

Christian Gnosticism Unveiled

“Heavenly” in Ephesians and Hebrews

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One of Satan’s schemes against the pristine Faith has been the corruption in modern Greek lexicons of a few Greek adjectives used by Paul. Uncovering these stealth viruses is critical, *“lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.”*¹ These intentionally twisted definitions have been used to covertly smuggle Gnosticism into Christian theology, and to make it extremely difficult to discover and remove the Gnostic corruptions of pristine Apostolic Christianity that occurred in the 2nd – 4th centuries. By imposing a Gnostic meaning upon these adjectives, and then imposing these twisted definitions upon the texts in which they appear, Gnostic ideas have been placed in the mouth of Paul himself. The adjectives, “πνευματικός” (rendered “spiritual”) and “επουρανιος” (rendered “heavenly places”), are two of the main culprits. We will deal only with “επουρανιος” in this article.

Gnosticism was the enemy of early Christianity, and was attacked by Paul, John, and several of the early Christian apologists, such as Irenaeus and Hippolytus. However, many linguists who have accepted theologies which were heavily influenced by Gnosticism centuries earlier, have defined these terms through the distorted lenses of their own erroneous theology. And the distorted meanings have become the dominant definition in Greek lexicons and commentaries.

The ten-volume, Kittel – Friedrich, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT), is the primary source for many other linguists and scholars, and is a good example of this corruption. The TDNT claims that “επουρανιος” refers to heaven itself, or more precisely, “the heaven of heavens.” Many other lexicons followed its lead. The editors were German Protestant theologians, who were amillennialists. Their definition has not been seriously opposed by dispensational writers either, who accept the same “heavenly destiny” concepts imposed on Ephesians and Hebrews by using the TDNT’s wrong definition of this adjective. The KJV illustrates this error in Protestant thinking, rendering “επουρανιος” incorrectly as “heavenly places.” This erroneous definition has

¹ 2 Cor 2:11

not only given cover to the latent Gnosticism of both amillennialism and dispensationalism, but has also spawned dabbling in the occult by misguided Charismatic Christians, under the guise of “spiritual warfare.”²

The adjective, “επορανιος” (ep-oo-ran’-ee-os), is a compound word, with the preposition “επι” prefixed to the adjective, “ουρανιος” (oo-ran’-ee-os), “heavenly.” The preposition “επι” means to superimpose something over something else – literally, “to cover” (of time, place, or order). It could be used of covering a bed with a blanket, covering a particular city with a radio broadcast, or a state’s governmental authority over that state.

The TDNT denies that “επι” carries its usual force in this case. “επι here does not denote “upon” but “in heaven.”³ It claims that “επι” acts as a superlative, as “highest heaven” or “heaven of heavens.” It then concludes, “But in Ephesians we find not only the OT idea of the throne of God in heaven, but also the gnostically influenced view to which Christ, exalted high above the heavenly world, reigns as its conqueror and ruler.”⁴ In short, the editor of the TDNT was claiming that Paul himself, when writing Ephesians, had been influenced by Gnosticism, and thus had partly molded his Pauline theology from Gnostic ideas. The editor’s opinion elevates Gnosticism, the enemy of pristine Apostolic Christianity, to a fountainhead of truth equal with divine revelation. In other words, Paul’s theology was a mixture of divine revelation and Gnosticism. It is from this presupposition that the editor defined the term “επουρανιος” for Christians, forever coloring their interpretations of Ephesians and Hebrews.

That the TDNT’s editor allowed his own corrupt theology to color his definition is easy to demonstrate. Lexical definitions of Greek words are developed by observing their usage in all of the places where they occur, and finding a single basic meaning that

² Ephesians 6:12 limits the Christian’s spiritual battleground to within “heavenly dominions” (that is, within the sphere of Christ’s present dominion – the churches). Yet, because many Bible versions mistranslate this term as “heavenly places,” some Charismatic groups have come up with the idea that the Christian’s spiritual battleground is to take on spiritual powers that are allegedly governing various cities or communities (which are outside of Christ’s current heavenly dominion – the churches). In doing so, they have exposed themselves to some of the most insidious Satanic influence disguised as the work of the Holy Spirit.

