

What does the Word “Heaven” Mean?

Introduction

The English language, like most languages, uses the concept of “homographs” – that is, the concept that a **single** word can have **many different** meanings, depending on the context. Here are some examples of homographs in English:

- Will he **run** for president?
- Please don’t **run** across the street.
- Don’t wear these tights because there’s a **run** in them.

- Our house is the one on the **right**.
- Jen always has the **right** answers in math class.
- Susan B. Anthony helped woman obtain the **right** to vote in the U.S.A.

So, if the words “run” or “right” are used in English, it is necessary to look at the *context* of the word in question, in order to determine the meaning that was intended for that word.

In addition, there are many “idiomatic expressions” in English - in other words, expressions that have a “figurative” meaning, rather than a literal meaning. For example:

- I’m so hungry I could **eat a horse**.
- She has a smile that **lights up a room**.
- He has **two left feet**.

Of course, the above expressions are not meant to be taken literally - they are used in a figurative sense, to make a point. However, people who are not native speakers of English often have difficulty understanding such expressions, since they are not aware of the figurative nature of those expressions.

Ancient Hebrew and Greek also use homographs and idiomatic expressions. As a result, it is also very important to look at the context of words and phrases in Scripture, in order to determine the author’s intended meaning of any given passage.

Four different uses of the word “heaven”

One of the words that Scripture uses *very* frequently is the word “heaven” - so it is important for us to understand what that word means. From my experience, most people *immediately* assume that there is only **one** meaning of that word. So, let’s take a look at some of the different uses of the word “heaven” in Scripture:

Group 1:

Genesis 1:20 (ESV):

²⁰And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the **heavens**.”

Deuteronomy 11:11 (ESV):

But the land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from **heaven**,

Job 35:5 (ESV):

Look at the **heavens**, and see; and behold the clouds, which are higher than you.

Group 2:

Genesis 1:15-17 (ESV):

¹⁶And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷And God set them in the expanse of the **heavens** to give light on the earth

Deuteronomy 1:10 (ESV):

The LORD your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of **heaven**.

Psalms 8:3-4 (ESV):

³When I look at your **heavens**, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
⁴what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?

Group 3:

Psalms 11:4 (ESV):

⁴ The LORD is in his holy temple;
the LORD's throne is in **heaven**;
his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man.

Isaiah 24:21-22 (ESV):

²¹On that day the LORD will punish
the host of **heaven**, in **heaven**,
and the kings of the earth, on the earth.
²² They will be gathered together
as prisoners in a pit;
they will be shut up in a prison,
and after many days they will be punished.

Ezekiel 1:1 (ESV):

¹In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the **heavens** were opened, and I saw visions of God.

Group 4:

Daniel 4:26 (ESV):

²⁶And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that **Heaven** rules.

Luke 15:21 (ESV):

²¹And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against **heaven** and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

Matthew 6:19-20 (ESV):

¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in **heaven**, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.

What does "heaven" refer to in those passages?

From what I can see, there are at least four separate meanings of the word heaven, in the above passages! My take on those four meanings are as follows:

Group 1: In this group, the word heaven means: **The atmosphere around the earth.**

After all, birds fly through the *atmosphere*, rain falls through the *atmosphere*, and clouds reside in the *atmosphere*, right?

Group 2: In this group, the word heaven means: **Outer space.**

The sun, moon, and stars all reside in *space* - not in the atmosphere - right?

Group 3: In this group, the word heaven means: **The place where God lives.**

Psalms 11:4 (plus many, *many* other verses) appear to indicate that God lives in a completely different "dimension" from us - i.e., different from the atmosphere or outer space. Isaiah 24:21-22 indicates that angels (including rebellious angels!) *also* reside in that dimension currently. Ezekiel 1:1 uses the "heavens were opened" phrase (which is also used elsewhere); that apparently means that Ezekiel saw a vision of the place where God lives - rather than seeing the atmosphere or outer space.

All three of the meanings listed above are **places** - i.e., the atmosphere, outer space, and God's residence are all *locations*. However, in addition to those meanings, there is another, "figurative" meaning of heaven:

Group 4: In this group, "heaven" is a figurative reference to: **God himself.**

Daniel 4:26 tells us that "Heaven rules" - but how can a *place* rule anything? Similarly, in Luke 15:21, the prodigal son says that he sinned "against heaven" - but how can we sin against a *place*? So, in these verses, it appears that the word heaven is being used to refer to God, **himself** - because in that case, the verses make perfect sense.

