

Heaven

Contents

From International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

Heaven[Heb *šāmāyīm*—‘heights,’ *mārôm*—‘height’ (Job 25:2; Isa. 24:18, 21), *ma aleh*—‘ascent’ (Isa. 7:11); Aram *šamayim* (Dnl. 4:11 [MT 8]); Gk *ouranós*—‘that which is raised up’]; AV also AIR (cf. Gen. 1:26), SKY, SKIES, ON HIGH, HEAVENS (Zec. 6:5; He. 8:1), HEAVENLY (1 Cor. 15:48), “places,” “the high ones” (Isa. 24:21), HEIGHT; NEB also SKY, SKIES, HEAVENS, HEAVENLY, “realm on high,” etc.; HEAVENS [Heb *šāmāyīm*, *mārôm* (Ps. 78:69); Aram *šamayim* (Jer 10:11); Gk *ouranói* (cf. Mk. 13:25)]; AV also HEAVEN (cf. Gen. 1:1), HEAVENS OF HEAVEN (Ps. 68:33 [MT 34]), VERY HIGH, “palaces” (Ps. 78:69), “astrologers” (Isa. 47:13); NEB also HEAVEN (cf. Gen. 1:1; Ps. 68:33), HIGH PLACES, “astrologers” (Isa. 47:13). “Heaven” denotes the sky, outer space, the abode of God, angels, and other spiritual creatures, or may be used as a circumlocution for God, depending on the context.

I. Old Testament In the OT, heaven is often metaphorically conceived as something fixed and material: it has windows (Gen. 7:11), pillars (Job 26:11), foundations (2 S. 22:8), and it can be torn (Isa. 63:19) like a curtain (cf. Mk. 1:10). In these senses, heaven is related to the “firmament” (Heb *rāqî[a]*; cf. Gen. 1:8).

Heaven often refers to the space immediately enveloping the earth, i.e., the atmosphere, and a number of meteorological phenomena are mentioned: rain (Gen. 8:2), snow (Isa. 55:9–11), frost (Job 38:29), dew (Dt. 33:13, AV, RSV mg), hail (Josh. 10:11), thunder (1 S. 2:10), wind (Zec. 6:5), and clouds (Ps. 147:8). Thus, heaven is the realm of

various signs, both natural (Mt. 16:2f) and supernatural (Ex. 10:21f). In a combination of these two views, heaven is also the realm wherein the rainbow, God’s sign of his covenant with Noah, is seen (Gen. 9:13–17).

Heaven can also denote outer space, where the lights (Gen. 1:14) and stars (Dt. 4:19) are located. The planets Venus and Saturn are referred to (Isa. 14:12; Am. 5:26), though they are not distinguished from the fixed stars. (*See Astronomy II.B, C.*) Several constellations are mentioned (Job 9:9; 38:31). Though cultic worship was often associated with astrology among the peoples of the Near East, such practice was forbidden to the Hebrews (Ex. 20:4). The prophets condemned sacrificial offerings to the stars (Jer 44:17–25), and astrological speculations were forbidden (Isa. 47:13). Such warnings reflect the conviction that the heavens, too, were part of the created order (Gen. 1:1; cf. Ps. 33:6) and therefore not to be worshiped in the place of the Creator. (*See Astrology IV.*)

In many passages, “heaven” is the abode of God: “Look down from heaven and see, from thy holy and glorious habitation” (Isa. 63:15). Both God’s habitation (Ps. 33:14) and His sanctuary (Ps. 102:19 [MT 20]; cf. Ps. 61:4 [MT 5]) are “in the heavens.” God’s throne is in heaven (Ps. 14:2; 103:19), and at times heaven is called the throne of God (Isa. 66:1; Mt. 5:34; He. 8:1). God’s house is in heaven (Ps. 61:4; Jn. 14:2) and He dwells there (1 K. 8:12). Thus, God is often called “the God of heaven” (e.g., Gen. 24:3, 7; 2 Ch. 36:23; Ezr. 1:2; Neh. 1:4f; Dnl. 2:37, 44). Yahweh, the God of heaven, is implored in prayer (Dt. 26:15) to “look down from thy holy habitation from heaven, and bless thy people Israel.” Since God was thought to be above, people lifted their hands in oaths (Dt. 34:20) and in prayer (Ex. 9:29).

