

“Heaven in the Qur'ān and Christian Testament”

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Introduction

In both Christianity and Islam, heaven exists and has always existed but there are different beliefs on how the living can engage with it. This paper provides an overview of some of these Abrahamic religions's relationships with heaven, highlighting two key dissimilarities. The scope is intentionally constrained in addressing this vast and complex topic. I am not attempting to be comprehensive or to present all variants of belief. I will not discuss the specifics of physical resurrection, interim or last judgements, the Christian Jesus versus the Muslim Jesus (*ʿIsā ibn Maryam*), or a variety of other tempting and fascinating topics. My comparisons will include the physicality of heaven, how some artists have envisioned how heaven looks, engaging with heaven during life, orthodox beliefs about heaven, when heaven opens, and mystical or heavenly cities. Writing this paper has become a journey of discovery as much as a research project. I keep finding new materials and points of view on *eschatology* and the end times. *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* offers this traditional definition, “eschatology comprised the ‘four last things’ that Christian faith expects to be the destiny of humans at the end of time: resurrection, last judgement, heaven, and hell.”¹ Comparative eschatology is a big subject but considering the more limited question of what Islam and Christianity have to say about heaven seems possible in the space of a relatively short paper.

The first dissimilarity considered here is the pattern of physicality in Quranic descriptions of heaven in comparison to the incorporeal generalities more common in the Bible's Christian

¹ Richard Bauckham, “Eschatology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, Iain Torrence, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 306.

Testament. St. John's University History Professor Nerina Rustomji compares what the Muslims call *The Garden* and *The Fire* with the Christian Heaven and Hell, contrasting them as an afterworld and an afterlife,

Islamic eschatology provides an *afterworld*, while Christian eschatology focuses on an *afterlife*....Christian texts in general present the quality of future lives through relationships with humans, angels, and the divine. By contrast, Muslims enjoy an afterlife within the parameters of a physically described afterworld. The connotation of "The Garden" and "The Fire" involves spaces or objects more than states of being."²

While Rustomji's summary seems generally accurate, I will discuss that some evangelical Christian groups have a more physical understanding of heaven comparable to that of Muslims.

The second dissimilarity I consider is whether Islam's Garden and Christianity's Kingdom of Heaven can be an experience or relationship with God that may both begin in the present for the living and also be fully realized in the future for the dead. This is expressed in the Christian theological framework, *already but not yet*, also called *inaugurated eschatology*.

I am Christian so I have sought advice, support, and perspective from several Muslim friends and colleagues in developing this paper. As a jail Chaplain (Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy, CIC volunteer since 2015, and CIC Staff Chaplain since 2022), I am blessed to work alongside Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Chaplains in supporting the diverse community of inmates. Thanks to CIC's lead volunteer Muslim Chaplain Oktay Eribil and CIC's Muslim Staff Chaplain, Mohammad Shabbir, for their reflections and reading recommendations and ongoing support. In addition, I very much appreciate the generous suggestions from Graduate Theological Union's Director, Madrasa-Midrasha Program, and Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies, Mahjabeen Dhala, and from GTU Instructor Fateme Montazeri, each of whom is leading a class I am taking this term.

² Nerina Rustomji, *The Garden and Fire: Heaven and Hell in Islamic Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), xvi-xvii.

Qur'ān passages are from the M.A.S. Abdel Haleem translation,³ and Bible passages are from the *Holy Bible - New Revised Standard Version - Updated Edition*.⁴ Use the web links in the *Images* section at the end of the paper for detailed exploration of the paintings.

Heaven: How Physical?

The *physicality* of heaven in the Qur'ān is represented by these scripture passages.

As for those who believe and do good deeds—We do not let the reward of anyone who does a good deed go to waste—they will have Gardens of lasting bliss graced with flowing streams. There they will be adorned with bracelets of gold. There they will wear green garments of fine silk and brocade. There they will be comfortably seated on soft chairs. What a blessed reward! What a pleasant resting place! (Q18:30-31).

God's true servants... will have familiar provisions—fruits—and will be honoured in gardens of delight; seated on couches, facing one another. A drink will be passed round among them from a flowing spring: white, delicious to those who taste it, causing no headiness or intoxication. With them will be spouses—modest of gaze and beautiful of eye—like protected eggs (Q37:40-49).

On couches of well-woven cloth they will sit facing each other; everlasting youths will go round among them with glasses, flagons, and cups of a pure drink that causes no headache or intoxication; [there will be] any fruit they choose; the meat of any bird they like; and beautiful companions like hidden pearls: a reward for what they used to do" (Q56:15-24).

Some faces on that Day will be radiant with bliss, well pleased with their labour, in a lofty garden, where they will hear no idle talk, with a flowing spring, raised couches, goblets set out, cushions in rows, and carpets spread (Q88:8-16).

