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# HEAVEN



Paula Gooder



*In loving memory of Frances Mant  
14 May 1961 – 7 May 2011  
A wonderful and much missed friend,  
and fellow believer in angels*

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# Contents



<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	viii
<i>Introduction</i>	ix
1 In the beginning . . . : heaven and earth	1
2 On the wings of the cherubim: God as king	12
3 Chariots of fire: God's throne-chariot	22
4 In the presence of God: cherubim, seraphim and the heavenly creatures	32
5 From heaven to earth: angelic messengers	45
6 Heaven opened: communication between heaven and earth	59
7 Caught up into heaven: ascending into heaven	68
8 You shall rise: life, death and resurrection	79
9 Between death and resurrection: what happens while we wait for the end?	91
Epilogue: . . . so what?	101
<i>Notes</i>	107
<i>Select bibliography</i>	129
<i>Index of biblical and ancient texts</i>	138
<i>Index of modern authors</i>	141
<i>Index of subjects</i>	143



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# Abbreviations



AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und des Urchristentum
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OTG	Old Testament Guides
<i>RSR</i>	<i>Religious Studies Review</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>SR</i>	<i>Studies in Religion</i>
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigilae Christianae</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

# Introduction



‘There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’<sup>1</sup>

What comes into your mind when you hear the word heaven? Most of us have some kind of mental image – however vague – that comes to mind whenever we hear the word. One of the fascinating things about writing a book on heaven has been the responses it has evoked from others. Normally it is hard to get people interested in what you are writing. Even the most fascinating subject becomes less interesting as you describe it. This book has been very different. As soon as I have mentioned it, most people – both people of faith and those of no faith – have become animated and told me either what they themselves do or do not believe about heaven, or a story – ridiculous or serious – of what someone else believes. It is interesting that nearly everyone holds an opinion of some kind about this topic. Opinions may vary from person to person, but nearly everyone thinks something about heaven and has an image of what it might be like.

Given this lively interest, it is odd that few people talk about heaven in any depth. An opinion expressed to me again and again while I was writing this book was that people yearn to talk about what believing in heaven means and yet they find few opportunities to do so. This may well be because it is so hard to know what can be said with any level of accuracy. Almost by definition there is little about heaven that we can know with any certainty.

This, however, did not seem to trouble the biblical writers. All the way through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, we find references to heaven and its relationship to earth. The Bible has much to say on the subject, even if we don’t. I don’t pretend for a moment that this book will respond to all – or even most of – the questions that people have about heaven. But I hope that it will stir the pot and

open up a conversation about the nature of heaven and how we relate to it in our everyday lives. Heaven is one of those great mysteries that somehow symbolize what we don't know about ourselves and the world around us. At the same time it lifts our vision from the mundane realities of our everyday lives and reminds us that beyond the daily grind of our existence there is another, unseen reality. A reality governed not by the things of earth but by the things of God. A reality that is as real – if not more so – than our everyday lives. Heaven suggests an answer to the familiar human feeling that there must be more than this, and prompts us to wonder whether there is indeed more in heaven and earth than can be dreamt of in all our philosophies.

### *Heaven in popular imagination*

We must begin, however, by asking what we mean by the word heaven. Heaven is one of those unusual words that, although originating in religious contexts, is used widely in everyday language. Most people, whether they have faith or not, will find themselves using it from time to time. People use it most often to describe what they believe will happen to them or their loved ones after death. Here heaven is viewed as the place to which people will go after they die; where, freed from the constraints of this life, they will experience endless happiness, joy and contentment. Although not everyone agrees about what heaven is like, belief in a heaven, of some kind, is widespread.<sup>2</sup> While few people can articulate precisely what they believe heaven is, it is popularly believed to be where the majority of those on earth will go after death. So widespread is the acceptance of belief in heaven as the location of the afterlife that even the briefest of explorations turns up plentiful examples of its usage in films, novels and songs.

