

THE NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT REGARDING THE REGIONS OF HEAVEN WITH EMPHASIS ON 2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-4

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In the varied use of ouranos in the New Testament the concept is implied that there are several regions of heaven, and in one place, 2 Corinthians 12:1-4, it is clearly stated that there is in some sense a third heaven. As a matter of fact, in this passage Paul states that he was snatched up, unto this third heaven, into paradise, and that he did not know whether he was in or out of the body in his experience.

It is the purpose of this study to interpret 2 Corinthians 12:1-4 as to the meaning of the third heaven and to the other regions implied, in the light of the concept of ouranos and related words in Classical and Hellenistic Greek, in the Old Testament, in the literature of the Intertestamental period and that of the Dead Sea Scrolls, comparing such usage with the teaching of the New Testament on the subject together with the writings of the Patristic period. The study will be concluded with an examination of the text of 2 Corinthians 12:1-4.

The questions arising in the New Testament and particularly in 2 Corinthians 12 concern how the heaven or heavens mentioned relate to the concept of a plurality of heavenly regions and whether they are to be considered as completely material and spatial, partly so, or not at all, and further, how paradise relates to this concept of heaven. For a more adequate answer to these questions it will be well to observe how writers other than those of the New Testament books used particularly the concept, ouranos.

Ouranos in the Classical and Hellenistic Greek Literature

Ouranos is used from the earliest period of the epic writings of Homer and Hesiod throughout Greek literature, but it never is used in the plural by classical writers.¹ The word conveyed the idea of the vault or firmament of heaven which was thought of as being made of bronze (chalkeos, Hom. Il. 17.425; poluchalkos, Il. 5.504) or iron (sidēreos, Hom. Od.

15.329), this vault idea also being conveyed by Empedocles (steremnion, Placit. 2.11.2 [Vorsokr. 1, p. 209]).

As to spatial relationship, ouranos was conceived of, on the one hand, as the lower heaven, the area of the atmosphere, that part which is wrapped in clouds (Il. 15.192, Od. 5.303), connected with both aithēr and nephēlai (Il. 15.192), being conceived of as the aitheros to eschaton (Zeno, Stoic 1.33 (cf. Ar. Nu. 95 sqq.),² the area above earth into which the flame from watch-fires would ascend into heaven (Il. 8.509); and, on the other hand, as the higher heaven of the stars (asteroenta, Hes. Th. 127; Il. 15.371, Od. 9.527). To the philosophers, Plato and Aristotle ouranos could be conceived of as the totality of all, the universe (Pl. Plt. 269d, Ti. 32b; Arist. Cael. 278^b21, Metaph. 990^a20).³

Ouranos was also conceived of by the Greeks as the dwelling place of the gods, being outside the skyey vault of heaven, inhabited by Zeus (Il. 15.192), called the great heaven and Olympus (Il. 1.497; 8.394) which was thought of in Il. 19.128 as connected with the starry heaven, and which in Il. 5.749-751 and 8.393-395 is pictured as above the thick cloud of heaven, where the gate of heaven (pulai ouranou, i.e., the thick cloud⁴) at the great heaven and Olympus was lifted up and put down by the Hours (hōrai) as though it were a trap door.

Thus, in the classical period ouranos to the Greeks included vault, involved the lower atmospheric heaven, as well as the higher starry heaven, and the universe as a whole, and had in it, in a location near, but above, the atmospheric heaven the dwelling place of the gods.

Ouranos in the Septuagint Old Testament

Ouranos, translating in the Septuagint the Hebrew word, Šāmāyim⁵ in Genesis 1:8 is connected with the concept of firmament, raqīya', an expanse.⁶ Further, as to spatial relationship the lower area of heaven is depicted as the place from which the rain descends from the clouds (Gen. 7:11; Deut. 11:11, 17) and the dew comes (Gen. 27:28), the wind blows (1 Kings 18:45), hail falls (Josh. 10:11) and thunder sounds (2 Sam. 22:14).

As to the higher heaven, ouranos is the place in which are found the sun and moon (Gen. 1:16), as well as the stars of heaven (Gen. 22:17; 26:4; Josh. 10:13). In some Scripture references the sun, moon, and planets are thought of as the host of heaven which heathen worship involved (2 Kings 17:16; 23:4, 5; Jer. 8:2).

In some passages the ouranos, together with the earth, is the totality of all the universe when reference is made to God creating the heaven and the earth (Gen. 1:1; Exod. 31:17; Isa. 37:16).