Luxurious clothes and surroundings, delicious food and drink, and lovely consorts are often mentioned in these texts. Rustomji writes of the purpose of these joys, "Life in the Garden is an everlasting banquet. In the Qur'an, the Garden creates the opportunity to experience fully the joy that could not exist for those who toiled on earth for Allah."⁵ She also writes that in hadith, heaven's physical pleasures are accompanied by worship and glorification of Allah.⁶

³ M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'ān* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴ National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, *Holy Bible - New Revised Standard Version - Updated Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Bibles, 2021).

⁵ Rustomji, 83.

⁶ Rustomji, 84.

The Christian heaven is also full of the glory of God, as seen in Matthew 24:30, Luke 19:38, John 12:28, and Acts 7:55. Some Christian Testament verses speak of feasting in heaven (Matthew 8:11, Luke 13:29, Luke 14:15); however, other Christian Testament references to luxury and feasting are more negative (Luke 7:25, Luke 16:19, 2 Peter 2:13, James 5:5). The Christian Testament agrees with the Qur'ān that those who behave rightly will be richly rewarded in heaven. However, except in the mystical Book of Revelation, physical details of heaven are lacking in most Christian scriptures. In the Gospels, there are many intriguing references to heavenly rewards and treasures (Matthew 5:12, Matthew 6:20, Luke 6:23) but only a few descriptions, such as when Jesus says, "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 18:10). Even the most famous physical description of heaven in the Gospels is not as specific as those in the Qur'ān. Jesus says to his disciples,

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also (John 14:1-3).

In addition to these, the Christian Testament says what is *not* in heaven. In Matthew 22:30, Jesus says, "For in the resurrection people neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels of God in heaven." There is a similar passage in Mark 12:24-25. Luke 20:35-36 extends the teaching to exclude both marriage and death, "But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels." In fifth century North Africa, Saint Augustine wrote a simple summary of the Christian view of the afterlife, "The City of God

holds that eternal life is the supreme good and eternal death the supreme evil, and that we should live rightly in order to obtain the one and avoid the other.”⁷

What Does Heaven Look Like?

In The *City of God*, Saint Augustine wrote, “To tell the truth, I have no real notion of what eternal life would be like, for the simple reason that I know of no sensible experience to which it can be related.”⁸ Here are two paintings whose artists stepped up to the challenge of creating views of heaven. Both of them include a large number of angels. A Christian representation is Michaelangelo’s Renaissance masterpiece of 1511 painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (in the Vatican, Italy), the heart of Roman Catholic leadership. God is surrounded by angels, reaching toward his new human creation.

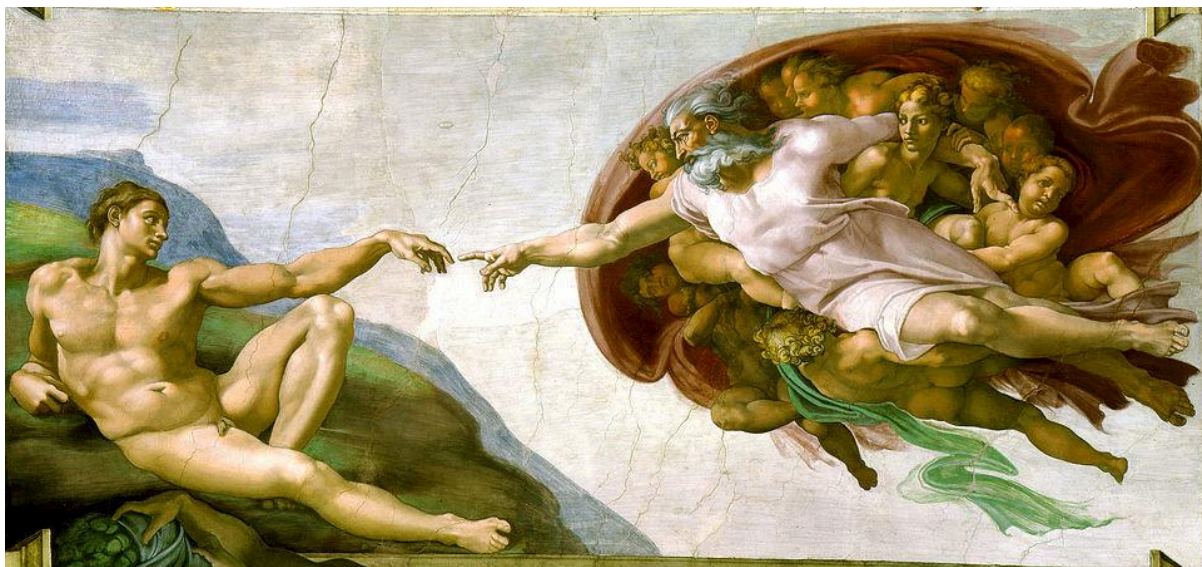


Figure 1: *The Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo, 1511. On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City, Italy.

