

2 Corinthians 12:2

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.

Analysis

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. Paul's transparent third-person reference—"a man in Christ"—demonstrates the humility he's arguing for: even recounting the most exalted experience, he distances himself from self-promotion. The phrase *harpagenta* (ἁρπαγέντα, "caught up") is passive voice—Paul didn't ascend; he was seized by divine initiative.

The **third heaven** reflects Jewish cosmology: the first heaven is earth's atmosphere (birds fly there), the second is stellar space (sun, moon, stars), the third is God's dwelling—the *shamayim ha-shamayim* ("heaven of heavens," Deuteronomy 10:14, 1 Kings 8:27). Paul experienced what Moses saw on Sinai (Exodus 24:9-11), what Isaiah witnessed (Isaiah 6:1-5), what Ezekiel beheld (Ezekiel 1)—the unveiled presence of God.

His repeated **whether in the body, I cannot tell** isn't false humility but phenomenological honesty: the experience so transcended normal consciousness that bodily location became irrelevant. This echoes 5:6-8's tension between being "present in the body" versus "present with the Lord."

Historical Context

"Fourteen years ago" dates this vision to AD 41-42, possibly during Paul's "silent years" in Syria and Cilicia (Galatians 1:21, Acts 9:30) before Barnabas brought him to Antioch (Acts 11:25-26). Jewish apocalyptic literature (1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, Testament of Levi) described heavenly journeys, but Paul's reticence contrasts sharply—he kept this private for 14 years, only disclosing it under duress.

Related Passages

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. What does Paul's 14-year silence about this experience teach about the proper relationship between extraordinary spiritual encounters and public ministry?
2. Why does Paul emphasize the passive "caught up" rather than presenting himself as a spiritual seeker who achieved mystical ascent?
3. How does uncertainty about bodily presence ("whether in the body, I cannot tell") guard against both materialism and Gnostic denial of physical reality?

Interlinear Text

οἶδεν	ἄνθρωπον	ἐν	Χριστῷ	πρὸ	ἐτῶν	δεκατεσσάρων
I knew	a man	in	Christ	above	years	fourteen
G1492	G444	G1722	G5547	G4253	G2094	G1180
εἴτε	ἐν	σώματος	οὐκ	οἶδεν	εἴτε	ἐκτὸς τοῦ
(whether	in	of the body	I cannot	I knew	(whether	out
G1535	G1722	G4983	G3756	G1492	G1535	G1622 G3588
σώματος	οὐκ	οἶδεν	ὁ	θεὸς	οἶδεν	ἄρπαγέντα τὸν
of the body	I cannot	I knew	G3588	God	I knew	caught up
G4983	G3756	G1492	G2316	G1492	G726	G3588
τοιοῦτον	ἕως	τρίτου	οὐρανοῦ			
such an one	to	the third	heaven			
G5108	G2193	G5154	G3772			

Additional Cross-References

Acts 22:17 (Parallel theme): And it came to pass, that, when I was come again to Jerusalem, even while I prayed in the temple, I was in a trance;

Revelation 4:2 (Parallel theme): And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne.

2 Corinthians 11:11 (References God): Wherefore? because I love you not? God knoweth.

1 Thessalonians 4:17 (Parallel theme): Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Isaiah 57:15 (Parallel theme): For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

1 Kings 18:12 (Parallel theme): And it shall come to pass, as soon as I am gone from thee, that the Spirit of the LORD shall carry thee whither I know not; and so

when I come and tell Ahab, and he cannot find thee, he shall slay me: but I thy servant fear the LORD from my youth.

Revelation 12:5 (References God): And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne.

Ezekiel 11:24 (References God): Afterwards the spirit took me up, and brought me in a vision by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, to them of the captivity. So the vision that I had seen went up from me.

1 Kings 8:27 (References God): But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?