EDITORIAL

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THE PROBLEM IS OLDER THAN WE THINK. WE JUST DO NOT KNOW WHAT HEAVEN WILL BE LIKE. This is not a failure of Christian art in the modern era, or an artefact of a new scientific worldview that has dispensed with old 'three-decker' pictures of the universe, or a result of the lack of faith in Western society. We never did know what heaven would be like. The greatest Christian poets – Dante; Milton – painted vivid and compelling, and in Dante's case very funny, pictures of hell. But heaven? Dante's *Paradiso* never captured the popular imagination the way his *Inferno* did, and it is not hard for any reader to see why. It has none of the irony, none of the (slightly salacious) pointed social commentary, none of the vividness of the earlier *cantica*. One-time enemies pour fulsome praise on each other; theological conundrums are debated at length; and heaven itself is described as a complex symbolic system in language that the most astute commentators have confessed to be unintelligible. And an unintelligible, unimaginable promise neither excites nor stirs to action.

In this issue we have tried to face up to the problem: how can we narrate or describe heaven, and what difference should it make? Our key resource, of course, is the Bible. But Scripture itself is reticent in describing heaven. All we have are charged symbolic pictures, obscure and deliberately allusive, intended by the writers to gesture towards the inexpressible. Isaiah sees heaven as the throne room of God, and describes everything except the central reality: a throne; a robe; attending angels – but the LORD whom Isaiah saw? Not a word of description; and then the house fills with smoke, and the vision is obscured (Is 6.1–4). Ezekiel gives us a long, if obscure, descriptions of the angels around the heavenly throne, but the closer we get to the heart of the matter, the more the language falls apart: 'something like a throne'; 'something that seemed like a human form'; 'something like gleaming amber'; 'something that looked like fire enclosed all around'. And, at the end, 'This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD' (Ezek 1.4–28). The appearance of a likeness is all we have.

The New Testament is hardly better: the one extended description we have begins with 'a rainbow that looks like an emerald' (Rev 4.3), already condemning us to simple unintelligibility. Scripture bears constant witness to the fact that God's reality is beyond our comprehension, beyond the capacity of our language to describe. And the reality of heaven is God's reality. That is the challenge we face, the challenge we have given to the writers in this issue.

Justin Thacker and Edward Adams both press the biblical imagery, particularly the visions of heaven in the book of Revelation. Thacker shows us some of what we can learn from these pictures, if we manage not to get distracted by things we don't understand. Heaven is a society defined by the worship of God, real and physical, and marked by God's presence. Adams focuses on the picture of the heavenly city coming down to earth in Revelation 21, and argues that we can know something of the reality there described. In particular, he claims we can know enough to gain guidance on how to respond to some of the most pressing ethical questions of our day, those concerning our relation to the environment. Our other professional biblical scholar in this issue, Howard Marshall, looks at the language of the Kingdom of God in the Gospels, exploring how Jesus' announcement that the Kingdom is at hand might help us to understand the coming reality of heaven.

Finding the biblical imagery difficult, we have often replaced it culturally with pictures of our own devising that seem more helpful to us. Dominic Milroy explores the weakness of the imagery that we tend to use of heaven, noting that we still borrow images from an earlier age, and that they no longer communicate successfully to a new culture. How, then, do we speak of heaven? Milroy identifies the essence of the issue as the fact that our lives today are 'heavy with consequence'. Even if we cannot describe the nature of that consequence, we should recognise the reality of it, and so live in the light of it.

If sermons are any guide, the most successful recent imagery of heaven was given to us by CS Lewis. A friend of mine once commented that the default beliefs about heaven and hell amongst Christians today amounted to 'a Narnian eschatology', so prevalent and so important were images drawn from *The Last Battle*. Colin Duriez offers an account of how Lewis came to be so fascinated by heaven, drawing on the telling descriptions in *The Great Divorce* as well as the better-known Narnian material. Lewis has sometimes been accused of being 'Platonist', an accusation that raises one of the running themes of this issue: Christian belief in heaven is not belief in an ethereal, dreamlike world less-real than this one, but belief that there we will encounter true reality. Thacker and Adams point out the physicality of heaven, a point brilliantly made by Lewis in *The Great Divorce*, where the grass of heaven is so solid, so much more real, that it cuts the feet of

▶ those who, not being citizens of heaven yet, are not as real as it is.

How do we become real enough for heaven? The answer of much of the Christian tradition has been the doctrine of purgatory, a place of preparation and sanctification, where we are made fit to be citizens of reality. This doctrine was denied at the Reformation, but Jerry Walls, writing as a Methodist and an Evangelical, suggests that perhaps that decision needs re-visiting. If we think of purgatory as a place where, somehow, merits lacking in the sacrifice of Christ are made up, then certainly no Evangelical (and no Catholic either, I suspect) will accept the doctrine, but Walls' account is rather different: we need to be made ready for heaven, and purgatory on his account is the place where that happens.

Walls also notes the pastoral use of belief in purgatory, which was stressed as early as St Augustine. Our final contribution, from Eric Stoddart, picks up on this pastoral question. Stoddart asks two important questions. First, what does our liturgical and homiletic practice at funerals, and our pastoral practice with the bereaved, reveal about our real beliefs about heaven, hell and salvation? Second, if we believe what we (some of us) say we believe about who will be excluded from heaven – beliefs that have generally been considered orthodox in the mainline churches through history – then how can we discover authentic and appropriately caring pastoral practice? Stoddart believes that these questions might be sharp enough to force us to revise our theology; others will come to different conclusions, but there can be no doubt that the questions are important and insightful.

In the contributions to this issue of *The Bible in TransMission*, then, we find a recognition of the difficulty of language about heaven, but also a testimony that in the big questions of the day and the most decisive moments of individual lives, our beliefs about heaven will shape our responses here on earth. ■