II. New Testament In postexilic Judaism the term heaven came to be used as a circumlocution for the divine name Yahweh or for the term “God.” This phenomenon occurs only once in the OT (Dnl. 4:23 [MT 20]) but is frequent in the NT. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the son returns and confesses to his father: “I have sinned against heaven,” meaning that he had sinned against God (Lk. 15:21). Jesus referred to this common practice of using heaven as a substitute for God when He said, “... he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it” (Mt. 23:22). Similarly Jesus asked the priests and elders whether John’s baptism was “from heaven or from men” (Mt. 21:25), and John the Baptist is reported to have said, “No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven” (Jn. 3:27). This phenomenon can also be seen in Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom: Mark and Luke consistently use the phrase “the kingdom of God,” but Matthew usually substitutes the phrase “the kingdom of heaven” (cf. Mk. 1:15 par Mt. 3:17; Mk. 4:11 par Mt. 13:11, etc.). (*See also Kingdom of God V.A.*)

Reference to heaven is made as a means of establishing the authority of someone or something. Thus “the heavens were opened” at Jesus’ baptism (Mt. 3:16), indicating the authoritative nature of His mission. The heavenly voice (Mt. 3:17) was also indicative of divine authority. Similarly, Paul testified before King Agrippa, justifying his apostolic mission with reference to “the heavenly vision” (Acts 26:19).

Of great significance is the ambivalent portrayal of heaven given in the biblical materials. The popular conception of heaven revolves around clouds, harps, and angels, with humanity marching through the Pearly Gates to live a life of bliss. This conception is far removed from the biblical witness. Rather, the Bible depicts heaven under the wrath of God, the scene of cosmic warfare, and finally subject to dissolution prior to the creation of a new heaven. This ambivalence surrounding heaven is to be expected because of the fundamental antithetical structure of biblical eschatology, which is conceived in terms of this present evil age and the age to come (*see Eschatology; Kingdom of God*). It must be stressed that in this framework this whole age experiences turbulence, disquiet, and flux; both heaven and earth experience the wrath of God, the powers of evil, personal incompleteness, and temporality. Only the age to come is “heaven” in any idyllic sense. In support of this view attention should

be given to the following points.

- (1) Heaven is populated by angels that are not absolutely good. Rom. 8:38 implicates heavenly angels in the execution of the wrath of God. This is also seen in Paul’s warning that the saints will judge the angels (1 Cor. 6:3). This judgment is not restricted to the fallen angels (cf. Jude 6; 2 Pet. 2:4), but rather, in light of the absence of any qualifying epithet (Gk *angélous*), the angels in view here must be considered “good” angels.
- (2) The heavenly tribunal was accessible to the accuser, Satan (Job 1:6; cf. Zec. 3:1). In Lk. 10:17–20 we are told that the accuser had been refused hearing before the heavenly tribunal and had been cast down. This occurred initially during the temptation and the exorcistic activities of Jesus and His disciples. This event is symbolically depicted at Rev. 12:7–12, a description of a war in heaven. At vv 8, 10, and 12 we are told that Satan was “cast out” and that “no longer” was there any place for him in heaven. Hence, only since Christ’s death and ascension to heaven has Satan’s access to heaven been terminated.
- (3) Some of the cosmic powers created by God (Col. 1:16) stand in need of redemption and reconciliation (v 20), which was accomplished in the cross of Christ. Some of these heavenly powers will be destroyed, being beyond redemption (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24). These cosmic powers are evil, and Paul describes the Christian’s warfare as against them (cf. Eph. 6:12). *See Heavenly.*
- (4) Even in those heavenly precincts where God’s presence is manifested there is disquiet and turmoil: the souls of the martyrs kept under the altar cry out and complain, saying, “O Sovereign Lord,... how long?” (Rev. 6:9f). They are perplexed and even impatient at the postponement of judgment. Only Jesus’ parousia and the subsequent completed judgment will bring these souls full blessedness. Though they are given white robes and told to rest “a little longer” (6:11), it is difficult to understand how the souls of the righteous could enjoy rest knowing that their fellow servants are being slaughtered. This “rest” is certainly not the rest of perfection, of completed blessedness.