Heaven has been depicted extensively through the centuries in fine art, and popular perceptions of heaven seem, at least in part, to find their roots in some of the great paintings of heaven. While it is difficult to point to any one painting as being the sole influence on our perception of heaven, the gardens in Hieronymus Bosch's *Paradise* or Jan van Eyck's *Adoration of the Lamb* take their place among a large

## Introduction

number of other works that have been influential in shaping our mental images of heaven.

Perhaps more surprising than heaven's popular depiction in artwork is the fact that, despite the complexities inherent in the task, heaven has regularly been depicted in film. Probably the most iconic of these is *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), which contains a scene depicting an escalator that ascends to heaven taking the recently departed to the other world. This scene became so iconic that it was widely used subsequently to refer to the journey to heaven. References to it include, among others, a still on the sleeve of Phil Collins' 1989 single 'Something Happened on the Way to Heaven', a scene in the film *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey* and two separate episodes of *The Simpsons*. A more recent film, *What Dreams May Come* (1998), depicts heaven very differently. Set almost entirely in heaven, it features the search of a man through heaven for his children and wife.

A good number of modern novels also find heaven a rich location. For example, *The Lovely Bones*, a 2002 novel by Alice Sebold – recently made into a film (2009) – featured a teenage girl who after her death at the hands of a murderer watches her family and friends from 'heaven'. A completely different but very popular novel, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2004) by Mitch Albom, is set entirely in heaven and, as its title suggests, records five people he meets in heaven immediately after his death who explain to him his life and his place in the world. Even the final Harry Potter book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), features a scene after Harry's final combat with Voldemort in which Harry is to be found in a white room with Dumbledore; some have interpreted this setting as heaven, though it may be closer to what some call limbo.

Heaven is equally important in rock and pop music. In Eric Clapton's 1992 song 'Tears in Heaven', written after the death of his four-year-old son, the singer wonders whether his son will recognize him if he sees him in heaven. Likewise Bob Dylan's 1973 song 'Knockin' on Heaven's Door' describes the emotions of a dying man who feels he is approaching the entrance to heaven.

I have brought together this motley collection of references not for their cultural significance or influence – which would be debatable –

but to illustrate the abiding popularity of beliefs about heaven and the afterlife, and the common usage of the word to refer to what may happen to us after we die. Inevitably there is little agreement about what heaven is like or even what people will do in heaven, but belief in an afterlife in heaven has been vibrant in popular culture and imagination and is reflected in a broad range of media. Shifting patterns of popular belief and the increase of secularism may well be changing attitudes to heaven, but for now a general acceptance of some sort of heavenly afterlife remains.

### **Heavenly thoughts and feelings**

It is worth noting that, in popular usage, the word heaven denotes not just a place but also an emotion. Heaven is often used to describe a state of highest bliss ('a heavenly piece of chocolate cake' or a 'holiday location that is like heaven'). This usage may well derive from beliefs about life after death. Despite the disagreement about what heaven will be like, many people view heaven as a place of eternal joy and blissful happiness. Earthly experiences, then, that come even close to this are likened to heaven or termed 'heavenly'. Take for example the abidingly popular Irving Berlin song 'Cheek to Cheek', first performed by Fred Astaire in the film *Top Hat* (1935), which opens 'Heaven . . . I'm in heaven', or the song 'Heaven is a Place on Earth', written by Rick Nowels and Ellen Shipley and famously sung by Belinda Carlisle in 1987. Both of these take the experience of falling in love as a 'heavenly experience', meaning thereby that the experience is either comparable to heaven or indeed an early experience of the same kind of happiness that will be experienced in heaven eternally after death.

We can see, then, that popular attitudes to heaven, while often hazy and indistinct, revolve around two particular ideas: that heaven is where we go when we die and that when we get there the experience will be one of contentment and bliss. For some people these popular views of heaven are simply, nowadays, a figure of speech with little reality behind them. For others the idea of heaven as a place of eternal happiness after death is a vital part of what they believe – not only about what will happen to them when they die but also what has happened to their loved ones who have already departed this life.