The Muslim painting is from a book of the 16th century Safavid dynasty (in what is now Iran). In it, Adam is riding a snake (or perhaps a dragon) and Eve is on a peacock as they leave the Garden / Paradise. The first people are attended by angels, or at least angels are present even

⁷ Edward Condon, Ed., *Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell / Sayings of the Fathers of the Church* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 51.

⁸ Condon, 64.

if not all of them seem to be paying attention. One of my classes used this image for a theological reflection. The students enjoyed noticing that some angels seemed more interested in engaging with each other than the dramatic event of humankind's expulsion from Eden.



Figure 2: Adam and Eve, cast out from the Garden, Painting from a copy of the Fālnāmeḥ (Book of Omens) ascribed to Ja'far al-Sādiq, 1550.

Heaven While Alive - Visions and Visits

Going to heaven can be a source of fascination, and, from the number of stories and visions, the potential for seeing heaven while alive seems particularly engaging. There are a variety of reports over thousands of years of either direct or visionary engagements with heaven or with angels from heaven. The Bible mentions angels over three hundred and twenty five times, and includes almost eight hundred references to *heaven* (although many references probably mean *the sky* rather than God's home).⁹ Scripture records at least two people who

⁹ "Keyword Search," Bible Gateway, accessed 21 May 2025, <https://www.biblegateway.com/>.

bodily visited heaven and returned alive to tell about it. Others, including the prophets Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), are said to have gone bodily to heaven.



Figure 4: *Elijah Taken Up in a Chariot of Fire*, by Giuseppe Angeli, c. 1740.

One who did return was the Prophet Muhammad on his Night Journey and Ascension (*Mi'raj* and *Isrā'*) in Q17:1, Q17:60, and Q53:1-18, with more details in hadith. Rustomji writes,

The Garden and the Fire are not realms that believers can enter until the end of time. Believers can dream about or create narrations about the afterworld; however, according to Islamic narratives, only Muhammad was privileged with an actual visit. For everyone else, the Garden and the Fire were unseen worlds whose signs only God could manifest in the earthly world.¹⁰

The Night Journey is traditionally considered to have happened before the Prophet moved from Mecca to Medina in about 622 CE. Some of Muhammad's companions said they saw and visited the future world through visions and dreams but not in their physical bodies.¹¹

Another living man who returned from heaven is Saint Paul, who in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 reported a vision of "a person in Christ," thought to be Paul himself, who was taken alive to the "third heaven" but is not allowed to say what he saw there. Saint Peter describes a vision of heaven in Acts 10:9-16. None of these visits or visions are the subject of this paper which

¹⁰ Rustomji, 3079.

¹¹ Rustomji, 22.

addresses regular people going to heaven after they die. This paper also does not include earthly appearances by the dead or ghosts, such as Saul’s conversation with the Prophet Samuel, in the Hebrew Bible in 1 Samuel 28:3-25. There are many (controversial) news reports of out of body or near-death experiences;¹² however, while scriptural stories of direct engagements with heaven are few, they have a lasting effect. For example, Rustomji notes, “Muhammad’s visions during an eclipse and his journey to the heavens reinforced the promise of an afterworld... Muhammad’s special access to the afterworld encouraged a culture of envisioning the Garden, since certain Muslims began to dream of scenes of the Garden within their earthly lives.”¹³



Figure 4: 1543 illustration of Muhammad on his Night Journey, the Mi'raj, from the *Khamsa* of Nizami Ganjavi created for Shah Tahmasp I.

¹² Eben Alexander III, “Near-Death Experiences, The Mind-Body Debate & the Nature of Reality,” *Missouri Medicine*, 112(1):17–21 (Jan-Feb 2015), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6170087/>.

¹³ Rustomji, xv.

Orthodoxy and Beliefs About Heaven

According to University of Michigan Professor of Philosophy Imran Aijaz, the doctrinal core of Sunni orthodoxy with regard to heaven and hell is, “Faithful Muslims, individuals who practically adhere to their belief in Islamic monotheism, are rewarded with heaven.

Non-Muslims, individuals who refuse to adhere practically to their belief in Islamic monotheism and culpably reject faith, are punished in hell.”¹⁴ However, when Dr. Riyad Salim Al Issa of Universiti Putra Malaysia and his colleagues studied the afterlife expectations of Muslim university students, they found differences in understanding. In their cross-cultural study they write, “Most Muslims believe that their ultimate destiny will be heaven if they maintain their Islamic identity no matter how consistent their behavior is with the teachings of Islam.”¹⁵

While there is great variation of belief among Christian denominations and groups, some seem to practice their faith on an understanding that once Jesus Christ is accepted as Lord and Savior, little else is required to get to heaven. This controversial theological belief is sometimes called *Once Saved - Always Saved*,¹⁶ or *Eternal Security*.¹⁷ Evangelical Christian author and Baptist Pastor David Jeremiah disagrees with this understanding. He writes,

We don’t become godly through the normal course of life. We don’t wake up one morning and find we are godly... The Bible tells us that if we’re going to become godly people in this generation, we’ve got to put some exercise into it. We’ve got to exert ourselves; it doesn’t just happen to us.... Someday we’ll live in heaven with a holy God, and that should motivate us to work hard to become more like Him now in holiness and godly conduct.¹⁸

¹⁴ Imran Aijaz, “The Unreality of Traditional Islamic Theism’s Views on Belief, Providence, and Eschatology: A Rejoinder to Tabur,” *Cambridge University Press - Religious Studies*, 1-21 (2024), 1-2.

