

Born to Win

About Heaven

by Ronald L. Dart

What did the first Christians believe about heaven? When they spoke of heaven, when they thought of heaven, what did they visualize? Was their *concept* of heaven the same as ours might be? I don't think so. I'm not talking here about the difference between Greek words and English words, I'm talking about how they (and how we) conceive of heaven.

From as early as the 11th century, heaven seems to be conceived of as a *place*. The dictionary says it's "the dwelling place of the Deity and the blessed dead." The operative word, though, is "place". Heaven is a place. Was that how the first Christians thought of it? Now, one thing we need to consider right off is that the first Christians were quite familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures. There is a word in question here. The word in Hebrew is *shamayim* [שָׁמַיִם, Strong's H8064]. It meant, simply, the sky—the place of the clouds where birds fly, and even higher. The stars of the night were in the sky, so everything *up* is the sky.

In Hebrew thought, the word was not so much a place as it was a direction—up. And we now know that people on the other side of the planet pointing "up" are pointing in the opposite direction of what you are doing. So going a step further, it isn't even a direction. It seems, in fact, to be...well, every place but Earth. All of us here on earth are under the heavens—under the skies—and thus heaven (at least in this case) is not exactly a delimited place. But all I'm asking here is not what the facts of heaven are but what the first Christians *believed* about it. Now, they were all very familiar with how the story began. Genesis 1, verse five:

Genesis 1

KJ2000

⁵ And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

⁶ And God said, Let there be a firmament [*an expanse*] in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

⁷ And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.

⁸ And God called the firmament Heaven. [...]

Actually, he called it "sky"—the Hebrew *shamayim*.

Genesis 1

KJ2000

⁸ [...] And the evening and the morning were the second day.

⁹ And God said, Let the waters under the [sky] be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.

Sky? *Shamayim*. The same word: heaven. Later on in Genesis 1:13:

Genesis 1

KJ2000

¹³ And the evening and the morning were the third day.

¹⁴ And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the [Sky] to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years:

¹⁵ And let them be for lights in the firmament of the [Sky] to give light upon the earth: and it was so.

¹⁶ And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also.

¹⁷ And God set them in the firmament of the [Sky] to give light upon the earth[.]

Well, when I was going through all this (I was going verse by verse through my concordance and looking up the scriptures and seeing what the original Hebrew said) it became apparent that the word “sky” makes perfect sense everywhere you find the word “heaven” in your Bible. Because that *is* what the word was, and in their language they use *precisely* the same word to describe whatever that you might think heaven is and the sky where the clouds are, where the birds fly, where the stars are, and the whole thing. In other words, it's everywhere else but here. Okay? Genesis 1:20:

Genesis 1

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²⁰ And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that has life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of [Sky].

Heaven is where the birds fly. And then there is a later case where Hagar took her son and ran away from Sarah. This one's kind of interesting...dimensionally interesting. Genesis 21, verse 14:

Genesis 21

AKJV

¹⁴ And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

Because Sarah had had enough of Hagar. She wanted her gone. Okay.

Genesis 21

AKJV

¹⁵ And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs.

¹⁶ And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bow shot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against him, and lift up her voice, and wept.

¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven [*He called to Hagar out of the sky.*], and said to her, What ails you, Hagar? fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is.

Note: “out of the *sky*”. Not from some location at the far end of the galaxy; from a location close enough to be heard by her. But how important is this, given the daily circumstances we deal with? Then there is this from Exodus 32, verse 13:

Exodus 32

AKJV

¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven [*the stars of the sky*], and all this land that I have spoken of will I give to your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever.

“Stars of the sky”. So it seems, to the Hebrew speaker, heaven was everything that is up: the atmosphere, to the stars (some of which we now know are *galaxies*—which means they are collections of *billions* of stars). The NIV here even renders the word “sky” as it progresses. Rain, it says, falls upon the earth “from heaven”—the sky. In [several] places it renders the words *shamayim* as “air”. Deuteronomy 11, verse 11:

Deuteronomy 11

AKJV

¹¹ But the land, where you go to possess it, is a land of hills and valleys, and drinks water of the rain of heaven[.]