Then, through the phrase, the heaven of heavens (ho ouranos tou ouranou) which seems to be the equivalent to highest heaven,⁷ the thought is suggested that the Hebrews conceived of another heaven beyond the two regions noted above. The expression is used with regard to God's creating not only heaven, and the earth and seas but also the heaven of heavens (Neh. 9:6); to His not being able to be contained in the heaven and heaven of heavens (I Kings 8:27; I Chron. 2:6 (5); 2 Chron. 6:18); and in poetic language, to God as the one who rides upon the heaven of heavens which were of old (Ps. 68:33 (34))⁸ and to whom praise should be made by the heaven of heavens (Ps. 148:4).⁹ There seems implied by this expression a third heaven¹⁰ beyond or apart from the lower atmospheric heaven and the higher heaven of the sun, moon and stars.

Ouranos is the dwelling place of personal beings, such as man, exemplified by Elijah being taken up to heaven in a body¹¹ by a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1, 11); and God who is pictured as sitting in the heavens (Ps. 2:4), His dwelling place (I Kings 8:30; 2 Chron. 6:21; Ps. 123:1), where His throne is (Ps. 11:4; I Kings 22:19; 2 Chron. 18:18).

In summary, most of these categories regarding heaven are to be taken as visible, material and in spatial relationship: the firmament, lower and higher heaven, the heaven as universe, and the heaven into which the body of Elijah ascended. It is likely that the heaven of heavens, a possible third heaven, is to be considered in the same way. That God dwells in heaven is not to be limited to that which is visible and spatial, although the Old Testament Scripture certainly teaches that God, the infinite Spirit, is in personal relation to His heaven and earth which He created.

The Concept of Heaven in the Intertestamental Period

In the Intertestamental Period ouranos is viewed as including the lower heaven from which fire descends (2 Macc. 2:10) the higher heaven of the moon and the stars (4 Macc. 18:5), the general or universal heaven which together with the earth God made (2 Macc. 7:28). Again there is reference to the highest heaven, the heaven of heavens, which man cannot reach, it being the dwelling place of God (3 Macc. 2:15), who is declared to be sovereign in heaven (2 Macc. 15:3, 4) and King of the heavens (3 Macc. 2:2).¹²

Of particular interest in this period is the concept of a seven-fold heaven. In the Testament of Levi 2:7-9¹³ there are presented three heavens with the indications that there are four more to come. Then, in the Testament of Levi 3 there is described a seven-storied heaven with the Great Glory (God) dwelling in the highest part.¹⁴

In the Assumption of Moses 35, a document of the same general time as, or a little later than, the received editions of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, and in the Book of the Secrets of Enoch¹⁵ there again occur references to seven heavens.

Thus, in the Intertestamental Period, as in the Old Testament, heaven is conceived of as including lower as well as higher regions, a highest heaven or heaven of heavens, and a place where God dwells. The significant additional concept is that heaven is a seven-storied structure with God dwelling in the highest part.

Heaven in the Dead Sea Scrolls Literature

In this distinctive literature, of course, the Hebrew word used to express the thought of heaven is smym¹⁶ which includes in its use the lower heaven from which comes rain (H 8, 17), the universe in general, which God created when He stretched out the heaven (H 1,9), and the place where God and His angels dwell (M 12, 1).

Such testimony, though not as full, agrees with that which is given in the Old Testament.

Ouranos in the New Testament

Ouranos is used many times in the New Testament and basically conveys the same distinctions as to be found in the use of the word in the Old Testament, including the lower heaven of the atmosphere, the place of the clouds (Matt. 24:30; Mark 14:62), from which comes rain (Luke 4:25), fire (Luke 9:54), lightning (Luke 10:18), and hail (Rev. 16:21), and the place in which the birds fly (Matt. 6:26; Acts 10:12).

Ouranos in the New Testament also can convey the idea of the higher heaven, that place of the stars (Matt. 24:29; Mark 13:25; Rev. 6:13), which area is spoken of as the host of heaven (the stars which Israel worshipped, Acts 7:42), and as the powers of the heavens which shall be shaken (Matt. 24:29; Luke 21:26). It is also the general or universal heaven which with the earth is considered the totality of God's creation (heaven and earth shall pass away, Matt. 24:35).