¹⁵ Salim Al-Issa, Steven Eric Krauss, Samsilah Roslan, Haslinda Abdullah, “The Heaven or to Hell: Are Muslims’ Afterlife Hope and Fear Balanced? A Cross-Cultural Study,” *Review of Religious Research*, 62 (2020), 364

¹⁶ “Is Once Saved Always Saved Biblical?” GotQuestions, accessed 19 May 2025, <https://www.gotquestions.org/once-saved-always-saved.html>.

¹⁷ Leila Miller, “Where is ‘Eternal Security’ in the Bible? Hint: Nowhere,” *Catholic Answers*, 19 May 2017, <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/where-is-eternal-security-in-the-bible-hint-nowhere>.

¹⁸ David Jeremiah, *Revealing the Mysteries of Heaven* (Southlake, TX: Breakfast for Seven, 2020), 263.

Orthodox Christianity and Islam seem very similar in their requirements for a lifelong and active dedication to God with heaven as the reward, as well as in criticism of a loose interpretation of those requirements by some followers.

Engaging with Heaven: Already and Not Yet - Inaugurated Eschatology

In the Christian Testament, both the living and the dead will experience the Day of Judgement (Matthew 24:29-31, 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18). There are differences of opinion among Christians on whether heaven may both begin in the present for the living and also be fully realized in the future for the dead. In the third century, early Christian theologian Tertullian wrote, “As long as the earth remains, Heaven is not open; in fact, the gates are barred. When the world shall have passed away, the portals of paradise will be open.”¹⁹ The theology of many Christian churches today has evolved from Tertullian’s understanding.

In oldest Gospel of the Christian Testament, Jesus’s ministry starts with these words, “Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’” (Mark 1:14). The Gospel of Mark seems to have been written down between 65 and 73,²⁰ around the time of the destruction by the Romans of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, about forty years after Jesus died. There is a similar text in Matthew 4:17, “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” The Gospel of Luke presents a longer version of the story,

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁹ Condon, 54.

²⁰ Mark Allen Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: MI: Baker Academic, 2018) 144.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (Luke 4:16-21).

Christian churches often interpret this to mean that as Jesus’s ministry began, the end times started and some of the Kingdom of Heaven opened for the faithful, to be fully realized on Judgement Day. When the story of Jesus starting his ministry is considered in sermons, it is often within the explicit theological framework of *already and not yet*.

George Eldon Ladd (1911-1982) popularized the already/not yet framework based on an approach first published in 1930 by Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949). Ladd was a Baptist Pastor and Fuller Theological Seminary Professor of New Testament Theology. He writes, “If a majority of scholars have approached a consensus, it is that the Kingdom is in some real sense both present and future...The future eschatological Kingdom has already begun its activity in Jesus’ mission.” He continues that for some scholars, “the Kingdom was altogether future, but it was so very near that its power could already be felt—as the dawn precedes sunrise.”²¹

Retired Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of St Andrews, Richard Bauckham writes in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, “In New Testament scholarship a broad consensus emerged that the eschatology of the New Testament writers lies somewhere between ‘consistent’ and ‘realized’ eschatology, a position sometimes labelled

²¹ George Eldon Ladd, Donald A. Hagner, ed. *A Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993.

‘inaugurated’ eschatology. There is a tension between the ‘already’ of experience and the ‘not yet’ of eschatological fulfilment.”²² LCC International Research Fellow Dr. David Wenkel summarizes, “Inaugurated eschatology ...employs an already/not yet tension and describes the future as having broken into the reality of this present world...An eschatology that is ‘inaugurated’ means that something has already begun but is not yet complete. It is characterized by elements of ‘fulfillment’ and ‘new beginnings.’”²³ Interestingly, Bauckham indicates that this theological framework is not consistent across the Christian Testament. He writes, “the emphasis varies in different New Testament authors—for example, between the strong emphasis on the ‘already’ in the Gospel of John and the strong emphasis on the ‘not yet’ in the book of Revelation—but most scholars see some element of each throughout.”²⁴ This already/not yet theological framework was not limited to Christians but was also used by a range of religious sects and movements in ancient Judaism, including the Qumran community near where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.²⁵ Today, the already/not yet framework is accepted (or at least discussed) in a wide range of Christian denominations and communities, including the Episcopal Church of which I am a member.²⁶ The national Episcopal Church website includes this in its definition of *eschatology*,

Some approaches to eschatology emphasize the coming of the Kingdom of God as a radical break from the existence of creation as we know it, or a breaking into time from the future. Other approaches emphasize that the power of God’s Kingdom was inaugurated in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, and that God’s power for salvation

²² Bauckham, 307.

