

שָׁמַיִם (shāmayim) **heaven, heavens, sky.**

Cognates are found in Ugaritic *shmm*, Akkadian *shamû* (singular, "rain"; plural, "heaven"), Aramaic, Arabic, and South Arabic.

The usage of *shāmayim* falls into two broad categories, 1) the physical heavens, and 2) the heavens as the abode of God. Under the first category, heaven includes all that is above the earth, and any given passage may include all or merely a part of the whole. Heaven and earth together constitute the universe (Gen 1:1). They yield rain (Gen 8:2), snow (Isa 55:10), frost (Job 38:29), fire (2Kings 1:10), dew (Deut 33:13), and thunder (1Sam 2:10). They hold the sun, moon, planets, and stars (Gen 1:14; Gen 15:5; Isa 14:12; Amos 5:26). Zechariah 2:6 [H 10] speaks of the four winds of the heavens, and Psa 135:7 says that God brings forth the wind from his storehouses.

The heavens are frequently described in figurative language as having windows (Gen 7:11; 2Kings 7:2; Mal 3:10, though the word here is more likely sluice-gates such as are used in irrigation, see 'ārubbâ), gates (Gen 28:7), doors (Psa 78:23), pillars (Job 26:11), and foundations (2Sam 22:8). They are stretched out and spread out like a tent or a curtain (Isa 40:22).

The use of such figurative language no more necessitates the adoption of a pagan cosmology than does the modern use of the term "sunrise" imply astronomical ignorance. The imagery is often phenomenological, and is both convenient and vividly forceful. Thus a disobedient Israel would find the heavens to be like iron (Lev 26:19) or like bronze (Deut 28:23), not yielding the much-needed rain. Note that if the heavens were conceived of as a metallic vault, as is commonly suggested from Gen 1:8, 14 etc., the above passages would be meaningless, since the skies would already be metal. The word *rāqîa'* (q.v.) comes from the verb meaning "to hammer out" and "stretch (a piece of metal) out" as an overlay. It is the idea of spreading out that carries over to the noun, not the idea of a metallic substance. "Expanse" is an acceptable translation.

Heaven is, secondly, the abode of God (Deut 26:15; 1Kings 8:30), and it is from there that he reaches down to do his will on earth. As the heavens are infinitely high above the earth, so are God's thoughts and ways infinitely above man's ability to comprehend (Isa 55:8-9). God is in sovereign control (Psa 2:4). He is able to reach out in judgment (Gen 19:24ff.) and in salvation alike (Psa 57:3 [H 4]; Deut 33:26). Jeremiah 23:24 states that God fills heaven and earth, and Solomon recognizes that all of heaven and the highest heavens themselves ("heaven of heavens") cannot contain the Almighty God. As vast as the heavens are, they are merely part of God's creation, and he stands above it all. Therefore Solomon has no illusions that God has need of his temple or that it can contain him. Yet God has graciously condescended to dwell there and to be approached by sinful man. Isaiah states (Isa 57:15) that though God dwells in the high and lofty place, he will also dwell with those of a contrite and humble spirit.

The heavens tell of the glory of God (Psa 19:1 [H 2]), declare his righteousness (Psa 50:6), and praise him (Psa 69:34 [H 35]). As grand as they are, they merely point to the Creator and are not to be worshipped (Exo 20:4; Jer 44:17-25). Though the heavens are his throne, they will one day vanish like smoke (Isa 51:6) and be rolled up like a scroll (Isa 34:4). Then God will create a new heaven and a new earth, unmarred by the effects of sin (Isa 65:17; Isa 66:22). The joy and glory of completed redemption will be reflected in all of creation.

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