

more traditional point of view. Many workbooks used with those learning English, for instance, include exercises that ask students to “rewrite each sentence so that the meaning remains the same.” I cannot judge English, but in my mother tongue, Russian, I can think of numerous examples where changing word order or grammatical patterns, as well as substituting words with synonyms, hardly has any detectable effect on the meaning. Some variations, of course, may change the emphasis or have other effects, but many changes are simply stylistic or idiolect differences. Speaking or writing in the same flat and standard manner is not good style in any language. Very often, to say something in a different way (or, better, to produce a different saying, not identical although very close to the first one) is a goal of its own, and not only for poets.

Any study of biblical texts will profit if we move away from expecting that each one is woven in a linear fashion. The alternative—expecting the unexpected—may not be easily applied, but perhaps I can conclude by inviting the reader not to forget that biblical poetry is first of all good poetry, and good poetry is just different—or it is no poetry at all.

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HEAVEN AND EARTH

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A number of years ago an old lady asked me a question. What did Jesus mean when he said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away”? I do not remember what answer I gave, but I was surprised at how concerned she seemed to be about the verse. It was only later, after I had left her, that I suddenly realized what it was that she was so concerned about. She knew that death could not be far away, and all her life she had looked forward to being with God in heaven. But this verse said that “heaven will pass away”! What did that mean for her hopes?

In fact, of course, in this verse Jesus was talking about the skies or the heavens, not about Heaven as the place of God’s presence. If I had realized the problem in time, I could easily have set the lady’s mind at rest on this question that was troubling her so much. However, I suspect that she is not the only person to be misled by the wording of this verse. Therefore, it is very surprising to find that even today many English versions (including NIV, NRSV, REB, GNT) still say “heaven and earth” in verses like Matt 24.35 and its parallels (Mark 13.31 and Luke 21.33). CEV and Phillips’ translation seem to be aware of the problem, and in Mark 13.31 both of these have “earth and sky” instead of “heaven and earth.” But in some other passages (such as Matt 5.18) the traditional wording is still found in both of those translations. The New Century Version does have “earth and sky” more consistently, and NJB has “sky and earth” in these passages. (Although “sky and earth” is closer to the Greek, it seems more natural in English to say “earth and sky”; but either way, at least the meaning is correct.)

Louw and Nida's *Greek-English Lexicon* (item 1.3, on page 1) suggests that the Greek expression being translated here, *ho ouranos kai hē gē* is "a more or less fixed phrase equivalent to a single lexical unit" and that it means everything that God created, that is, the universe. They then quote Mark 13.31 as an example, using "heaven and earth" in their translation of it. However, they go on to say that there "may be certain complications involved in rendering *ho ouranos kai hē gē* as 'heaven and earth,' since 'heaven' might be interpreted in some languages as referring only to the dwelling place of God himself. The referents in this passage are 'the sky and the earth,' in other words, all of physical existence, but not the dwelling place of God, for the latter would not be included in what is destined to pass away."

In my opinion, English itself is one of the languages where the word "heaven" will be interpreted as referring only to the dwelling place of God himself, and translations into English should not use "heaven" in these passages. It is probably because these passages are so very familiar that translators do not realize the meaning they are giving their readers when they use the expression "heaven and earth" here. In modern English we might talk about a rocket "soaring into the heavens," but we would certainly not describe it as "soaring into heaven," because "heaven" is not another way of referring to the sky or to outer space.

In fact, it is surely important in all languages to have some way of distinguishing the concept of "sky" from the concept of "dwelling place of God." In these passages translators should never use a term meaning "the dwelling place of God." It may not be necessary to use a term meaning "sky" either, if there is some other expression in the language which gives the correct meaning of "everything that has been created" or "the universe."

There are of course places in the New Testament where Heaven, as the place where God lives, is contrasted with the earth. In these passages, translators should be careful to give the correct meaning. A good example of this is in the Lord's Prayer, in Matt 6.10: "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Similarly, 1 Cor 15.47 says that "the first man [a reference to Adam] was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven." Passages like these are referring to Heaven, not to the sky. Other NT passages where heaven refers to God's dwelling place, in contrast with earth, are Matt 5.34-35; 16.19; 18.18; Acts 7.49; James 5.12; and Rev 5.3.

Sometimes in the New Testament, the word "heaven" is used because of the Jewish reluctance to use the name of God. "Heaven" in these cases is used in place of "God" and refers to God himself. This is the case in the many references in Matthew to "the kingdom of heaven" where other gospels have "the kingdom of God" (e.g., compare Matt 4.17 with its parallels in Mark 1.15 and Luke 10.9). It is also most likely the case in references like Matt 16.1; Luke 20.4, 5; John 3.27; and even perhaps Col 1.5.