There is a possible suggestion of a plurality of heavens in such expressions as the kingdom of the heavens (ouranōn, Matt. 3:2; 4:17) and your Father in the heavens (Matt. 7:11), but it is difficult to determine sometimes where the plural form, ouranoi is to be taken literally (as probably above) and where it is to be understood only as a part of a formula

following the Hebrew, šāmayim, in being plural. For example, there does not seem to be any distinction to be drawn between the singular, ouranos, in Luke 3:21 and the plural, ouranoi, in Matthew 3:16 inasmuch as the same incident is described in both places.¹⁷

However, there are references in the New Testament where ouranoi can be understood properly in the plural sense, implying a third heaven beyond the two regions mentioned earlier; for example, of Christ, our high priest who has passed into the heavens (Heb. 4:14) who has become higher than the heavens (Heb. 7:26) and who has gone up above all the heavens (Eph. 4:10); and of creation, the heavens being the work of God's hands (Heb. 1:10) who created all things, both those in the heavens (plural) and those on the earth (singular, Col. 1:16). Peter declares that at the end of the age there will be a new heavens (plural) and a new earth (singular, 2 Pet. 3:12, 13). We will discuss Paul's third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2) below.

The New Testament also presents ouranos as the dwelling place of God and His angels, for, He is the Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:45; 6:1), whose throne is there (Rev. 4:2), and His angels are pictured as the multitude of the heavenly host (Luke 2:13, 15).

Thus the New Testament presents the same basic picture of heaven as seen in the Old Testament, including the universal creation of God, the lower and higher heaven, a plurality of heavens which suggest a region distinct from the lower and higher areas, and heaven as the place where God and the angels dwell.

Ouranos in the Patristics

In the Patristics in addition to being used of the higher heaven which contains the sun (Ath. gent. 9, M 25. 17 C), and of the general, universal heaven (of heaven and earth, Or. Jo. 1.15), the term ouranos is employed to describe two heavens, (visible and invisible, Thdt. qu. 27 in 3 Reg.) and also the seven heaven concept, which was seen in the Intertestamental Period, it being asserted as being a part of the doctrine of the Gnostics (Iren. Haer. 1.5.2, ANF, Vol. I), and as being unscriptural (Or. Cels. 6.21 and 6:23, ANF, Vol. IV). The heaven is the dwelling place of Christ who ascended up to heaven (Barn. 15.9), and of angels (Or. Cels. 4.92).¹⁸

Although the usage of ouranos is not as full here, yet it follows the general pattern of thought expressed in the New and Old Testaments.

Paul's Third Heaven of 2 Corinthians 12:1-4

In defending his position as an apostle, Paul in this passage mentions visions and revelations given to him and describes an experience of his in being caught up to the third heaven, into paradise, in which experience he is not certain whether he is in or out of the body. What was the nature of this experience, of the vision, of the third heaven and Paradise, and of his being transported to heaven?

First, it is to be noted that in verse 1, he uses both the words optasia and apokalupsis, the former conveying the idea of vision, in which man is granted the privilege by God of seeing what is ordinarily hidden from human beings (such as Zechariah's vision of an angel in the temple, Luke 1:22, and Paul's vision of Christ on the road to Damascus, Acts 26:19); and the latter depicting the thought of a disclosure or revealing of some truth or information, such as the light of revelation for the Gentiles (Luke 2:32). In 2 Corinthians 12:1 Paul is connecting both words in the one prepositional phrase (eis) and saying that he was permitted to see something usually hidden from men and in the seeing, some basic divine truth was made known to him, a revelation from the Lord.¹⁹ Whether the visit to the third heavens involved just a spiritual ecstatic experience or also involved his physical body is not clarified by these words.

In verse 2 in describing this definite experience Paul states that he was caught up unto the third heaven. In the light of the teaching of the Old Testament concerning the plurality of the heavens, and indeed concerning three regions of heaven, to which viewpoint the New Testament conforms, the Apostle who was well acquainted with the teachings of the Old Testament, must have had in mind in 2 Corinthians 12:2 a third region quite distinct from that of the lower atmospheric and higher starry heavens, but far different from the limited finite place in which the early Greeks conceived of their gods as dwelling. It is not proper to spiritualize away the concrete reality of the third heaven because of the anarthrous tritou, since ordinal numbers do not require an article (cf. Matt. 20:3; Mark 15:25; Acts 2:15).²⁰

Paul says that he was caught away "as far as," or, rather, "up to" (heōs) the third heaven, with the possible implication that he had gone to the highest heaven, as far as it was possible to go (cf. Acts 1:8, heōs tēs gēs, unto the extremity of the earth). Plummer says:

The heōs does not prove that St. Paul regarded the third heaven as the highest of all, but certainly 'even to the third heaven' would be more naturally used, if the third heaven were the highest, than if there were four other heavens above it.²¹