²³ David H. Wenkel, “Kingship and Thrones for All Christians: Paul’s Inaugurated Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 4–6,” *The Expository Times*. Vol.128 no 2. November 2016, 64.

²⁴ Bauckham, 307.

²⁵ Wenkel, 64.

²⁶ Mary France Schjonberg, “Already and Not Yet, Easter Day.” *Episcopal Church – Sermons That Work*, 2014. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/already-and-not-yet-easter-day-a-2014/>.

and the fulfillment of all things is currently active in history.²⁷

The evangelical Vineyard Church includes already/not yet in the second sentence of its “Introduction to Core Values: a People of the Kingdom of God,”²⁸ That is, both older Protestant denominations like the Episcopal Church and the evangelical nondenominational groups like Vineyard Church commonly use the inaugurated eschatology framework.

One of my favorite public YouTube channels is called “Ready to Harvest” that presents its mission as, “Christian Denominations explained in a neutral and concise way.”²⁹ This well-researched site began in 2014, features over four hundred videos, and has almost two hundred thousand regular subscribers. Popular video topics include profiles and comparisons of Christian denominations and groups, with analyses of their theology. Some videos discuss how churches engage with eschatological topics including the end of days, Judgement Day, the Tribulation and Rapture. The channel’s creator identifies himself only as *Joshua*, a professor at a Baptist Bible college.³⁰ The channel makes an overt effort to be unbiased and seems pitched toward a more educated audience; however, it has very little to say about heaven itself. For example, in the twenty-minute-long 2022 video, “Christian Eschatology Explained,”³¹ and its sequel, “Lesser Known Views in Christian Eschatology,”³² most of the discussion of the end times compares Premillennial versus Postmillennial versus Amillennial beliefs about the time before the Last Judgement, from Preterist, Idealist, Historicist, and Futurist points of view. In the graphic developed in these videos, inaugurated eschatology holds the broader middle ground

²⁷ Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, eds., *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church: A User Friendly Reference for Episcopalians* (New York: Church Publishing, 2000), <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/eschatology/>.

²⁸ Vineyard USA, “Core Values & Beliefs,” 9, *Vineyard USA*, accessed 9 May 2025, <https://vineyardusa.org/Vineyard-Core-Values-Beliefs.pdf>.

²⁹ “Welcome,” *Ready to Harvest*, accessed 20 May 2025, <https://readytoharvest.com/welcome/>.

³⁰ “Hello, I’m Joshua,” *Ready to Harvest*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6x4GC0YKoM>.

³¹ “Christian Eschatology Explained,” *Ready to Harvest*, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyaQiI70Bqs>.

³² “Lesser Known Views in Christian Eschatology,” *Ready to Harvest*, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRSHDfQxhco&t=69s>.

between realized and unrealized eschatology. George Ladd is identified in “Lesser Known Views in Christian Eschatology” as a Futurist Premillennialist (not a Dispensationalist).³³

To keep this paper shorter, I will not offer a deep dive on each of these theological categories but I do encourage my reader to watch the videos. Note that despite all of the charts, definitions, comparisons, and complex analyses, “Ready to Harvest” videos rarely mention heaven. It seems that for many, the events and actions leading to heaven are deeply fascinating but the place itself is only lightly considered.

The theological framework inaugurated eschatology does not seem to have a direct parallel in Muslim scripture or orthodox belief. My go-to basic text on Islam, *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, only mentions *eschatology* twice in passing and the index does not include *heaven*. The Qur'ān indicates in many places that Allah is very near to humankind, as in Q50:16, “We created man - We know what his soul whispers to him: We are closer to him than his jugular vein.” Similar indications of God’s closeness are in Q2:186 and Q8:24. When I consulted him for guidance, Chaplain Mohammed Shabbir wrote, “Islam has some elements of inaugurated eschatology, especially in the *Barzakh* (the period between death and resurrection) and divine nearness, but its framework remains predominantly futurist.”³⁴ A passage quoted by *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*³⁵ that seems to support Brother Shabbir’s assertion of Islam’s futurist, post-death, focus is Q35:9, “It is God who sends forth the winds; they raise up the clouds; We drive them to a dead land and with them revive the earth after its death: such will be the Resurrection.” Other resurrection verses include Q23:16, Q23:99-100, and Q16:38.

³³ “Lesser Known Views in Christian Eschatology,” video time 6:51-7:50.

³⁴ Mohammad Shabbir, personal email to Katy Dickinson, dated 11 May 2025.

³⁵ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2006), 90.

