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Heaven... It's Not the End of the World (Book Review)

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Heaven ...It's Not the End of the World, by David Lawrence (London: Scripture Union, 1995). 159 pages. £3.99. ISBN 0-86201-950-8. Reviewed by Thomas G. Soerens, Instructor of Theology.

This lively little tract is required reading for Dordt Theology 101 students. Many Dordt students are young men and women who have been thoroughly "talked to" about God, sin, and salvation. But talk about God's plans in Christ for the eventual renewal of earthly existence have been less common and compelling. Can we get at this theme biblically and go beyond a smattering of jargon? Lawrence's book helps us do that by putting the New Earth front and center. For some students it is a bit jarring to have their spiritualized notions of eternity subjected to biblical housecleaning, yet most come to find *Heaven ...* a refreshing and enjoyable read.

Lawrence's book, subtitled "The biblical promise of a new earth," has a double foci. It intends to deal with these two broad questions:

If a new earth and not a 'spiritual heaven' is the goal of history, then what will this New Earth be like?

And if our eternal destiny is to live on a new earth, then what is heaven?

The second question finds its answer in a single chapter, the third. The bulk of the book is an exploration of the first question.

Can indeed the notion that the New Earth is the destiny of believers be sustained biblically? In Part One, Lawrence develops a biblical theology which answers in the affirmative. Popular piety aside, the eternity God has planned does not involve trivializing or trashing the earthly home He created for humanity. Part Two, "Visions of Life on the New Earth," wants to lead the reader from merely getting used to the prospect of a New Earth destiny to imaginatively fleshing out what it would be like to live there. Finally, a brief Part Three spells out the implications for our present life of the new vistas opened by the prospect of an earthly eternity.

Chapter 1 examines the Old Testament, and finds a consistent viewpoint at work from one historical era to the next. The way God formulated His covenant promises and extended hope to a chastised Israel concerning the last days is expressive of His determination to renew the earth for it to be the inheritance of His people. The point is developed against the backdrop of the traditional view, namely, that earth "has no status in itself other than as a kind of space station for God's salvation mission". (15) This chapter's quick walk through the Old Testament has a convincing, cumulative effect. Nevertheless, omitted are the O.T. passages, especially the Psalms, which describe this inheritance not only as the heritage of His people, but His own inheritance. The earth finds its destiny as the *posesio* of

God's people and of God Himself.

Chapter 2 turns to the New Testament. It asks us to consider whether Jesus' teaching stood in continuity with the Old Testament view of a New Earth destiny. The discussion cites details of Jesus' Kingdom parables and His prophecies concerning the end times. The hope to which Jesus pointed us is clear: "The end of this age then, according to Jesus, would be marked by his return to earth not our removal to heaven" (31f.). Throughout the chapter Lawrence sprinkles in well phrased and thought-provoking conclusions. The handling of Pauline and Petrine texts is juxtaposed with Jesus' words and O.T. examples to illustrate the New Testament expectation of a New Earth. The apostle John's final vision is a thunderous affirmation "See, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

Lest his readers suppose that the emphasis on earth implies a devaluation of heaven, chapter 3 is wisely placed soon enough in the discussion to avoid that impression. This chapter helped expand an appreciation in me for what heaven is, deepening the sense of what is unique about each of these created realms (the heavenly and the earthly). Heaven is defined as the "dimension in which God dwells" (51). It is the seat of God's authority as King of the universe, from whence the now-incarnate Son came, leaving the Father's side for earth's redemption. In so doing and in Christ's return to heaven in our flesh, it is confirmed that "heaven and earth are linked in the present-tense relationship, and Christians need to learn to think more about heaven's authority in their lives than about its accessibility at their death" (57).

This third chapter contains a brief section that is a teaser: "God's Store Cupboard." Lawrence's scattered remarks about heaven as a storehouse of rewards, riches, and blessing by their very brevity beg for the broader issue to be explored: What really is the overall biblical picture of how the 'coin' of blessing passes back and forth between the two realms? One wonders whether the distortions of the Health and Wealth Gospel don't spring precisely from the lack of a comprehensive biblical exploration of this question.

From the premise that humanity is only fully alive when body and soul/spirit are intact, Lawrence works to counter the notion that upon death, the eternal destinies of heaven or hell are entered immediately. To make the case, the author sketches out the progressive unfolding of what Scripture reveals about the afterlife of the individual. The terms "Sheol" and "Hades" (mistranslated as 'hell') are discussed in thoughtful fashion. Hades is

not hell; Hades is the place, until Christ's return, of those who have passed from this life. Yet Lawrence says that a 'part' of Hades is identified as Paradise, which is the experience of believers who await the resurrection.

The whole point of the discussion could have been made more simply, avoiding confusion. Whereas in the O.T. the word "Sheol" encompassed what awaited both the righteous and unrighteous, in New Testament usage over time "Hades" eventually proved suitable to point only toward the temporary condition of unbelievers awaiting final judgment. Lawrence's commendable reticence to think of heaven in largely spatial terms found in the 3rd chapter would have served him well in the 4th chapter as well. None of the N.T. data requires describing the afterlife with the predominant category being that of "place"(except as *parable* with Lazarus and Dives). It seems more helpful to posit the separation into one "condition" or another. Awaiting Christ's return, the dead find themselves in a condition which anticipates their final destiny, whether that be the destiny of life and glory, or that of death and punishment.

My experience with college readers of the book tells me that by the 5th chapter their initial skittishness about the book's basic thesis has been transformed to respect as the threads of the overall argument are drawn together. Indeed as Lawrence argues in this chapter, the bodily resurrection of Christ is the touchstone for verifying the content of our hope as solid, physical, and earthly. Since His resurrection, ascension and return does not negate Christ's physical, human identity, neither is there a final negation of our human wholeness in our future.

Lawrence's 6th chapter tackles the question: what then will this new earth be like? The author admits he is giving full rein to his imagination. He steps into the

discussion of a manageable number of topics in this fashion:

Once one has biblically adjusted one's thinking to accommodate belief in an eternal earthly future a host of questions flood to mind. Will we recognize one another? Will there be animals there? Will we eat? Will we have to work? (99)

To think imaginatively into what life might be like on the New Earth is not a difficult task. Suppose life's distortions were removed, all the pain and ambiguities of a sin-dominated existence swept away. Imagine the broadening and extending of new Spirit-born capacities for cultural, communal shalom in righteous, daily experience. That's the picture Lawrence tries to paint in the concluding chapters. What he offers as specifics is left for those who pick up the book.

Lawrence's little book is meant to be an eye-opener, and it is. In setting aside the debates concerning views of history and prophecy, Lawrence is a tour guide for a path less traveled: Christian expectations of the New Earth. All Christians could benefit from reading *Heaven*. It is a worthy resource for adult discussion groups or the staffs of Christian organizations. It would not be too much of a stretch to think of a pastor having this book serve as a springboard for Sunday sermons or funeral messages, or for Christian leaders in environmental concerns, art, politics, and agriculture to ground their efforts more clearly in the anticipations of the renewal to come.

Editor's note: The Dordt Theology department heartily recommends this book, but it is not available in North America. However it can be ordered from the Dordt College Bookstore for \$9.00 (which includes shipping).