In Matthew 6:19-20, Jesus tells us to store up treasures "in heaven". However, we *cannot* actually store up treasures in the atmosphere, in outer space, or in the place where God lives. So, this passage also appears to refer to God, himself - because we **can** "store up treasures" with God. In other words, God "keeps track" of what we do - and as a result, God will **reward** us for the good things that we do during this age. This is apparently what Jesus is referring to, in that passage.

Why are these four meanings important?

There are a number of “key” verses in Scripture which use the word heaven. In other words, some of the verses which mention the word “heaven” are used by various Christian denominations, to make *sweeping* doctrinal statements. As a result, it is vitally important to determine the *intended* meaning of “heaven” in those verses – in order to determine if the doctrines in question are valid.

For example, consider the following verse:

2 Kings 2:11 (ESV):

And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into **heaven**.

This verse tells us that Elijah was taken up into “heaven”, by a whirlwind. Most mainstream denominations believe that means that Elijah is currently in **the place where God lives** - i.e., the meaning from Group 3, above. In addition, mainstream denominations then go on to claim that **all** Christians go to the place where God lives when they die, from this verse.

However, is the above understanding true? First of all, *after* Elijah was taken up, his followers organized a search party, to try to find him. If they thought that Elijah was in the place where God lives, they would not have looked for him, right? Also, about 10 years *after* that event, King Jehoram of Israel received a **letter** from Elijah! That certainly seems to indicate that Elijah was **not** taken to the place where God lives.

Notice that the verse above explicitly states that a **whirlwind** took Elijah into heaven. Well, where does a “whirlwind” (i.e., a tornado or cyclone) do its work? It seems to me that a whirlwind operates in the **atmosphere of the earth** - i.e., the meaning from Group 1, above. If that is the case, it means that Elijah was transported - through the atmosphere - to a different location **on the earth**. That certainly seems to explain the actions of Elijah’s followers, as well as the letter from Elijah.

Next, consider these verses:

Psalms 115:16 (NIV):

¹⁶ The **highest heavens** belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to man.

2 Chronicles 2:6 (ESV):

But who is able to build him a house, since **heaven**, even **highest heaven**, cannot contain him? Who am I to build a house for him, except as a place to make offerings before him?

2 Corinthians 12:2 (ESV):

² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the **third heaven**— whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.

The above verses seem to indicate that there are multiple “levels” in heaven - i.e., that there may be three separate “layers” of heaven. The Mormons have a rather “unique” belief about what that means. Basically, they state that there are *three separate areas* where God lives - with one “area”

controlled by the Father, one “area” controlled by the Son, and one “area” controlled by the Holy Spirit.

However, there is a much simpler explanation to the above verses. As mentioned above, there are three different “place”-type meanings for heaven - the atmosphere, outer space, and the place where God lives. So, with that understanding, the following explanation can be used:

- The atmosphere around the earth is the “lowest”, or “**first**” heaven;
- Outer space is the “middle”, or “**second**” heaven;
- The place where God lives is the “highest”, or “**third**” heaven.

That looks to be a much more reasonable explanation to the above verses. (That’s just my view, of course.)

Finally - and most importantly - take a look at these verses:

John 6:38 (ESV):

³⁸For I have come down from **heaven**, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.

1 Corinthians 15:47 (ESV):

⁴⁷ The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is **from heaven**.

The above verses are frequently cited - by many denominations - to try to prove that Jesus *personally* pre-existed in **heaven** (the place where God lives), *before* he was born on the earth.

However, as noted above, one of the meanings of the word “heaven” is figurative - i.e., sometimes “heaven” refers to **God himself**. So, those verses could certainly mean that Jesus was **sent from God** - *rather* than meaning that he personally pre-existed in the place where God lives. As it turns out, John 6:38 explicitly refers to the fact that God sent Jesus - because Jesus states that he is going to do “the will of him who sent me”.

In fact, Scripture uses the phrases “from heaven” and “from God” interchangeably:

John 8:42 (ESV):

⁴²Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came **from God** and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.

In addition, take a look at this verse:

James 1:17 (ESV):

¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is **from above, coming down from the Father of lights** with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

The above verse tells us that *every* good gift is “from above”. Does that mean that every good gift “personally pre-existed” **in heaven**, before God manifested it on the earth? I don’t see any evidence to support that supposition. In a similar way, Jesus did *not* need to “personally pre-exist” in heaven, either, before God caused him to be born on the earth.

Overall, it appears that the word “heaven” does **not** *always* mean “The place where God lives”!