Sufi thinkers and mystics sometimes touched on related cosmological concepts that inspire beneficial contemplation. Rustomji writes,

In his opus *al-Futuhat al-makkiyya* (Meccan Illumination), Ibn al-‘Arabi develops the eschatological themes further by discussing the Garden and the Fire. Al-Ghazali and Ibn al-‘Arabi’s works suggest some thinkers were formulating ways that people could live within the world and see its sanctified meaning through religiously guided perception ...al-Ghazali and Ibn al-‘Arabi’s theories suggest that when believers were able and willing to look beyond the object and into its divinely created manifestation, their perceptions could also yield greater insight into the world.³⁶

Like Sufis, since ancient times Christians and Jews have used mystical or visionary texts to inspire and guide believers, famously in the Bible’s Book of Daniel and Book of Revelation. Whether or not these scriptures depict true visions, they do potentially provide insights and comfort from considering the future in a physical context.

Heavenly or Mystical Cities - Cities of God



Figure 5: John of Patmos watches the descent of New Jerusalem from God in a 14th-century tapestry. “La Jérusalem céleste,” extraite de la Tapisserie de l'Apocalypse du Château d'Angers, France.

³⁶ Rustomji, 129.

For many evangelical Christian groups, discussion of heaven is heavily, sometimes exclusively, focused on the last two chapters of the final book in the Christian Testament, the Book of Revelation. This mystical book by John of Patmos was written around the year 95 CE and presents expansive visions and prophecies about the end times. Revelation Chapters 21 and 22 describe a holy city, starting with, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Revelation 21:1-2). Powell writes about the continuing controversy about this book, “throughout history, Revelation has proved to be one of the most popular books in the Bible among people who lack formal (much less, theological) education, especially those who belong to lower economic classes and/ or marginalized social groups.”³⁷ He concludes the chapter, “The book of Revelation often has created problems for theological leaders in the church, who have not always known what to make of it.”³⁸

The Christian Testament description of a mystical city is similar to an even more ancient apocalyptic vision included in the Dead Sea Scroll called “The New Jerusalem Scroll.” This was found in the caves near Qumran, Israel, dated from about the third century BCE, probably inspired by the Hebrew Bible’s Ezekiel 40-48.³⁹ The website of a current Dead Sea Scrolls museum exhibit describes the Aramaic text, “In the text an angel reveals the New Jerusalem...The city’s dimensions are enormous and totally unrealistic. While the Temple of Jerusalem was still standing, apocalyptic and eschatological speculations about the future Jerusalem and the future Temple seem to have been a point of interest by the community.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Powell, 531-532.

³⁸ Powell, 551.

³⁹ “New Jerusalem / 4Q554,” *Dead Sea Scrolls: The Exhibition at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum* - Nov. 22, 2024 - Sep. 2, 2025, (Exhibition website.) Accessed 14 May 2025. <https://dssusaexhibit.com/new-jerusalem-4q554/>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Powell lists eighteen common features of apocalypses (a genre of literature presenting visions by a seer who is sometimes transported to a heavenly or spiritual realm), many of which are found in the Book of Revelation.⁴¹

David Jeremiah has written numerous books including several about heaven and the Book of Revelation. He writes that Revelation 21 and 22 present, “the creation of the new heaven and the new earth, and then, we’re told, the great city of New Jerusalem—the dazzling city with foundations—will descend from the sky and become the capital city of God’s eternal kingdom. It’s important to realize that the city of New Jerusalem is not really heaven, per se. It is the capital city of heaven.”⁴² That is, for Jeremiah, New Jerusalem is a literal not metaphorical place. Jeremiah spends chapters of his best selling book, *Revealing the Mysteries of Heaven*, as well as dozens of popular YouTube videos, describing this holy city, as does Randy Alcorn in his bestseller *Heaven*.⁴³

Alcorn writes, “Fifteen times in Revelation 21 and 22 the place God and his people will live together is called a city. The repetition of the word and the detailed description of the architecture, walls, streets, and other features of the city suggest that the term *city* isn’t merely a figure of speech but a literal geographic location.”⁴⁴ Clearly, for evangelical Christians Jeremiah and Alcorn, the physicality of heaven is very important. This seems at odds with the immaterial descriptions of heaven in the rest of the Christian Testament and seems closer to the Muslim understanding. Rustomji writes, “In Islam, heaven and hell are afterworlds where believers and unbelievers can live full, dynamic afterlives.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Powell, 535.

⁴² David Jeremiah, 136.

⁴³ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009).

⁴⁴ Alcorn, 249.

⁴⁵ Rustomji, *xiv*.

Jeremiah describes the city of New Jerusalem as lovingly as a real estate agent showing off a model home in a new housing development. He writes, “The Bible delights in telling us about this place... and I don’t believe it’s a figure of speech. It is an actual physical place—a real city. As I’ve already avowed, our resurrected bodies will be physical bodies, real and tangible; so they will need a real place and an actual home—a physical city.”⁴⁶

The Book of Hebrews is the other Christian Testament book that describes a heavenly city. It was written in the late first century CE, about the same time as the Book of Revelation. In Hebrews 10:10, Jesus Christ is quoted as saying of Abraham, “he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” He continues, “they desire a better homeland, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 10:15-16). Jesus then describes the city,

You have not come to something that can be touched...you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant” (Hebrews 12:18-24).