³ TDNT Vol. V, p. 538

⁴ TDNT Vol. V, p. 539

explains them all. A good definition will fit well with every usage of the term in Scripture, both in the New Testament and in the Septuagint.

Compound words, such as the one we are dealing with, result from fusing two ideas together. We would expect, then, that the meaning would flow from this fusion of the two ideas, not contradict either or both.

The occurrence of “επουρανιος” in several passages clashes with Kittle’s interpretation, requiring “Gnostic” kinds of mystical explanations in order to make sense of them. Both amillennialists and dispensationalists do not shy away from such Gnostic, mystical interpretations in these passages. Just read a few of the Reformed or Dispensational commentaries on Ephesians 2:6, “*and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus,*” for a sampling of such mystical nonsense.

“and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:’ Christ is entered into heaven as the forerunner, to take possession of it for his people, in their name; and to prepare mansions of glory for them, and in these they sit; which imports honour, pleasure, rest from labour and weariness, and safety and security: and what adds to the happiness of this is, that it is together with all the saints, and with Christ himself; and in these they are made to sit already; which is so said, because of the certainty of it, for the same glory Christ has, they shall have; and because of their right to such a blessing; and chiefly because Christ their head is set down therein, who sustains their persons, bears their names on his heart, and represents them.”⁵

“made us sit together’ — with Christ, namely, in His ascension. Believers are bodily in heaven in point of right, and virtually so in spirit, and have each their own place assigned there, which in due time they shall take possession of.”⁶

This author is not surprised when amillennialists do this, since allegory is their default hermeneutic. But, dispensationalists claim a literal hermeneutic, yet do not in practice follow it in these passages.

⁵ John Gill’s Commentary on Eph. 2:6

⁶ Jameson, Faucet, Brown Commentary on Eph. 2:6

If we assume Kittle's definition, we are left with the following absurdities:

- Eph. 2:6 puts Paul and the entire church of Ephesus in heaven at the time he wrote to them, being seated snugly on the throne of God along with Jesus at the Father's right hand.
- Eph. 6:12 puts all the minions of hell in the highest heaven, where Paul and the Ephesians were allegedly seated beside Christ.
- Heb. 11:15 claims that while Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were living in tents in the Land that God promised to give them as an age-enduring inheritance, they were instead longing for a city and inheritance in heaven. This contradicts both Genesis and the context of Hebrews 11. It makes the "promise" to Abraham (which both Genesis and Hebrews claim was the Promised Land inheritance, into a promise of a city in heaven, no hint of which can be found in the Genesis account).

More recent and reasonable scholarship has shown that *επουρανιος* refers to heaven's influence superimposed upon something else in the context. That is, the preposition "επι" retains its usual meaning – to superimpose, cover, hence abstractly, to completely influence or completely dominate. Prefixed to the adjective "ουρανιος" (heavenly) the sense is "heavenly dominion," "heavenly domination," or the scope of "heavenly influence" exerted upon earthly things. The new HELPS™ lexicon has this meaning: *"epouranios – properly, heavenly, referring to the impact of heaven's influence on the particular situation or person."*⁷

The heavenly sphere of influence (dominion) is a much better understanding of the fusing of the preposition *επι* with the adjective *ουρανιος*. Since most occurrences of this compound adjective have the definite article and lack a noun to modify, a noun must be inserted for our translation to be grammatically correct in English (as the KJV wrongly inserts "places" in Ephesians). It is therefore natural and proper to take the sense of the noun we are supplying from the preposition that was prefixed to the adjective. Hence, "επι" (literally, to superimpose or cover) refers to the dominion or sphere of influence which is "heavenly." This meaning also makes good sense in every place where this word appears in the Bible. Here are some examples:

⁷ HELPS™ Word Studies, © 1987, 2011 by Helps Ministries, Inc. <http://thediscoverybible.com>

1. Daniel's declaration to Nebuchadnezzar in the Septuagint about God's judgment on him reads as follows: "...from which you will know the power, the heavenly [dominion]," (Dan. 4:26 LXX). The primary point concerns heaven's dominion over Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom, not the location of "heaven."

