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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

# HEAVEN AND SKY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

by D. K. INNES

**M**R. INNES (now Vicar of St. Paul's, Woking) is known to our regular readers as the writer of a series of papers on the text of Micah which appeared in our pages two or three years ago. In this paper he maintains that the Hebrews did not hold such a naïvely literal conception of the three-decker universe as is generally supposed.

**T**HE Old Testament, we are told, pictures a "three-decker" universe with God residing above the vault of the sky. In a pastoral ministry one still meets people who think that he physically looks down upon them through the sky, in company with their departed loved ones. The majority of adults, however, have realized that such "crudely spatial" concepts (in the phrase of Bishop Robinson) are no longer tenable in the modern age. But is it merely that the space age has forced us to reinterpret the Bible, or are there indications even in the O.T. itself that such language was never intended to be understood in a "crudely spatial" sense? The object of this paper is to study the usage of O.T. words meaning heaven/sky, in an endeavour to show whether this is the case.

The very fact that the same Hebrew words mean both heaven and sky, seems at first sight to establish that the two were identical in Hebrew thought, or at least two aspects of a composite whole. The commonest word translated heaven(s) is the plural *shamayim*.

In some passages *shamayim* certainly denotes the (physical) sky, where the stars are (Judges 5: 20; Genesis 15: 5) and whence fall the rain (Genesis 8: 2) and dew (Genesis 27: 28; Deuteronomy 33: 28). Sometimes the sky appears to be thought of as a solid surface, which has waters above it (Genesis 1: 7-9, Psalm 148: 4). Birds are said to fly (literally) "in front of" the firmament of the heavens (Genesis 1: 20). This "firmament" is even referred to as having "windows" (Genesis 7: 11) or "doors" (Psalm 78: 23)—though the idea of Yahweh's making windows in heaven seemed to one Israelite official ridiculous enough to be the subject of a profane joke (2 Kings 7: 2, 19).

Where the "solid surface" imagery is in use, the sky appears to be thought of as an inverted bowl. The edges of it are at the horizon in both directions (Deuteronomy 4: 32; Psalm 19: 6 (Heb. 7)). The actual phrase "vault of heaven" is used in Job

22: 14, in the context of ideas attributed to Job by Eliphaz the Temanite. The heavens are over all the earth. This is implicit in the phrase "under (the whole) heaven" (e.g. Deuteronomy 2: 25; Ecclesiastes 1: 13)—though the heavens above the Israelites can also be described as "*your* heavens" (Deuteronomy 28: 23 (see Hebrew); Leviticus 26: 19).

There are other passages, however, which do not seem exactly to agree with the "inverted bowl" imagery. Birds fly not only in front of but *in* the heavens (Deuteronomy 4: 17 (see Hebrew), Jeremiah 8: 7; Proverbs 30: 19). In Psalm 8: 8 (Heb. 9) "the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea" may be taken to imply that birds fly in the sky as fish swim in the sea. And the fire which burned on Mount Horeb burned "to the heart of heaven" (Deuteronomy 4: 11).

The phrases "the pillars of heaven" (Job 26: 11), "the foundations of heaven" (2 Samuel 22: 8, but not in the parallel Psalm 18: 7 (Heb. 8)), are in highly poetic contexts, and it is difficult to decide whether they were thought of as existing literally.

Next we come to passages where (*ha*)*shamayim* clearly denotes God's dwelling place, as in 1 Kings 8: 30, 39; Psalm 2: 4. Sometimes God is called "the God of heaven" (e.g. Ezra 1: 2, Jonah 1: 9 *'elohe hashshamayim*; Daniel 2: 18 *'elah shemayya*; Psalm 136: 26 *'el hashshamayim*). There is no certain example of these phrases in the earlier literature of the O.T., for in Genesis 24: 7 the LXX adds *kai ho theos tēs gēs*, and the date of the Book of Jonah is disputed. They are generally said to be the result of adaptation to the religious ideas of the Persians.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere God is said to ride in or through the heavens (Psalm 68: 33 (Heb. 34); Deuteronomy 33: 26), and he looks down from heaven upon the earth (Deuteronomy 26: 15; Psalm 102: 19 (Heb. 20); 14: 2; Lamentations 3: 50). Clearly the Lord's dwelling place is here regarded as identical with the physical heavens. The brimstone and fire which fell on Sodom and Gomorrah are said to come "from the LORD, from heaven" (Genesis 19: 24). He "thunders in heaven" against his enemies (1 Samuel 2: 10; Psalm 18: 13 (Heb. 14)); he talks with Israel, and his angel calls to Hagar, from heaven (Exodus 20: 22; Genesis 21: 17). However the identification with God's dwelling place of the source of the bread (manna) is not explicit in Exodus 16: 4, Nehemiah 9: 15; the case of the fire in 2 Kings 1: 10 and that of the hail stones in Joshua 10: 11 are similar.

<sup>1</sup> G. von Rad, *O.T. Theology*, E.T., I (Edinburgh, 1962), p. 88, n.8.