While the heavenly city of Mount Zion of the Book of Hebrews is not described at the same level of detail as New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation, or The Garden in the Qur’ān, it is like them in being built by God as a future home for believers.

There is an envisioned city in the much later work of Abu al-Najib Suhrawardi (1154-1191), the Persian Sufi philosopher and mystic. In Suhrawardi’s “Treatise VI: On the Reality of Love,”⁴⁷ he writes of several mystical cities that are the residences of the three brothers Beauty, Love, and Sorrow. Suhrawardi never says that his made up metaphorical cities

⁴⁶ Jeremiah, 133.

⁴⁷ Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi, *The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical Treatises*, W.M. Thackston, Trans. (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999).

represent heaven or real places (he calls one of them “nowheresville”)⁴⁸ but some similarities to Revelation’s New Jerusalem are strong. The detailed descriptions of the layout and architecture of his cities provide a housing for the ideas Suhrawardi wants his readers to consider.

Another potential Muslim analog to consider for the Christian city of New Jerusalem is what Rustomji calls sacred topography. She writes about how some real cities are connected with sacred locations,

The Dome of the Rock and the Umayyad mosque in Damascus ...were not necessarily constructed as paradises on earth... Muslims eventually viewed Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, and Damascus (like Karbala for the Shi‘a) as sacred spaces that offered blessings (baraka)... What is intriguing about the notion of sacred topography is that the land is not considered sanctified because of the buildings or natural sites that people recognize as holy. Rather, the topography itself was recognized as having sanctity, and it is for that reason that monuments and shrines were developed in the area. Sacred spaces create sacred places.⁴⁹

Expanding her concept of sacred topography, Rustomji writes of the evolution of thinking about the Jerusalem mosque, “the direct association between the Dome of the Rock and the prophet’s Journey may not have been made until the twelfth or thirteenth century.”⁵⁰ She also notes that although the original builders did not build the mosque to reflect heaven, “over time it became associated with the Garden by local Muslims eager to extol the virtues of the city and by pilgrims who were seeking the otherworld by way of their travels.”⁵¹

I found several examples that support Rustomji’s observation. The first is from University of Texas at Austin’s South Asia Institute Director Syed Akbar Hyder who writes of a *zakir* or *zakira* (one who remembers, an orator about Allah), “bribing the devotees with

⁴⁸ Suhrawardi, 62.

⁴⁹ Rustomji, 130.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Rustomji, 132.

appealing visions of heaven” so that Shia listeners will cry for the Karbala martyrs.⁵² Next are web posts that describe Karbala and Najaf (Iraqi cities that are major pilgrimage destinations and are particularly holy for Shia Muslims) as *heaven on earth*.⁵³ Finally, I also found web posts describing Jerusalem’s Church of the Holy Sepulchre as *heaven on earth*.⁵⁴ That is, for Muslims and Christians, associations with heaven can reflect or enhance importance and emotional response, and these associations seem to accrete around holy locations over the centuries.

In addition to real locations, Rustomji also mentions the fabled city of Iram that was destroyed by God (Q89:7-15), perhaps because it was built to resemble Paradise.⁵⁵ To my Christian mind, Irem begs for comparison with the Tower of Babel in the Hebrew Bible whose prideful builders said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves” (Genesis 11:1-9). The Lord scattered the builders of that tower over the face of the earth. There are also two intriguing references in the Qur’ān (Q28:38 and Q40:36) to Pharaoh asking Haman to build a tower to heaven so that he may confront God but that story is very brief.

Both of the lost cities (Babel and Iram) have been the subjects or inspiration for many creative works. Among contemporary works using Babel as a setting,⁵⁶ Neal Stephenson’s 1992 science fiction novel *Snow Crash* expands the story of the Tower of Babel, connecting it to language development and computer viruses.⁵⁷ *Snow Crash* has been on Time magazine’s list of

⁵² Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala / Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 51.

⁵³ Syed Hadi, “My Journey to Heaven on Earth: Najaf & Karbala,” *Medium*, 5 September 2023, <https://ssyedhadi.medium.com/my-journey-to-heaven-on-earth-najaf-karbala-f9f8f51da55c>.

⁵⁴ Lamerapera, “Heaven on Earth! - Review of Church of the Holy Sepulchre,” *TripAdvisor*, 25 February 2025, https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g293983-d318942-r995460019-Church_of_the_Holy_Sepulchre-Jerusalem_Jerusalem_District.html.

⁵⁵ Rustomji, 3510.

⁵⁶ “Tower of Babylon / Ted Chiang,” *Good Reads*, accessed 11 May 2025, <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/29864598-tower-of-babylon>.