So it seems likely that *shamayim* could be...and really, I think, in a lot of ways I have begun to find that if I will use “sky” instead of “heaven” everywhere, the scriptures actually make more sense, oddly enough. Because languages change over time, you have to realize that.

Ezekiel 31

AKJV

⁶ All the fowls of heaven made their nests in his boughs[...]

And so on it goes. Now, God sits, not exactly in a place, but in the skies. Take the second psalm, verse four:

Psalms 2

AKJV

⁴ He that sits in the heavens shall laugh: the LORD shall have them in derision.

Yeah, God's in heaven. Heaven's the place where God lives. Well, yeah, but it's not exactly a place. “He that sits *in the skies* shall laugh” is what this says. So this might be the idea the first Christians had long held, even before they were Christians. Now, when we come to the Greek New Testament, the word is different; the meaning is precisely the same. The Greek word: *ouranos* [οὐρανός, Strong's G3772]. Matthew 3, verse 17. This is at the baptism of Jesus.

Matthew 3

KJ2000

¹⁶ And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up immediately out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him:

¹⁷ And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

So heaven is not way off somewhere. Heaven is close enough to be heard. But, in fact, if you read this “And lo a voice from *the sky*, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased”, it actually reads better and conveys more by using a common word for “sky” rather than “heaven”. Now, a good case can be made for dropping “heaven” from scriptural vocabulary because it has been given a *special meaning* not held by the first Christians.

Right after his baptism and his temptation by the devil, Jesus came back and Matthew says:

Matthew 4

AKJV

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Actually, what he said in the ears of the first people who heard him was, “the kingdom *of the skies* is at hand.” Now, what did that mean to the first Christians? How did they grasp it? Well, they knew Daniel, for example, chapter two, verse forty four:

Daniel 2

AKJV

⁴⁴ And in the days of these kings shall the God of [the skies] set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.

So they saw him as the God of the skies, not God of the heavens like we normally use the term—much bigger than heaven, even, as normally visualized. You know all the jokes about Saint Peter at the gate, and taking people coming and going, they picture a *place* up there. Well, the skies are much more open, ambiguous, far-reaching than that. Well, the Pharisees, we're told in Mark 8, verse 11:

Mark 8

AKJV

¹¹ And the Pharisees came forth, and began to question with him, seeking of him a sign from heaven, tempting him.

A sign from heaven? Well, no, what they were asking for was a sign *from the sky*. And heaven again seems to be a direction, not a place. It is up, no matter where you are on the globe. If you say, “Which direction is heaven?”, you point up. In fairness, heaven seems to have been sky from the beginning and retain that meaning right through the Bible including the New Testament. But somewhere since the time the New Testament was finished, the sense of the word changed. In point of fact, you can render the Hebrew or the Greek words as “sky” and be closer to the writer's intent than by using the word “heaven” now. Now, that may not have been true in King James' day, but it is now—much more clear. Consider, for example, the Lord's Prayer:

Matthew 6

KJ2000

⁹ After this manner therefore pray: Our Father who is in [the sky], hallowed be your name.

That's what the Greek says. And I presume he begins this way to avoid confusion with one's earthly father. In other words: “Our father...” Well, my dad is in the other end of the house. “Our Father who is in the sky...” Now, what Jesus is doing, I think, is choosing a metaphor that people can understand. But when he spoke of “heaven”, his audience surely did not think the way we think about it—due to all the years of hearing sermons, and hearing and singing songs about heaven and that beautiful city, and all that kind of stuff that dominates *our* thought. It is *odd* how a purely human construct of “heaven” has so strongly taken over. I tend to visualize, even now, a throne room somewhere that is “heaven”—no doubt because of my upbringing, what I've always heard, the songs I sang—and that tends to be reinforced by the picture of God that is drawn in the Book of Revelation. The big question is: What did Jesus mean when he spoke of heaven, and how did the disciples understand him?