## *Heaven in popular Christian thought*

These views of heaven are equally significant within the Christian tradition and many favourite hymns present a view of heaven similar to the one outlined above. Take for example the well-loved hymn by Charles Wesley, 'Love divine all loves excelling' (1747), which has in its final verse the line 'Till in heaven we take our place', or the equally popular 'O Jesus I have promised' by John Bode (1868), which contains also in its final verse:

O guide me, call me, draw me, uphold me to the end;  
And then in Heaven receive me, my Saviour and my Friend.

These and many other hymns take as read the belief that life after death involves an eternal, joyful existence in heaven.

We have become so familiar with these ideas – and so comfortable with them – that we are often a little surprised to discover that the biblical tradition describes heaven in a somewhat different way. Within the biblical tradition, the main portrayal of heaven is not as the final resting place for human beings or even as a place of contentment and bliss. Instead heaven is seen as the dwelling place of God above the earth, where God is worshipped day and night by angels. While there are a few references to heaven as a place where the souls of the dead reside, the majority of references to heaven in the Bible have nothing to do with what will happen to us when we die but are concerned with the place where God dwells now; a place which is integrally related to the world as we know it.

By focusing on it as something that will happen to individuals when they die, we have ended up with a privatized and postponed conception of heaven. We have made it much more about the personal fate of human beings than about God, and we have also pushed the reality of heaven off into an indefinite future. Heaven has, as a result, become relevant to individuals as they contemplate their future fate but has become largely irrelevant to everyday life. At the same time this kind of belief has devalued the created world, as the ultimate goal of human existence has become the abandonment of our bodies and this physical world for a spiritual, heavenly existence.

In contrast to popular perception the biblical tradition portrays heaven as primarily not about us but about God, and as something that rather than affecting individuals in the future will influence the whole world now. Over and over again in the Bible heaven is described as the place where God dwells above earth, and from which God intervenes in the things of earth by hearing the cries of humanity, by sending angels and sometimes even intervening directly. In the Bible, heaven – though far off – is not distant from everyday life. The things of heaven are seen to be intimately connected to the things of earth, and what goes on in heaven is believed to affect what happens on earth now.

### *The aim of this book*

The major concern of this book is to give an introduction to the vast subject of heaven in the Bible. Somewhat surprisingly the subject has been less well explored than might be expected,<sup>3</sup> and there remains a need for an up-to-date exploration of the idea of heaven both in the Bible and in Jewish and Christian texts written around the same time. This is because a belief about heaven, God's throne in heaven and the angels that surround God in heaven suffuses the biblical writings. Some biblical books make more overt reference to heaven than others (e.g. the Psalms are packed with references to heaven and God's throne, whereas the book of Micah makes no reference to it at all), but all books both in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament are written into a world in which people held an active belief in heaven, in God's reign in heaven and in angels. If we want to understand much of the Bible, then we need to understand what its authors meant when they used language about such things as heaven, God's throne, Jesus sitting at the right hand of God and angels.

In this book I have attempted to tread a difficult line between accessibility and reliance on scholarship. I am aware that too much scholarship makes a book dense and hard to read. On the other hand, too little reference to scholarship makes a work feel lightweight and insubstantial. I have therefore tried to make the main text as readable as possible – in the full knowledge that some of the material explored in the book is complex in the extreme – while providing references

for further reading in the endnotes for those who wish to explore these issues further.

## **The language of heaven**

You can't get very far in the Bible without discovering beliefs about heaven, God's throne and angels. In order to negotiate our way through such language and imagery we need a working knowledge of what the language refers to and a rough understanding of why it is there. As its title suggests, this book seeks to provide a 'rough guide' to heaven which will offer an introduction to the ideas of heaven while also raising questions about what difference this makes to Christian faith and practice. A book like this inevitably involves the exploration of material that many people find 'weird' or just too hard to understand. It involves studying God's throne-chariot, angels and the like, but I remain convinced that this kind of imagery is so important in the mind of Paul, the evangelists and the other writers of the New Testament that unless we understand it we will not be able to make sense of much that they were talking about.

