

HEAVEN

This particular session is fraught with difficulties; this is where people are liable to become offended and upset. Right from the start we said that this course was looking at *biblical* attitudes to death and afterlife, but many people are convinced that the views they hold are biblical, even when there is no evidence for that. And, of course, this is personal. This is all about not only what people hope for for themselves but also, possibly more importantly, what they hope has happened to their loved ones who have already died.

Heaven, in popular culture, has become a number of things. It is a meeting place, where we join back up with friends and family, and continue life, but without the problems, pains and difficulties. It is a place of perpetual chocolate, cream cheese or whatever we choose. For most people, God does not get much of a look in, except in a general sense. Possibly, if one has so little to do with God in life then one would not want to be bothered by Him in death!

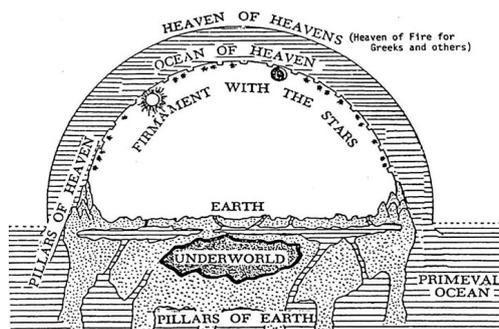
What are some of the images you have of heaven?
What are some that you have heard from others - at funerals, in obituaries etc? Why do you think that people have these images?

Language

As ever, it seems, one of our first problems concerns language; we do not speak the same language as the people who wrote the bible and even when we translate their words our words might not mean the same thing! In the ancient world - in both Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) - the words that we translate as 'heaven' had a slightly different meaning - or at least more meaning! Both '*shamayim*' (Hebrew) and '*ouranos*' (Greek - from which we get the planet 'Uranus') mean more 'sky' than heaven in our sense. In English, the terms 'sky' and 'heaven' became separated in a way that ancient writers would not have understood.

Old Testament

As mentioned above the Hebrew word for 'heaven' is '*shamayim*' but another word is also used - *raqia* which really means 'firmament'; this refers to the dome which covers the earth and separates it from the celestial ocean (Gen 1:6-8 and Ps 148:4 - look at the picture below).



But the 'heavens' (often plural not because they believed in more than one but to show their vastness) is also the abode of God (Isa 6:1; Ps 11:4). This line of thinking - that God 'resides' so high above the earth (so high that the people on the earth look like grasshoppers - (Isa 40:22; Ps 102:19). is a way of separating God from creation - He is not part of creation.

As heaven is the abode of God, so it is also the place from which salvation, in whatever form, comes - for instance the bread that feeds the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 16:4) and the blessings that come down on God's people - Gen 49:25 and Deut 33:13.

One important point is that there is no concept in early Hebrew religion of anyone else being able to be with God in heaven - it is for Him alone. This idea changes over time - have a look at Ecc 3: 21; Dan 12: 1- 3, and also Pss 16, 49, 73 - as the Jews came under the control of the Persians and the Greeks, both of who had extensive ideas about heaven!

New Testament

The New Testament provides us with a slightly more developed view of heaven, but even here there is nothing definite or clear, and is certainly not a major topic. Before looking at this in more detail, a couple of points need to be cleared up, to avoid possible confusion - *paradise* and the *Kingdom of Heaven*.

Paradise

Paradise is not another name for heaven - even if that is how we tend to use the word today. The word originates in Persian and means a 'garden' or 'enclosure'. In the Greek version of the Old Testament it is the word used for the Garden of Eden - and so gained a religious aspect that was never a part of the original. In later Jewish books, such as the apocryphal books of Enoch, it becomes a place between death and resurrection - almost a waiting room. It is probably in this sense that Jesus would have understood it when he speaks to the thief on the cross (Luke 24:43).

The Kingdom of Heaven

This is a phrase that abounds, especially in the Gospel of Matthew. It means exactly the same as 'The Kingdom of God' - that is 'the rule of God'; it is not a place but God's reign. (Matthew is a very 'Jewish' writer and would have felt uncomfortable using the word 'God' too often).

By the time of the New Testament, Judaism had been heavily influenced by both Roman and Greek thought - including the ideas of post-death reward and punishment. The few times that heaven is mentioned in the Gospels, outside its use as the Kingdom of Heaven, it is a place of reward for the righteous (Matt 5: 12, 6: 20) - but it is a bit of surprise how little detail is given. Paul, in 2 Cor 12: 1- 4, talks about an ascent to 'the third heaven', but it is very hard to know what this means; such descriptions of 'ascents into heaven' were very common at that time - and, again, Paul offers very few details of what he sees.

Of course, it is the Book of Revelation that seems to give the most detailed insight into heaven; the seer is taken up and shown the throne-room of God, filled with a multitude of beings, both human and otherwise. But Revelation is a special book - written in line with other Jewish apocalyptic material. Its purpose is to encourage and strengthen Christians in difficult times. And the 'twist' comes at the end, when the 'heaven' John describes is not the final one, or the final destination of humanity; something new takes place.

Conclusion?

There seems to be very little to conclude! What becomes, I hope clear, is that much of what we think about heaven does not come from the Bible, because the bible says so little about heaven! That is not to say that what people believe must be wrong; but it should make us be more willing to question what we do believe. Heaven throws up other issues that we will be looking at – judgement; salvation; resurrection. And, of course, it makes us think of the 'other place' to which we turn our attention next!