- (5) Paul tells us (2 Cor. 5:1–10) that the saints now in heaven are naked (Gk *gymnoi*, v 3), having not yet received their spiritual bodies (1 Cor. 15:44), which await the Parousia. Thus the intermediate state of the righteous prior to the eschatological consummation must not be one of complete felicity. Indeed, in 2 Cor. 5:1–5 Paul seems to shrink before the prospect of dying and going to heaven prior to the Parousia.
- (6) Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the Bible indicates that heaven will experience an eschatological catastrophe that will bring this age to a close. Heaven and earth were created together (Gen. 1:1), they will experience dissolution together (Isa. 51:6), and they will be redeemed together. In Mt. 24:29 Jesus said that “the powers of the heavens will be shaken,” referring to the angelic or cosmic powers (Gk *dynámeis*) that are “in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12): the heavens will perish (Ps. 102:26–28; Isa. 34:4), but they will be remade (cf. Isa. 65:17; 66:22).

It is in the NT that this final catastrophic judgment of heaven is clearly seen (cf. He. 1:10–12). He. 12:6, which refers to Hag. 2:6, says that the Lord will shake “not only the earth but also [Gk *allá kai*] the heaven,” with this adversative construction stressing heaven’s participation in the final cataclysm. Not only the visible, celestial heavens will be destroyed, but rather heaven in its entirety is subjected to the judgment of God. He. 1:10 and 2 Pet. 3:7, 10, 12 stress the plural “heavens” (*ouranoí*), which is explained not only with reference to the commonly used Heb plural *šamayim* but also by the Jewish belief in the plurality of the heavens (cf. 2 Cor. 12:2).

Whereas other religions often conceive of heaven, the beyond, as the place of complete felicity and look upon the celestial sphere as a place of pure light and untainted glory, the NT tradition never entertains such thinking. Rather, heaven was and is, even in the period after Christ, a place of conflict. God exercises wrath against the demonic attack that threatens to remove Him from his sovereign throne. It is this representation, the picture of a total age including the heavens of this age taken up in the catastrophe of evil, which finds normative expression in the NT. Thus the Christian does not seek ultimate release in this age or in the heaven of this age, for this age is impregnated with evil and hence subject to wrath. Rather, those who

are “in Christ” here on earth and those who are “with Christ” in heaven anticipate that splendid day when Christ the Lord shall appear and by divine power end the demonic threat and inaugurate the coming age of glory. Then shall the saints of God fully rejoice and in transformed bodies eternally reign with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the new heavens and new earth. *See also* Heavens, New.

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The word **heaven**, or the heavens, is used in the Scriptures in a number of different senses. In the most general of these it includes all that is distinguished from the earth. When employed this way, the words heaven and earth exclude one another; but when taken together, the two embrace all the universe of God (Gen 1:1). In this sense, the term often is used metaphorically. For example, “From one end of heaven to the other” (Mt 24:31), and “from the one side of heaven unto the other” (Deut 4:32).