2. In 1 Corinthians 15:40, Paul was not saying that resurrected bodies are in heaven or created in heaven, while earthly bodies are on earth or created on earth. Rather, he was saying that the natural body is under the earthly dominion (cursed, destined for death), but the resurrected body is under heavenly dominion (from whence its incorruptible nature flows). He clearly said, in vss. 42-43, that the very same corpse that is planted (in the grave) in dishonor is to be raised in honor! Therefore, the body cannot be in two different locations at the same time, nor can Paul be contradicting himself. Rather, the body is first under the dominion of the cursed earth (when buried) but under the dominion of heaven when raised.

3. Ephesians 1:20 speaks of Christ's authority, rather than His location: "...raising Him from the dead, and seating Him at His own right hand, in the heavenly [dominions]." That "dominion" and not location was Paul's point is proven by the words which immediately follow: "far above all principality and power and might and **dominion**, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and **gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body**, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."⁸ Clearly, Christ's location being vertically "high above" the location of others, including the Ephesian church, was not the point! Rather, within the "heavenly dominions" (that is the things that are NOW under submission to heaven, the "body of Christ," the Christian churches), Christ has been placed as the Sovereign, exerting His proper authority within these limited realms of influence and dominion (as opposed to His unlimited domination of all nations in His coming Kingdom, shepherding them with a rod of iron).⁹

4. Ephesians 2:6 says that Christ has "raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly [dominions] in Christ Jesus." Again, the point is not location, but heavenly authority within the realms that are subject to heaven. Christ's being "seated" at the

⁸ Eph. 1:21-23 NKJV

⁹ Psalm 2

Father's right hand is drawn from Psalm 110:1, which uses the "footstool" metaphor for total domination. Hence, being "seated" is a metaphor for having authority. The scope of this authority is limited by the clause, *"in the heavenly dominions."* That is, our authority as Christians is active within those limited realms where Christ's dominion now extends, such as within the local church or the Christian home. Taking this term to mean location here leads to the absurdity that the Ephesians were sitting on Christ's throne in heaven while their bodies were still in Ephesus. This is an exegetically indefensible load of nonsense!

5. Ephesians 6:12 makes much more sense with our interpretation, rather than supposing that all the minions of hell run free in God's presence in heaven. *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly [dominions]."* The last clause, *"in the heavenly dominions"* limits our sphere of spiritual warfare to those earthly realms that are already under the dominion of Christ, such as the church, or the Christian home. If Charismatics simply understood that our "fight" with spiritual forces does not extend to those realms which have not yet been placed under Christ's feet, (such as politics, government, society, or territory), much of the buffoonery and dabbling in Christian witchcraft could be avoided!

6. Finally, Hebrews 11:16 makes much more sense with our interpretation. Abraham was not yearning to go live in some city in the highest heaven, something never alluded to in the entire Old Testament. He was yearning for the fulfillment of God's promise to him, plainly stated in Genesis, to give him and his Seed the land in which he lived as a pilgrim and alien, for a permanent inheritance. *"And the LORD said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered. Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee. Then Abram removed his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the LORD."*¹⁰ Thus, Abraham looked for a "heavenly country,"¹¹ that is the Land God promised him when it will be under heavenly dominion.

¹⁰ Gen 13:14-18 KJV

With this corrected understanding of επουρανιος, several other passages of Scripture harmonize much better with the concept of a restored creation, and show just how foreign the idea of heaven being the destiny of the redeemed is to Christianity. For example:

2 Tim. 4:18 NKJV

18 And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly [επουρανιος] kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen!

The sense here is not that the Kingdom is in heaven, but it is the Kingdom in which heavenly dominion will be exerted over the nations.

Heb. 12:22-23 NKJV

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly [επουρανιος] Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect.

The Jerusalem referred to here is not some city in heaven, but to Jerusalem when it will be under the dominion of heaven.

The eggs of the Serpent have been hatched in many of our lexicons, commentaries, and Bible versions. It is time for his schemes be exposed, and ignorance of his devices be rectified so that the primitive hope of the Christian Church can shine through, just as Paul prayed for the Gentiles steeped in Greek thought in Ephesus: *“that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your mind having been enlightened, that you may perceive what is the hope of His calling, what is the wealth of the glory of His inheritance¹² among the saints¹³.”¹⁴*

¹¹ Heb. 11:16

¹² Psalm 2, Heb. 1:2,4-5

¹³ Rev. 2:26-27

¹⁴ Ephesians 1:17-18 LGV