

Temple, Cosmology, and Myth in the New Testament¹

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Abstract

The idea of a heavenly temple is widespread in the ancient world, including in the New Testament. Yet it has been a neglected theme in New Testament scholarship, certainly by comparison with the related yet less prominent themes of Christ as temple and community as temple. This article first outlines the extent of the theme in the New Testament. It then outlines reasons for this neglect before focusing on one: the mismatch between ancient conceptualisations of the universe and modern scientific cosmology. It explores and critiques a number of attempts to account for this gulf, a debate which continues to be influenced by Bultmann’s category of demythologisation. It finally argues that, even on a ‘mythological’ construal of the New Testament writers’ cosmology, the connection of temple with heaven speaks eloquently of the nature of God’s abode.

1. Introduction

Where is heaven? And what is heaven like? Is it ‘up there’? And can we go there? Questions like this are simple enough to be posed by young children and yet complex enough to have exercised the greatest minds in the church’s history, without resolution. One widespread association in antiquity was the notion that heaven is, or is like, or contains, a temple, in whole or part.² This idea is

1. The Tyndale Fellowship New Testament Lecture, 2024. I am grateful to Richard Briggs for a clarifying conversation on an earlier draft, and to Josh Cockayne, Jonny Rowlands, attendees at the lecture, and the two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and questions.

2. I do not here sharply distinguish between ‘heaven-as-temple’ and ‘temple-in-heaven’, though both notions are found in ancient Jewish and early Christian texts, with important differences between the two. In both cases the importance of temple for heavenly space is clear, in that even where there is a temple within the heavenly

attested in ancient Near Eastern creation epics, in parts of the Old Testament, in some Second Temple Jewish literature, and can also be found in the New Testament. In this article I will indicate the extent of the heavenly temple idea within the NT, not only in Hebrews and Revelation, where it is most evident, but also in the Gospels and Acts. Despite its wide extent in Scripture, it has been a neglected theme, and I explore one possible reason for this neglect: namely, the gap between ancient conceptualisations of the universe and modern scientific cosmology. There have been a number of attempts to respond to this gap, but the debate continues to be dominated by Rudolf Bultmann's notion of 'demythologisation'. I agree with Bultmann that NT writers did in some sense believe that heaven is 'up there'. But I disagree that demythologisation is either necessary or sufficient, not least because humans have a tendency to remythologise. On that basis, I turn back to the heavenly temple idea to ask how the temple might speak intelligibly and fruitfully of the nature of God's abode.

2. Extent of the heavenly temple theme

In this section I will not provide an exhaustive catalogue of the notion of a heavenly temple in the NT. Instead, taking as read its centrality for both Hebrews and Revelation, I offer brief vignettes from Mark, John, and Acts in order to demonstrate that a heavenly temple is a widespread notion within the NT and not only in some Second Temple literature outside of it.³

In Mark's Gospel, the tearing of the heavens at Jesus's baptism forms an *inclusio* with the tearing of the temple veil at his crucifixion (1:10; 15:38). These two events suggest a connection between the visible heaven and the temple

realm it is usually central and/or in the highest heaven. The one exception is b. Hagigah 12b, where the temple is in Zebul, the fourth of seven heavens. For the spectrum of conceptualisations of the heaven-temple relationship in the period, see Nicholas J. Moore, 'Heaven and Temple in the Second Temple Period: A Taxonomy', *JSP* 33 (2023): 75-93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09518207211052237>.

3. I also think the notion of a heavenly temple can be discerned in Matthew, Luke, and Ephesians; Paul's ascent in 1 Cor 12 will be touched on below. For relevant passages in Hebrews, see 4:14-16; 6:19-20; 8:1-5; 9:11-14,23-28; 10:19-23; for Revelation, see 3:12; 6:9; 7:15; 11:1-2, 19; 14:15-17; 15:5-8; 16:1,17; 21-22. For fuller readings of all these texts, see Nicholas J. Moore, *The Open Sanctuary: Access to God and the Heavenly Temple in the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 2024). In this article I do not sharply distinguish tabernacle from temple, as both are instantiations of God's sanctuary within Israel and are invoked by NT authors in connection with heaven (including in the same text, see Rev 15:5). In the book I give more attention to the distinct portrayal of tabernacle and temple in individual texts.