In a more limited sense the word is employed to describe the atmosphere which surrounds the earth. Thus we read of the “dew of heaven” (Dan 4:15), the “clouds of heaven” (Dan 7:13), and of heaven giving rain (Jas 5:18). *See* Sky. Again, the word often includes more than just that which is comprehended within the earth’s atmosphere. It is used to embrace all that is visible in the expanse of the universe above man. It would be impossible to set specific limits to the visible expanse of space which stretches away to unknown heights; but as such, the term heaven includes the vast realm in which are the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars (Gen 1:16, 17).

From the theological standpoint, unquestionably the most important use of the term heaven is with reference to the invisible realm of which the visible may be simply the fringe nearest to man. This is the heaven which is best described as God’s dwelling place. Before the Christian era, the Jews divided the heavens into seven different strata, a notion which has no basis in the Scriptures, although

Paul speaks of having been “caught up to the third heaven” (II Cor 12:2). Unquestionably, the apostle is speaking of the heaven which is the abiding place of God and the blessed dead. The fact that he uses the expression “third heaven” means that he was referring either to heaven in its most exalted character, or to the heaven which is reached by the souls of the blessed when they have passed through the two lower regions of the atmosphere and of outer space containing the celestial bodies. The term “heaven of heavens” (Deut 10:14; I Kgs 8:27; Ps 68:33; 148:4) literally render the Heb. idiom for the superlative, “the highest heaven.” It may express our concept of the uttermost reaches of the universe.

When we speak of heaven as God’s dwelling place, or the place where His presence is made manifest, we do not transgress the doctrine of His divine omnipresence. Though the Lord speaks of coming from heaven and going to heaven, He is infinite and therefore manifests Himself where He already was. (John 1:18) implies that when the Lord was on earth He was in the bosom of the Father. We simply recognize that the description of infinite divine realities must be given to finite human minds in terms they can understand. Much of the description of heaven in this its strictest sense is given in figurative terms, because it is impossible to express heavenly things except in figurative language which is often symbolical. This language, however, does not at all mean that there is nothing literal about heaven and that it is simply a state or a condition. Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you” (Jn 14:2). Christ lives forever in His glorified resurrection body. There must be a place where He dwells with His saints. *See* Abraham’s Bosom; Father’s House.

Certain things are clearly revealed in the Scriptures concerning heaven. Considerable attention is given to the things which are *not* to be found there. For example, there will be no marrying or giving in marriage (Lk 20:34–36). There will be no tears, death,

sorrow, crying, or pain, nothing that defiles, and no more curse. There will be no night, nor will there be need for light, because the Son of God will be the light of heaven (Rev 21:4, 27; 22:3, 5).

In addition to the negative description, certain facts are delineated concerning the inhabitants and the activities of heaven. (1) Here, God is present in a special sense, dispensing judgment, grace and glory. We pray to Him as “our Father which art in heaven” (Mt 6:9; *cf.* also Jon 1:9; Rev 11:13; Ps 2:4; 14:2; 102:19; 103:19; Isa 33:5; 66:1). (2) Jesus Christ descended from heaven (Jn 3:13) and He was taken up into heaven (Acts 1:9–10; 3:21). He is presently at the right hand of God, making intercession for His saints (Heb 7:25; Rom 8:34), and from this place He will come again to judge the quick and the dead (Mt 24:30). (3) Redeemed souls are presently with Christ in heaven (*see* Intermediate State). At least two OT saints, Enoch and Elijah, were translated into heaven (II Kgs 2:1, 11; Heb 11:5). All the redeemed shall ultimately be in heaven in their resurrection bodies when He comes from heaven for them (I Thess 4:16–17; Rev 19:1–4). Furthermore, their treasures and rewards await the saints in heaven (Mt 5:12; I Pet 1:4; II Cor 5:1). (4) Heaven is the dwelling place of angelic beings (Mt 18:10; Eph 1:10; Heb 12:22) and from thence they go to minister to the inhabitants of the earth (Lk 2:13–15; 22:43).

See also Eternal State and Death; Jerusalem; New Heavens and New Earth.

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