There are some places, such as Matt 11.25, where God is called "Lord of heaven and earth." Since God is of course the Lord of Heaven as well as of the universe, it may not matter so much which interpretation is given in these passages (others are Luke 10.21 and Acts 17.24). Nevertheless, the intended

meaning here is likely to be “the universe.” This is because this expression in Greek, as Louw and Nida say, is a set expression referring to everything that has been created. Acts 17.24 in fact combines the idea of the creation of the universe with the idea of God as Master or Lord of the universe.

Other NT passages where this expression refers to the created universe are Matt 5.18; Mark 13.27; Luke 16.17; Acts 4.24; 14.15; Eph 1.10; Col 1.16, 20; Heb 12.26-27; 2 Pet 3.7, 10, 13; Rev 10.6; 14.7; 20.11; and 21.1. These are all passages where translators should be careful not to refer to Heaven as the place where God lives. (NJB, which uses “sky and earth” in the key passages mentioned earlier, unfortunately has “heaven and earth” in several of these passages, some of which talk about the sky passing away.)

In three other passages (Luke 12.56; Acts 2.19; and Rev 6.13) the reference is not to the whole universe, but to the sky in contrast with the earth.

Old Testament background

The use of “heaven and earth” in the New Testament is very similar to what we find in the Old Testament, because it is largely based on the Old Testament. The Old Testament begins with the story of creation, which is presented as the creation of the heavens and the earth, with lights to shine in the heavens and give light to the earth. Birds are created to live in the heavens, animals to live on earth, and fish to live in the sea (Gen 1.1–2.4).

As we can see from the way the creation story is told, it is meant to be understood as the creation of the universe. Although in English the regions above the earth have traditionally been called “the heavens” in the story of creation, they cannot be called “Heaven,” in the sense of the place where God dwells. In terms of modern English, it would probably be better to say “the sky and the earth” or “the earth and the sky.”

The story of creation then becomes an important theme throughout the Old Testament. God is often described as “the maker of heaven and earth” (meaning the sky and the earth). The first example of this is in Gen 14.19, where Melchizedek blesses Abram by saying, “May the Most High God, who made heaven and earth, bless Abram!” (GNT). Another example is Ps 121.2, “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (NRSV). Jeremiah prayed (32.17), “Sovereign Lord, you made the earth and the sky by your great power and might; nothing is too difficult for you” (GNT).

As the creator of the earth and the sky, God is often referred to in the Old Testament as the God (or Lord) of heaven and earth. For example, in Josh 2.11, Rahab says to the Israelite spies, “The Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth below” (REB). With this construction, it becomes harder to be sure of the meaning of “heaven.” This could be a reference to the created areas above the earth. But it could also be a reference to Heaven as the place where God lives. The meaning of Heaven as the place where God lives is also common in the Old Testament. In Deut 26.15, e.g., the people are told to say a prayer which includes the words, “Look down from heaven, your holy dwelling-place, and bless your people Israel” (REB). Psalm 76.8 says, “You made your judgment known from heaven; the world was afraid and kept silent”

(GNT). And in Isa 66.1, God says, “Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool” (NRSV).

In the Old Testament, when the writer is making statements about the whole universe, the heavens (sky) and earth are often used in parallel lines which together give the whole meaning.

Isaiah 44.23 (NRSV) has:

Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it;
Shout, O depths of the earth.

Prov 3.19 (REB)

By wisdom the Lord laid the earth’s foundations
and by understanding he set the heavens in place.

Jer 4.23 (REB)

I looked at the earth and it was chaos,
at the heavens, and their light was gone.

In the context of God’s judgment, we often hear about the earth and sky trembling and shaking:

Joel 2.10 (GNT)

The earth shakes as they advance;
the sky trembles.

Isa 13.13 (REB)

Then I shall make the heavens shudder,
and the earth will be shaken to its foundations.

In Isaiah, we also find the idea of a new sky and new earth:

(REB)

See, I am creating new heavens and a new earth!
The past will no more be remembered
nor will it ever come to mind.

Conclusion

In most passages, whether in the Old Testament or the New Testament, when “heaven and earth” or “the heavens and the earth” are mentioned, the meaning is the created universe. It is not a reference to Heaven, as the dwelling place of God. In English, translators have not been careful to keep this distinction clear, and this is probably true in many other languages as well. However, as we have seen, this can lead to real confusion for ordinary Bible readers. It is better if translators find ways to make the meaning clear in these passages. “Heaven” should be mentioned only in passages which clearly mean the dwelling place of God. In other passages, an expression should be used which means only “sky.” Or else, the whole expression “heaven and earth” can be translated in a way to show that the whole universe is meant.