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):
16 And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. 17 And 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.

Psalm 8:3-4 (ESV):
3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?

Group 3:

Psalm 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):
21 On 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):
1 In 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):
26 And 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):

21 And 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.

Psalm 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:

Psalm 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):
38 For 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):
42 Jesus 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”!