I will begin by looking at heaven's relationship to earth; at the image of God's enthronement in heaven; at angels; at occasions when heaven opened; and at beliefs in the possibility of ascending into heaven. This sets the scene for the related question of the afterlife and heaven's relationship to 'life after death'. I have deliberately spent less time on the question of what happens after we die because this theme has been so well explored elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> but a book on heaven would be incomplete without at least some reflection on life after death and its significance in Christian thought.

The book is organized part chronologically and part thematically. I do not propose to go into detail about the order in which the books of the Hebrew Bible were composed, and then to demonstrate how ideas of heaven have developed over time, as this would double the length of the book. Nevertheless we cannot help noticing that there is a marked difference of view between, for example, the Hebrew Bible's depiction of heaven as God's dwelling place and the elaborate descriptions of heaven in Revelation. We will therefore explore themes in roughly chronological order, so as to make it easier to observe how traditions shift and change throughout the biblical period.

## Introduction

It is important to note now that it is impossible to state categorically what the Bible as a whole says about heaven, nor to argue that there is a single, clear line of development that runs from the earliest to the latest texts. Biblical beliefs about heaven are varied, complex and fluid. It is possible to note general patterns of belief, and even of developments of thought, but this must be done against a general acknowledgement that the biblical writers are all attempting to put into words something that defies description, and so the words and images they use are bound to vary.

Most important of all, I hope to be able to show why believing in heaven affects the way we live now. I don't mean this in a threatening, hellfire-and-damnation kind of way – live well now or suffer the consequences on the day of judgement – but simply in terms of the way we live our lives. When we postpone and privatize heaven we push it forwards and out of our lives into a dim and distant future. The heaven I see in the Bible is almost the opposite of this. It is not distant and irrelevant, but present and transformative; it speaks powerfully of God's desire to dwell close to humankind and to be involved in our lives. Believing in heaven is not so much about what *will* happen as what is happening *now*. It gives content, meaning and depth to our lives and as such is not a weird optional extra but one of the central pillars of faith.

# 1

## *In the beginning . . . : heaven and earth*



May you be blessed by the LORD, who made heaven and earth.  
The heavens are the LORD's heavens, but the earth he has given to  
human beings. (Ps. 115.15–16)

### *Heaven and sky*

While, in popular usage, the word heaven is used to refer either to what happens to us when we die or to an emotion that comes close to the bliss we will feel in heaven after death, this is not its only use. Intriguingly we also use the word heaven as an alternative to 'sky'. It is not unusual to hear someone using the phrase 'the heavens opened' to refer to a particularly heavy downpour of rain. When you think about it, it is odd that this expression remains in common usage, since it describes a view of the world that is long gone.

This usage can be traced back to biblical tradition, where we find a parallel with our own modern usage. So, in Genesis 8.2, when it stopped raining we are told that the 'the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained', or in Psalm 147.8 that God 'covers the heavens with clouds'.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere the word is used in a different way to describe not so much the sky as the place where God dwells. So, in other places in the Bible, descriptions are given of God's throne being in heaven (Ps. 11.4) and of God looking down from heaven to earth (Ps. 14.2).<sup>2</sup>

### **Heaven and the heavens**

In English, the only slight difference in the way we use the word heaven in these two contexts is that when referring to the sky the

word is more often in the plural ('the heavens'); when it refers to God's dwelling place it is in the singular ('heaven'). English translations of the Bible use this as a way of indicating when the word means sky and when it means God's dwelling place. On one level this is helpful, because it has helped to focus the question of what the word means each time it is used; on another it has been distinctly unhelpful, because it implies that 'heavens' and 'heaven' reflect a different Hebrew word or usage. The problem is that this is purely a convention in English and is not reflected in the use of the Hebrew word.