Paul goes on to say, after some emphatic remarks, that he was caught up into Paradise (ton paradeison), a word indicating an enclosure, a garden, such as the physical garden of Eden (Gen. 2, 3) and also a place of blessedness apart from, or above, the earth (as in Luke 23:43), the latter idea being the meaning here.²² That paradise in verse 4 is to be equated in some sense with the third heaven in verse 2 is to be preferred (although not absolutely provable), since both sentences begin with the same statement, "I know such a man," the repetition being given in order to bring emphasis; and since, in connection with both statements, there are the same linguistic expressions in the snatching away (harpagenta hēpagē) and the statement of uncertainty as to whether the event was experienced in the body or not. By using eis in verse 4 instead of the heōs of verse 2 he may be indicating that paradise is within the region of the third heaven. That the third heaven and paradise are combined elsewhere is seen in the Assumption of Moses 37, and 40, written at a time not far removed from that of Paul.²³

Related to the subject of the third heaven and paradise which is the place where God dwells and where Christ went following His death (Luke 23:43) is the question as to whether a material, physical body may inhabit it in a spatial manner. In 2 Corinthians 12:2 and 3 Paul says twice in connection with his visit to the third heaven and paradise that he does not know whether he was in or out of the body (eite en sōmati eite chōris [ektos] tou sōmatos), which statements allow for either of two interpretations, either that he was taken up in bodily form to the third heaven, or that his spirit, removed from the body, was taken up by itself²⁴ (cf. Christ and the thief on the cross following death, Luke 23:43). To be sure Paul makes it clear that he was conscious of the transfer regardless of how it happened,²⁵ and by his very uncertainty as to which of two distinct ways the event could have transpired, he implies that his physical, material body could just as well have gone to the third heaven as could his spirit alone. In the Scripture there are two illustrations where physical bodies went out into space somewhere: Elijah who went to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1, 11), his body later not being found (v. 17); and Christ who with His resurrection body ascended up into the cloudy heaven in which manner he is to return (Acts 1:9-11; I Thess. 4:16-17).²⁶ Note that in the two passages just cited the singular (ouranos) is used in a context where clouds are mentioned, whereas in places where Christ (who, it is implied in the New Testament, has retained His resurrection body²⁷) is depicted as having reached His ultimate place of triumph, glory and honor, the plural (ouranoi) is employed, as exemplified in Hebrews 4:14 and Ephesians 4:10, where Christ, our High Priest and Redeemer is seen as having passed into the heavens, even above all the heavens--all there is He has entered into.

CONCLUSIONS

As to the regions of heaven, we observe that the New and Old Testaments agree in conceiving of heaven as basically involving three different areas, the lower, the higher and highest heaven in the last of which God particularly dwells, and we conclude that Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:1-4 has this last area in mind when he talks about the third heaven, implying the two other regions by his use of the word, third.²⁸

Furthermore, the third heaven where God dwells and where Paul received divine instruction is not to be thought of necessarily as involving a spiritual, non-spatial relationship only, but also as involving space, somewhere out there in the highest or third heaven, beyond our immediate earth and heaven, there being a place where a human being with a body and God who is everywhere can meet.

DOCUMENTATION

1. H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, a new edition, revised and augmented by H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1953), "ouranos."
2. But note that in (II. 2.458, 17.425, 19.351, [cf. Sch. II. 3.3]) ouranos is above the aithēr.
3. Plato (Ti. 32b, c) calls such a universe, ouranos, visible and tangible (horaton kai hapton) and speaks of it also as the cosmos (ho kosmos).
4. See II. 5.751; 8.395 where in the context the words, pukinon nephos are used.
5. Ouranos is used to translate several Hebrew words, but almost all of the uses are a translation of šāmāyim (in the Aramaic section of Daniel it is š, mayyi). E. Hatch and H. A. Redpath, A Concordance to the Septuagint, Vol. II, (Graz-Austria: Akademische Druck--U. Verlagsanstalt, 1954), "ouranos."
6. E. A. Speiser translates it "expanse" in Genesis 1:8 and says, "Traditionally 'firmament,' . . . [which] goes back to the Vulg. firmamentum 'something made solid,' which is based in turn on the LXX rendering of Heb. rāqīa' 'beaten out, stamped' (as of metal) suggesting a thin sheet stretched out to form the vault of the sky. . . ." Genesis in The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1964), p. 6. See the discussion above for the early Greek concept of heaven as a vault of bronze or iron.
7. Brown, Driver, and Briggs (op. cit., šāmāyim) indicate that, š, mey haš-, means the highest heaven in such references.
8. "The heavens of heavens (Deut. 10:14) are by qedem described as primeval (perhaps, following the order of their coming into existence, as extending back beyond the heavens that belong to our globe,

of the second and fourth day of Creation). God is said to ride along in the primeval heavens of the heavens (Deut. 33:26), when by means of the cherub (18:11) He extends His operations to all parts of these infinite distances and heights." Franz Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on The Psalms, tr. F. Bolton, Vol. II (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955), pp. 270, 271.