⁵⁷ “Snow Crash / Neal Stephenson,” *Good Reads*, accessed 11 May 2025, <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/61240297-snow-crash>.

best English language novels.⁵⁸ Iram of the Pillars was the setting for the tale “The City of Many-Columned Iram and Abdullah Son of Abi Kilabah” in *The Arabian Nights* (translated by Richard Burton in 1850).⁵⁹ In the short story, Allah destroyed the city and its builders as unbelievers. More recently, Iram of the Pillars has been featured as an explorable setting in several video games, including *Uncharted 3*⁶⁰ and *Sunless Sea*,⁶¹ as well as the exotic locale for many poems and stories.⁶²

There seems to be a long-term fascination in both Christianity and Islam with cities built to resemble heaven, or reaching toward heaven, even though in scripture two such cities were destroyed by God. This fascination may align with the devotion of evangelical Christians to discussing all of the physical details of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation.

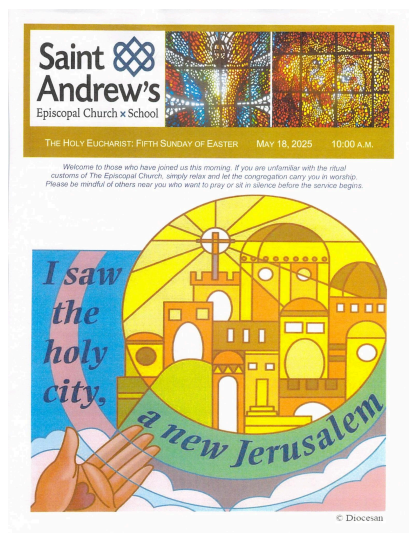


Figure 6: Sunday service folder from Saint Andrew’s Episcopal Church (Saratoga, California), 18 May 2025.

⁵⁸ Lev Grossman, “Snow Crash - All-Time 100 Novels,” *Time*, 8 January 2010, <https://entertainment.time.com/2005/10/16/all-time-100-novels/slide/snow-crash-1992-by-neal-stephenson/>.

⁵⁹ Richard Burton, trans., “The City of Many-Columned Iram and Abdullah Son of Abi Kilabah,” in *The Arabian Nights*, accessed 11 May 2025, <https://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/burt1k1/tale11.htm>.

⁶⁰ Robert Zwetsloot, “The Atlantis of the Sands: the Real Myth Behind *Uncharted 3*,” *PSU*, 26 October 2011, <https://www.psu.com/news/the-atlantis-of-the-sands-the-real-myth-behind-uncharted-3/>.

⁶¹ “Irem - Sunless Sea Wiki,” Fandom, accessed 12 May 2025, <https://sunlesssea.fandom.com/wiki/Irem>.

⁶² “Irem - The H.P. Lovecraft Wiki,” *Fandom*, accessed 11 May 2025, <https://lovecraft.fandom.com/wiki/Irem>.

Conclusion

In the Gospel of John, there is an interaction between Jesus and his disciples that demonstrates the common desire to know what will happen next. Jesus has been giving them some of his last teachings and speaking about what will happen after he dies,

“If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (John 14:3-5).

Even after spending years walking, learning, and working with Jesus, his closest followers still asked for reassurance and wanted to know how to get to heaven. After studying the Qur'ān's physical descriptions of heaven, I can understand why Muslims find them comforting.

While I have been writing this paper, my home church is in the annual season of Easter when we read the Book of Revelation. The weekly Stepping Stones online gathering I lead is attended by jail volunteers and Chaplains, people phoning in from jail, and those in reentry. In our recent discussion of Revelation 21:1-6. I could hear that they felt comfort knowing some physical details of our heavenly home. Revelation was one of the final books to be added to the Christian Testament canon.⁶³ Even though the two final chapters of the Book of Revelation are not like anything else in the Christian Testament, I can understand why they were included. They can bring the familiarity of a physical place into scary reflections about death and the end times.

As the Sufis discussed by Rustomji wrote, there is a valuable potential for insights in considering the future in a physical context. She writes about the benefits of imagining the beauties of the Garden, “emphasizing the materiality of the afterworld so that the believer is invited to imagine his fate through the senses... to express the most ineffable of experiences: the human encounter with God.”⁶⁴

⁶³ Powell, 65.

⁶⁴ Rustomji, 113.

This paper has compared heaven in Christianity and Islam in several ways. These subjects are complex and could easily be addressed in a much longer paper, or even a book. The two areas of difference on which I focused were the pattern of physicality in Quranic descriptions of heaven in compared to the incorporeal generalities more common in the Bible's Christian Testament, and Islam compared with Christianity on heaven being an experience or relationship with God that may begin in the present for the living. The journey of discovery writing this paper taught me how some Christian and Muslim beliefs are even closer than I thought, and that traditional Protestant and evangelical Christian groups have more theology in common than I knew. My most powerful learning is a better appreciation of the comfort provided by a physical description of heaven as a welcoming and splendid city.

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