In Hebrew the word for heaven is *shamayim*. Interestingly, this word is plural (the ending '-im' in Hebrew often denotes a plural),<sup>3</sup> but it is used in this same plural form whether it refers to the sky or to the place where God dwells. No distinction is made in Hebrew between the two uses. The Hebrew word is always plural no matter what is being referred to. Interestingly Greek does use both singular and plural nouns to refer to heaven, but this usage does not match our English conventions. So for example in the Greek version of Genesis 1.1 ('In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth') heaven is translated as singular, but in the Greek of Job 16.19 ('Even now, in fact, my witness is in heaven') the word for heaven is plural. My point is that we like to make a clear distinction between heaven as the dwelling place of God and the heavens as the sky but the original languages of the Bible do not. It is simply not possible to distinguish the two as clearly as some people would like to do.

This raises the question of why the Hebrew word for heaven might be plural. One of the intriguing popular phrases about heaven is the expression 'I'm in the seventh heaven'. It is an expression, akin to 'heavenly', used to describe the highest bliss possible. A quick search on the internet reveals companies which sell beds, candelabras and holidays (as well as other less salubrious items and entertainments) under the name Seventh Heaven – there is even an animal rescue centre called Seventh Heaven. This popular usage seems to have its roots in a later Jewish and Christian tradition (from the third century BCE onwards) in which different levels of heaven are identified by varying numbers. Even Paul, writing in the first century, refers to a 'third heaven' (in 2 Cor. 12.2). In the Hebrew Bible, however, there is little,

if any, evidence that people believed that heaven had more than one level. A belief in heaven as a multi-level realm seems to have developed only later.<sup>4</sup>

The use of the plural in Hebrew seems to be a way of suggesting not variety but vastness. There is no clear reference within the Hebrew Bible to any more than one level of heaven, but there are numerous references to heaven's immensity. Heaven is regarded both as too large to measure: 'Thus says the LORD: If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will reject all the offspring of Israel' (Jer. 31.37); and as far, far above the earth: 'For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him' (Ps. 103.11). Thus it is most likely that in the period of the Hebrew Bible it is heaven's size that has given rise to the use of a plural noun in Hebrew rather than the existence of more than one level in heaven. What is likely is that the plural noun provided the space for the later tradition about multiple levels of heaven to develop. (For further discussion of the levels of heaven see Chapter 4.)

### *Heaven as the dwelling place of God*

We are then left with the question of why the same word can be used both for the sky and for God's dwelling place. Surely that only leads to confusion? The answer is relatively straightforward and can be found in the Hebrew understanding of the world. One of the complexities for us in understanding Hebrew attitudes to the world is that we now view the world in an almost entirely different way.

### **Cosmology in Genesis 1**

Genesis 1 gives us a helpful framework for understanding Hebrew cosmology (see Figure 1 overleaf). In Genesis 1, we are told that God created the heavens and the earth. This was done by the act of three separations: light from darkness (1.4); the waters above from the waters below (1.7); and the dry land from the waters on the face of the earth (1.9). These three separations were followed by three main actions that filled the space made: the sun, moon and stars were hung in the sky (1.14); fish were created for the sea and birds for the air

open up a conversation about the nature of heaven and how we relate to it in our everyday lives. Heaven is one of those great mysteries that somehow symbolize what we don't know about ourselves and the world around us. At the same time it lifts our vision from the mundane realities of our everyday lives and reminds us that beyond the daily grind of our existence there is another, unseen reality. A reality governed not by the things of earth but by the things of God. A reality that is as real – if not more so – than our everyday lives. Heaven suggests an answer to the familiar human feeling that there must be more than this, and prompts us to wonder whether there is indeed more in heaven and earth than can be dreamt of in all our philosophies.

### *Heaven in popular imagination*

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Heaven has been depicted extensively through the centuries in fine art, and popular perceptions of heaven seem, at least in part, to find their roots in some of the great paintings of heaven. While it is difficult to point to any one painting as being the sole influence on our perception of heaven, the gardens in Hieronymus Bosch's *Paradise* or Jan van Eyck's *Adoration of the Lamb* take their place among a large