9. This phrase, heaven of heavens, means, "the highest heaven, conceived as in an indefinite ascending series." C. A. Briggs, and E. G. Briggs, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Vol. II, in The International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), p. 539. On Psalm 148:4 Delitzsch says, "The heavens of heavens are, as in Deut. 10:14, I Kings 8:27, Sir. 16:18, and frequently, those which lie beyond the heavens of the earth which were created on the fourth day; therefore, they are the outermost and highest spheres." Op. cit., Vol. III, p. 406.
10. W. R. Harper, in speaking of the heaven of heavens, interprets it as a third heaven and refers to Deut. 10:14; I Kings 8:27, and Psalm 148:4. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea in The International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), on Amos 9:6, p. 191.
11. It is to be observed that Elijah's body was looked for on earth and was not found.
12. There are a number of other references suggesting similar thoughts in this Apocryphal literature. See Hatch and Redpath, op. cit., "ouranos," and R. H. Charles, The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, Vols. I and II (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1913).
13. The received editions of The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs seem to have come "from Jewish-Christian hands which supplemented and reworked (rather than merely interpolated) Essene editions." F. M. Cross, Jr., The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies, rev. ed. (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Co., 1961) p. 200, footnote 6. It may well be that the original Hebrew of the Testaments dates from c. 100 B.C. as contended by Charles (op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 282, 290).
14. Charles notes, "The sixth, fifth and fourth heavens are introduced [between vss. 5-8] but there is still a gap between v. 3 and v. 8, as there is no third heaven mentioned in 3 (a). The descending order is a witness to the original text, which thus enumerated the angels in the third heaven." Op. cit., Vol. II, p. 306.
15. Suggested dates for these documents are: The Assumption of Moses, between 60 A.D. and 300 A.D., probably of the earliest part of this period; and the Book of the Secrets of Enoch, in its present form, 1-50 A.D., or later. Charles, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 129, 429; and Cross, op. cit., p. 202, footnote 7.

16. The reference letters and numbers are those used by Karl Georg Kuhn, ed., in the Konkordanz zu den Qumrantexten (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1960).
17. Cf. Arndt and Gingrich, op. cit., "ouranos."
18. For further elaboration on the patristic use of ouranos, see G. W. Lampe, ed., A Patristic Greek Lexicon Fascicle 4 (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1965), "ouranos."
19. See A. Plummer, The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, in The International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), p. 338.
20. See H. A. W. Meyer, A Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistles to the Corinthians (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884), p. 676.
21. Plummer, op. cit., p. 343.
22. Cf. Arndt and Gingrich, op. cit., "paradeisos."
23. See above in the discussion of heaven in the Intertestamental Period.
24. See H. Alford, The Greek Testament, Vol. II, 5th ed. (London: Rivingtons, 1865), p. 710.
25. Plummer, op. cit., p. 342. He certainly was conscious of receiving words (hrēmata) from the Lord in the place to which he was transferred, for he heard (ēkousen) them, and he states that as man (anthrōpos) it is not lawful for him to speak them.
26. In the Patristics likewise it is born out that the body of Christ went into heaven (anabainōn hōs anthrōpos kai anapherōn eis ton ouranon hēn ephorei sarka), Ath. Ar. 348. Lampe, op. cit., "ouranos."
27. Christ's resurrection body, the physical body in which He was crucified (compare the scars evident as a result of the nails and spear, Luke 24:39, 40 John 20:25, 27) and in which He ascended (Acts 1:9-11) was one, as to its form and substance, as was true in its character before death, that could be touched (Matt. 28:9; John 20:25-28), assimilate food (Luke 24:30, 42, 43), occupy space (His body that was touched was confined within a room, John 20:26-28), and yet it was a body which could somehow appear and disappear instantly (Luke 24:31; John 20:19, 26). It is this kind of body to which the resurrection body of the Christian is to be made like (metaschēmatischei. . .summorphon, Phil. 3:21) and which kind of body that shall rise in space to meet Christ in the air according to 1 Thess. 4:16, 17, in which passage not only the dead in Christ but also those who live in a physical body at the time shall rise in the clouds to meet the Lord. This hardly seems to be a body devoid of flesh (in the resurrection, an immortal and incorruptible flesh, or fleshly material substance, which has been delivered from Adam's curse) as suggested by Oscar Cullmann, Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Body (London: The Epworth Press, 1958) pp. 37, 45, 46.
28. Observe his recognition of the cloudy heavens in I Thess. 4:16, 17.