It may be questioned whether the Hebrews distinguished as we do between the "figurative" and the "literal". At any rate it is impossible to decide in which category certain passages should be placed. Also, in any language it would be a mistake to look for scientific accuracy in highly poetic contexts, and these would surely include passages like 2 Samuel 22: 10a, "He bowed the heavens, and came down" (RSV), and Isaiah 64: 1a (Heb. 63: 19b), "O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down" (RSV). And when Ezekiel (1: 1) says that the heavens were opened and he saw visions of God, he does not mean that he observed the "inverted bowl" of the sky to split, but that for him the barrier between the natural and the supernatural was removed.

An extension of the idea of heaven as God's dwelling place is seen in the idea that various attributes of God exist in heaven, e.g. his sword, symbolizing his retributive justice (Isaiah 34: 5). Similarly his Word stands firm in the heavens (Psalm 119: 89), i.e. in the transcendent realm where God dwells, and therefore removed from the changes and uncertainties of earthly life. In Psalm 36: 5 (Heb. 6) God's steadfast love (*hesed*) is said to be "in the heavens" (AV: Hebrew *behashshamayim* (sic)). But the parallel statements, "And thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds. Thy righteousness is like the great mountains; Thy judgments are a great deep", show that this is a figure of speech for the *vastness* of God's *hesed*. The RSV therefore captures the true sense by translating: "Thy steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens". Psalm 89: 2 (Heb. 3) is similar: "Mercy shall be built up for ever: Thy faithfulness shalt thou establish in the very heavens". Cf. Kirkpatrick's interpretation<sup>2</sup>: "One stone after another will continue to be laid in the building of God's loving kindness till it reaches to heaven itself". In Psalm 20: 6 (Heb. 7) we find the phrase, "the heavens of his holiness" (AV; RSV "his holy heaven").

In some passages in the Psalms the heavens are said to declare certain attributes of God, e.g. his glory (Psalm 19: 1 (Heb. 2)), his righteousness (50: 6), his wonder (89: 5 (Heb. 6)). In Psalm 19 the stress seems to be on the fact that the skies, as God's handiwork, reveal his nature; in Psalm 50 the heavens are called on as witnesses in the dispute between the Lord and Israel (like heaven and earth in Isaiah 1: 2). But Psalm 89: 5-6 (RSV) reads: "Let the heavens praise thy wonders, O LORD, thy faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones! For who in the skies can be compared

<sup>2</sup> A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge, 1906), *in loc.*

to the LORD? Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD . . . ?” Here the stress is on the heavens as the dwelling place of the heavenly hosts.

*Shamayim* therefore means both the skies, and also the dwelling place of God and of heavenly beings. God is pictured as dwelling “above the bright blue sky”, and Hebrew thought flows easily between the visible skies and the invisible realm of spiritual beings. But equally the O.T. shows that this imagery is neither literal nor exhaustive. In the first place the visible heavens were created by God (Genesis 1: 1; Nehemiah 9: 6). The clear implication is that his eternal dwelling place is something more than the visible heavens; otherwise he would have had no dwelling place before the creation. Secondly, the O.T. language about God’s dwelling place is not logically consistent. As G. von Rad says:<sup>3</sup> “It is, in fact, absolutely amazing to see how the most varied ideas about Jahweh’s ‘dwelling places’ maintained themselves within Israel without being harmonised. Was his dwelling place Sinai, from which he sometimes appeared (Judges 5: 4; Habakkuk 3: 3), or was it the Ark, with which he went into battle, or was it Zion (Amos 1: 2; Isaiah 8: 18), or was it heaven?” And if we insist on taking the O.T. literally when it speaks of heaven as the Lord’s throne, in what sense is the earth his footstool? (Isaiah 66: 1). Finally, in one place (1 Kings 8: 27) Solomon declares: “Heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee” (RSV). This is perhaps the clearest statement in the O.T. that the imagery is not to be taken literally.

The other words meaning “sky”, “heavens” add little to the conclusions drawn from the use of *shamayim*. *Shaḥaq*, which has in Isaiah 40: 15 the meaning “fine dust”, more usually means “(thin) clouds” and so “sky”. Usually in its plural form it is an extremely frequent synonym of *shamayim*, and is often used in parallelism with the latter. It is commonly translated “sky” in AV and (rather less frequently) in RSV. It often signifies the physical heavens (even in Job 37: 18 where they are thought of as a solid surface spread out). But also God’s power is in the *sheḥaqim* (Psalm 68: 34 (Heb. 35)) and the *shaḥaq* is the abode of supernatural beings (Psalm 89: 6 (Heb. 7)). And in Psalm 18: 11 (Heb. 12) the phrase *‘abe sheḥaqim*, incorporating two different words for clouds, features in the description of a theophany.

The word *raqia’* (“firmament”) is used as a synonym of *shamayim* when the physical heavens are in view, and emphasizes the solid-surface conception.

<sup>3</sup> *O.T. Theology*, II, p. 346.

We may conclude that the idea of God dwelling in the skies is not presented as a strictly literal one, even in the O.T., if its evidence is taken as a whole. We infer that it was used as being the least inadequate imagery for that which man cannot fully grasp. It conveys the ideas of transcendence, mystery and limitlessness. Moreover it is balanced by other images which show that God is also immanent, and active in human history. Modern man may know that the imagery falls short of the truth as it really is, but it was this imagery which was chosen by God the Holy Spirit as the vehicle of his revelation, and no other can bring him nearer to the ultimate truth.

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