, and not bodies celestial, and differ in glory as the moon differs from the sun. These are they who are not valiant in the testimony of Jesus; wherefore, they obtain not the crown over the kingdom of our God. (D&C 76:73–79)

Telestial Glory

While Paul refers to *doxa asteron* (“the glory of the stars”) in 1 Corinthians 15:41, he doesn’t categorize it as the others. Joseph Smith used “telestial” in the Vision to denote the most diminutive kingdom of glory in the afterlife, symbolically represented by the stars. While the Greek root *tele-* means “far away” and reasonably describes a degree of glory farthest from the abode of God, there seems to be no etymological precedent to the Prophet’s coining of the term. It is not found in the 1828 edition of Webster’s dictionary, or in the Bible, or in the Book of Mormon. Joseph learned that:

These are they who received not the gospel of Christ, neither the testimony of Jesus. These are they who deny not the Holy Spirit. ... These are they who shall not be redeemed from the devil until the last resurrection, until the Lord, even Christ the Lamb, shall have finished his work. These are they who receive not of [God the Father’s] fulness in the eternal world, but of the Holy Spirit. ...

43. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*. 5:36.1–2. See also Papias, *Fragment V*, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0125.htm>.

These are they who are liars, and sorcerers, and adulterers, and whoremongers, and whosoever loves and makes a lie. These are they who suffer the wrath of God on earth. These are they who suffer the vengeance of eternal fire. These are they who are cast down to Hell and suffer the wrath of Almighty God, until the fulness of times, when Christ shall have subdued all enemies under his feet, and shall have perfected his work. (D&C 76:82–86; 103–106)

Impact and Further Teachings on Degrees of Glory

After three centuries of protestant affirmation of a Heaven without degrees, Joseph Smith's vision was a very real paradigm shift that was difficult for many in the Church to grasp. The early Saints had strong backgrounds in protestantism and saw the concept of eternal reward and punishment as a strictly black and white issue, with the wicked thrust down to Hell and the righteous receiving the glories of paradise.⁴⁴ Brigham Young remarked that "It was a great trial to many ... My traditions were such, that when the Vision came first to me, it was directly contrary and opposed to my former education. I said, Wait a little. I did not reject it; but I could not understand it."⁴⁵ Brigham came to know and understand it in time with much thought and prayer. Brigham's brother Joseph Young also admitted "I could not believe it at first ... [but] after I had prayed over it and Joseph [Smith] had explained it I could see it was nothing but good sense accompanying the power of God."⁴⁶ The Prophet, sensitive to the delicate witness to the Restoration that many early Saints held, asked the Twelve Apostles to keep the deeper doctrines to themselves until the Church was more populous and mature. However, several were unable to contain their enthusiasm for the Vision and taught it anyway, creating a stumbling block for some potential new converts. A few members of the Church even rebelled, leading to a disfellowship, but most rejoiced in the new and more commodious concept of Heaven than popularly known.⁴⁷

44. Taylor Halverson, "The Kingdoms of Glory": D&C 76; 131; 132:19–24; 137," The Interpreter Foundation, (website), December 7, 2013, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/res-the-kingdoms-of-glory-d-131-13219-24-137/>.

45. "The Vision," 150.

46. *Ibid.*, 150–151.

47. Terry L. Givens, "How Limited is Postmortal Progression?," *BYU Studies* 60, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 3, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/how-limited-is-postmortal-progression/>.

As time passed and the Church grew both in number and maturity, the restored doctrine of degrees of glory in Heaven became securely established with the Saints. Thousands of years earlier, the apocalyptic Jews blended cosmological and spiritual elements together in their worship and literature, and the Saints would do the same, blending sun, moon, stars, and even constellations into the architecture of the Salt Lake Temple.⁴⁸ In time, additional Apostles supplied their own perspectives. James E. Talmage wrote:

The three kingdoms of widely differing glories are themselves organized on an orderly plan of gradation. We have seen that the telestial kingdom comprises a multitude of subdivisions; this also is the case, we are told, with the celestial; and, by analogy, we conclude that a similar condition prevails in the terrestrial. Thus the innumerable degrees of merit amongst mankind are provided for in an infinity of graded glories. The Celestial kingdom is supremely honored by the personal ministrations of the Father and the Son. The Terrestrial kingdom will be administered through the higher, without a fulness of glory. The Telestial is governed through the ministrations of the Terrestrial, by “angels who are appointed to minister for them.”⁴⁹

Later, Bruce R. McConkie wrote:

Rewards granted individuals in eternity will vary between and within kingdoms. Only those who are sealed in the new and everlasting covenant of marriage and who thereafter keep the terms and conditions of that covenant will attain the highest of three heavens within the celestial kingdom. (D&C 131:1–4.) Inhabitants of the telestial kingdom will differ in glory among themselves “as one star differs from another star in glory.” (D&C 76:98; 1 Cor. 15:41). Similar variations will exist among inheritors of the terrestrial kingdom. (D&C 76:71–79).⁵⁰

48. Richard O. Cowan, “Latter-day Houses of the Lord: Developments in Their Design and Function,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 47 (2021): 99.

49. James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1899), 420.

50. Bruce R. McConkie, “Kingdoms of Glory,” in *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 304.

These observations of additional degrees of glory even within kingdoms implies ample place for the many degrees of reward given to the many degrees of “fruitfulness” of the children of God, truly reflecting the Savior’s teaching that “in my Father’s house are many mansions” (John 14:2). This new understanding of the nature of Heaven and eternal progression gave rise to speculation among Church members and leaders about whether souls could progress to different degrees of glory over time. Nineteenth-century Church leaders’ remarks generally weighed in favor of progression between kingdoms, while twentieth-century Church leaders’ remarks generally weighed against it. In summarizing the debate, Givens affirms that the doctrine has not conclusively been settled within the Church.⁵¹

Conclusion

While New Testament teachings brought a clearer focus to the concept, Heaven remained the somewhat mysterious habitation of God for early Christians, and no firm orthodoxy existed on the nature of Heaven. However, the religious literature of the few centuries before and after the Savior evidences that apocalyptic Jews and early Christians were rapidly embracing an understanding of Heaven where angels and the righteous dead fill multiple heavens, worship with different capacities and glories, and perform differing functions in administering the divine order of God. After the apostolic period, Christianity continued to embrace degrees of glory until the Reformation. Protestant Reform Theology enthroned the primacy of grace in salvation, rejected the merit of works in justification, and affirmed a single heavenly state for the faithful. But in the nineteenth century, Joseph Smith’s vision of three degrees of glory restored a doctrine that was original to those of the Savior’s time but had been lost for centuries.

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51. Givens, “How Limited is Postmortal Progression?” 136–38.

He served a full-time mission from 1989–1991 and has served in numerous ward and stake capacities, but his favorites have been those of Seminary teacher and bishop. He and his wife, Teri, are the proud parents of two sons and eagerly look forward to grandchildren in the near future.