veil, such that the heavens beyond are like the interior of the temple.⁴ This link is reinforced by the connection of these two episodes with a third, the transfiguration (9:2-13), through the confession of Jesus as Son of God, which occurs in all three. The transfiguration is a mountain-top theophany with echoes of Sinai, where the law and the instructions for the tabernacle were given (note the cloud, transformation, encounter, and response of terror).⁵ At Jesus's trial, false witnesses charge that Jesus said he would build a temple 'not made with hands' (ἀχειροποίητος, 14:58). It is not necessary for every aspect of this charge to be untrue for Mark to deem it false testimony. The key point of contention in the temple sayings is the claim that Jesus would destroy the Jerusalem temple (cf. Acts 6:14). In fact, the evangelists suggest that while he predicted the destruction and intimated a new temple (Matt 24:1-2; John 2:19), Jesus never claimed that he would destroy it. This leaves open the possibility that Jesus did believe in – indeed perhaps taught about – a temple 'not made with hands'. This possibility is in keeping with Jesus's affirmation to the high priest that the Son of Man will take up his seat 'at the right hand of the Power' (Mark 14:62, citing Ps 110:1 and Dan 7:13): that is, in the heavenly court or temple.⁶

John's Gospel contains an explicit temple Christology, but it also witnesses to the heavenly temple idea. In John 2:21, the narrator draws out what is implied in Jesus's statement that he will raise 'this temple' in three days: 'he was speaking of the temple [ναός] of his body'. This is of a piece with language in John's prologue describing the Word as 'tabernacling' among us (1:14). The influence of Wisdom traditions on John's prologue has long been discussed,⁷ but what is often missed is that a personified Wisdom dwells with God in the heavenly tabernacle and emerges from there to find a place on earth. In the Book of Sirach, Wisdom dwells in the highest heavens with God, where she ministers 'in the holy tent' (24:10); she goes forth from heaven until God 'caused my tabernacle to rest'⁸ in Jerusalem (κατέπαυσεν τὴν σκηνὴν μου, 24:8,

4. David Ulansey, 'The Heavenly Veil Torn: Mark's Cosmic Inclusio', *JBL* 110 (1991): 123–125, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3267155>.

5. On Sinai's significance for subsequent theophanies, see Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East*, Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology (Paternoster Press, 1995).

6. For an extended case for this reading, see Max Botner, 'A Sanctuary in the Heavens and the Ascension of the Son of Man: Reassessing the Logic of Jesus' Trial in Mark 14.53–65', *JSNT* 41 (2019): 310–334, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X18821544>.

7. See, e.g., Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 93–105, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812203844>.

8. Author's translation.

cf. 24:11).⁹ And in the Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom is with God in ‘the holy tent [σκηνὴ ἅγια] that he prepared from the beginning’, and is sent from there to build the temple on Zion as a copy of the heavenly temple (μίμημα, Wis 9:8).¹⁰ That is to say, in some traditions Wisdom is identified as the divine presence which comes to dwell in the temple. If this informs John’s Christology, it suggests there is room for both ‘Jesus as temple’ and ‘heaven as temple’ ideas in the Gospel, with the Logos serving as the divine presence which dwells first in heaven and then in flesh. The possibility that John views heaven this way is confirmed in John 14, where Jesus speaks of many rooms ‘in my Father’s house’ (ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ τοῦ πατρὸς μου, 14:2). The only other use of ‘my Father’s house’ in John is in 2:16 to refer to the Jerusalem temple.¹¹ The many rooms of the Father’s house reflect the multiple chambers of Solomon’s, Herod’s, and Ezekiel’s temples.¹² Jesus’s departure in his death and glorification prepares a place for his disciples in the heavenly temple, and he promises to return to them to take them to be there with him.

The book of Acts is premised on Jesus’s ascension. This is anticipated in the later parts of Luke’s Gospel: as in Mark’s trial scene, but with more imminent expectation, Jesus affirms that ‘from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God’ (Luke 22:69). The veil tearing in Luke’s crucifixion occurs just before Jesus dies and as if in response to a vision of God in heaven he commends his spirit to the Father (23:45-46). The ascension fulfils this expectation, and from heaven Jesus sends the divine presence in the form of the Spirit into the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Jesus also appears to Stephen in the standing posture of a priest (7:56),¹³ at the culmination of a long defence speech in which a major point of emphasis is the reality of divine presence with Israel throughout their history, including in the tabernacle and

9. In Sir 24, ‘Wisdom finds expression in the cult of the Jerusalem temple’, John J. Collins, ‘Ecclesiasticus, or The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach’, in *The Apocrypha*, ed. Martin Goodman, John Barton, and John Muddiman (Oxford University Press, 2012), 91.