Now, here's one thing to keep in mind. The Greek word for this is the *same word* that is used for the sky in everyday language. You are aware, I think, that the word “spirit” [*pneuma*, πνεῦμα, Strong's G4151] in the New Testament—like “Holy Spirit”—is simply like the wind that moves the leaves on the trees. You would say, “My, the spirit is moving the leaves on the trees.” You don't mean anything supernatural, because wind is in your normal vocabulary. And that's all it is. The “Holy Spirit” is “Holy Wind”.

Okay. Now, it seems to me that God dwells in something like another dimension—a nonphysical dimension—unmeasured, and unmeasurable. And while the Holy Spirit is amorphous, God is not. Father and Son manifest as *men*. Why not? Man is made in *their* image. It's not so much that they're like us; we are like them. But to live in the sky seems strange, now that we know how the universe is constructed and how *big* it is. For, in biblical terms, the heavens—the sky—extends to the furthest objects the Hubble telescope can see. From up there, you can look down and see the Earth. You can actually see how the atmosphere is around the Earth and about how thick it is. And then you can turn around and look out into space...I don't know how far the Hubble telescope actually sees. I think they have seen things 14 billion *light years* away in space. Heaven goes out *that far*.

Now, consider the kingdom parables in the New Testament as examples to, kind of, get a grip on this. Matthew 13, verse 24:

Matthew 13

AKJV

²⁴ Another parable put he forth to them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened to a man which sowed good seed in his field:

Another way of saying that is, “the Realm of the Skies is like this.”

Matthew 13

AKJV

²⁵ But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way.

²⁶ But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also.

²⁷ So the servants of the householder came and said to him, Sir, did not you sow good seed in your field? from where then has it tares?

²⁸ He said to them, An enemy has done this. The servants said to him, Will you then that we go and gather them up?

²⁹ But he said, No; lest while you gather up the tares, you root up also the wheat with them.

³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather you together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

Now, when you remember that parables are like riddles or like allegories, you realize there is something much bigger than agriculture involved here. What Jesus is trying to tell people isn't that hard. What is curious about it is the fact that it is compared to the *kingdom of the sky*. What this might say to a pastor is, “Don't root out the bad members—don't attempt to get rid of the bad apples in your congregation — because you may get the wrong people by mistake, or you may tear them up along with the bad apples.” And, you know, that's true. One bad apple in a congregation...it's funny how fast they can become the underdog and gain sympathy from other people. Basically, he says, “Leave him alone. There will come a time when *I* will sort them out.” But if we take that approach then that would make your congregation part of the kingdom of the skies, wouldn't it?

Matthew 13

AKJV

³¹ Another parable put he forth to them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field:

³² Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.

Okay, the church—the Christian movement—starts small and grows. It becomes significant. *But*, this is like the *kingdom of the skies*. Now, we have a term for this sort of thing that might be an apt synonym for heaven. We speak of things that are “other-worldly”. Believe it or not, that word is in the dictionary; it's been in use for about 150 years. But I will have to confess “sky” sure sounds a lot more poetic. But back to my question: What did the first Christians believe about heaven? Consider something that Paul wrote. He said in Philippians 3, verse 18:

Philippians 3

NIV

¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.

¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

²⁰ But our citizenship is in [the sky]. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ[.]

The word in the NIV is, of course, “heaven”, and I put the word “sky” there because it really, I think, contrasts what we're dealing with. One thing is the things that are earthly; the other is the sky which, basically, is everything else. It's other-worldly. They don't seem to have thought of heaven as a place as much as a direction from which Jesus will come—the direction to which we ultimately will belong and ultimately will go. One thing that is evident to any serious reader of the Bible is that there *is an other-world*—a world beyond the present reality. In science fiction or science, this might be called a parallel universe or another dimension of space-time. Our old friend Daniel got a hint of that—just a passing hint—when the angel Gabriel visited him and, of all things, apologized for the delay of getting there to see him. Why was it he had to apologize? Because he had to fight his way through the prince of Persia.

Daniel 10

AKJV

¹³ But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days: but, see, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me; and I remained there with the kings of Persia.

Now, Gabriel is a prince. Michael, in the same area, is identified as a prince. Who's this prince of Persia? Well, most people seem to equate it with Satan or with another big angel like Satan. A battle between spirit beings? Apparently so. It seems hard to imagine that it would take place, and you think of lightsabers and clashes and whatever they did to fight with back in those days... (By the way, I've talked about this is some length that a little book that we have called *Tracks of the Devil*. If you remember, just include that in your request when it comes to us. Ask the operator to send you *Tracks of the Devil* [Booklet and/or Audio] and we'd be happy to send it along to you.)

Now, the odd thing about the incident in Daniel is that the angelic skirmish had *nothing whatever* to do with the story or the purpose of the vision. It's an aside to simply explain the delay. But it does accomplish one important thing: It opens the door to the realization that there is an other-world—out

there, up there, somewhere. It isn't here. We can't see it. And the simplest way to explain it is to say that it is “up there”, in the heavens, in the sky. So when Jesus said to the Jews:

John 8

AKJV

²¹ Then said Jesus again to them, I go my way, and you shall seek me, and shall die in your sins: where I go, you cannot come.

²² Then said the Jews, Will he kill himself? because he said, Where I go, you cannot come.

²³ And he said to them, You are from beneath; I am from above: you are of this world; I am not of this world.

²⁴ I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins: for if you believe not that I am he, you shall die in your sins.

Jesus confirms what we have been seeing so far: There is *this world*; there is *other-world*. The thought that grows on me as I think through this is that heaven and sky are metaphors, used in some cases in the New Testament and the Old Testament for the other-world. The other-world is not a long way from here, because an angel can call from it and be heard right here—as though it were a parallel universe, as though an angelic being can simply step across from his world into ours. Why not? If that's true then heaven is *sort of* here. It's only metaphorically in the sky (because the sky is somewhere else) but it is one way that it can be *here* and *not here* at the same time. Now, if that doesn't make any sense to you, that's probably because you've got a healthy mind. (Sorry about that.)

Okay, probably much of our concept of heaven is influenced by the descriptions of the apostle John in Revelation. In Revelation, heaven does seem a little bit more like a place. For example, in the fourth chapter of Revelation, John is caught up in a vision and he says:

Revelation 4

AKJV

¹ After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in [the sky:....]

Your Bible probably says “a door was opened in heaven”, but I think, visually, it's more like a door was opened in the sky.

Revelation 4

AKJV

¹ [...] and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up here, and I will show you things which must be hereafter.

² And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in [the sky], and one sat on the throne.

Now, we are definitely at an otherworldly place, right? No longer this world; we're in other-world. We are in the sky, and here's a throne that is set in the sky, undifferentiated. John here, of course, who is seeing all of this, while he sees it his body is sitting on a rock in the isle of Patmos. He only sees this place, and all this event, in vision. What follows in Revelation 4 is an *astounding* picture of the place where God *is*. Some like to think that God is everywhere but, in this case, God is right there, in vision, before John's eyes. I will leave it to you to read the description of all this because there's another passage, in the little time I have, I want to call to your attention. It's in Revelation 21. Said John:

Revelation 21

AKJV

¹ And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed

away; and there was no more sea.

Okay. A new sky, a new earth. The first sky and the first earth were passed away. No more sea. What does that mean to you? Well, to me it means that we have moved to another place in the galaxy, as it were, so that the earth underneath our feet is new and, consequently, the skies around us are just as new. And when we look up, we look for the Big Bear constellation and something has replaced it. It isn't there.

Revelation 21

AKJV

² And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of [the sky], prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

³ And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

Now, that's interesting because it seems that rather than us “going to heaven”, *God* descends out of heaven in the holy city and *comes to us* on the new earth.

Revelation 21

AKJV

⁴ And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

You know, it is really this city that he describes here that forms the image of what we call “heaven” in hymns and sermons that have so influenced the way we think about heaven. But the city is not heaven. It comes down *out of heaven*, out of the sky. It is the City of God, and it *is* a place. And the place? Well, the place is in the other-world. Did the first Christians understand it this way? Up to a point, I think they did. And beyond that point, we may be meddling with things that are just a little too high for us.

Until next time, I'm Ronald Dart, and you were *born to win*.

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