10. See David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (Doubleday, 1979), 203–205, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261837>, for more on the heavenly temple in this passage.

11. Some reckon that the difference in term for ‘house’ here is significant (ὁ οἶκος τοῦ πατρὸς μου, John 2:16, vs ἡ οἰκία τοῦ πατρὸς μου, 14:2), but both terms are used in John to refer to household and building.

12. See references in Steven M. Bryan, ‘The Eschatological Temple in John 14’, *BBR* 15 (2005): 190, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26423896>.

13. On this, see David M. Moffitt, ‘Atonement at the Right Hand: The Sacrificial Significance of Jesus’ Exaltation in Acts’, *NTS* 62 (2016): 549–568, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688516000217>.

temple. The point at issue, for Stephen, is the people's response, which has bordered on the idolatrous by focusing on the earthly structures to the neglect of the heavenly reality, as he demonstrates by citing Isaiah 66:1-2 ('heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool ...' Acts 7:48-50). And finally, the angelic visit to Cornelius occurs at the time of the evening sacrifice (10:2-3), when he is praying, suggesting that heavenly events keep time with temple rhythms.¹⁴

In sum, in more and less overt ways, the notion that God's heavenly dwelling place is a temple space with cultic features has significance for the evangelists and Acts as well as for Hebrews and Revelation.

3. Nature of the heaven-temple relationship

At the heart of the heaven-temple connection lies a specific claim. A fundamental premise for both tabernacle and Jerusalem temple is that they correspond to heaven as a model of it. For this reason, temple is a privileged way of thinking about heaven. The key text is Exodus 25:9: 'In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.' The tabernacle is a model of what Moses saw.¹⁵

While in its original setting it may well refer to blueprints or instructions, by the Second Temple period Exodus 25:9 was overwhelmingly understood to mean that Moses was shown heaven or a temple in heaven and constructed the tabernacle in imitation of what he had seen.¹⁶ This verse is quoted directly in the NT in Hebrews 8:5, to signal that the earthly tabernacle is a copy or model of the heavenly one, and in Stephen's speech in Acts 7:44, demonstrating the divine sanction behind Moses's construction of the tabernacle at the same time as indicating that God's permanent abode is heaven, and not any earthly sanctuary. The idea of correspondence between heaven and temple is found more widely within the NT. As seen above, the connection of the heavens

14. Dennis Hamm, 'The Tamid Service in Luke-Acts: The Cultic Background behind Luke's Theology of Worship (Luke 1:5-25; 18:9-14; 24:50-53; Acts 3:1; 10:3,30)', *CBQ* 65 (2003): 215-231. A thrice-daily pattern of prayer is also attested (Dan 6:10; Ps 55:17), which may align with Saul's/Paul's and Peter's visions, both of which take place at noon (Acts 10:9; 22:6).

15. The construction of Israel's sanctuary according to divinely revealed plans also applies to Solomon's temple: David's plans were put 'in writing at the LORD's direction' (1 Chr 28:19).

16. For the reception of this verse see Philo, *QE* 2.52, 82, 90-94; *Mos.* 2.74-76; 2 Bar. 4:2-7; and the further texts and comments in Max Wilcox, "'According to the Pattern (tbnyt) ...': Exodus 25:40 in the New Testament and Early Jewish Thought", *RevQ* 13 (1988): 647-656.

tearing with the veil tearing in Mark (1:10; 15:38, σχίζω) implies an analogy between the temple veil and the visible skies, and therefore of the sanctuary beyond the veil with the heaven(s) beyond the skies. Similarly, as seen in John's Gospel, Jesus refers to both the earthly temple and the heavenly one as 'my Father's house' (2:16; 14:2). Matthew connects heaven as God's throne with the earth as his footstool (Matt 5:34-35), a striking echo of Isaiah 66:1 and also a clear temple resonance in that the ark is the divine throne or footstool within the resting place of his sanctuary (Pss 99:1,5; 132:7-8; 1 Chron 28:2). Later in Matthew in the woes against the scribes and Pharisees, and almost incidentally, Jesus again parallels the temple and heaven: 'whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it' (23:20-21).

The notion of correspondence between heaven and the temple is important because it suggests that describing heaven as a temple is not a metaphor but rather a model.¹⁷ That is to say, this is not a case of taking imagery from a source domain (temple) and applying it to an unrelated target domain (heaven) in ways that create a new, figuratively generated, understanding of the latter.¹⁸ Instead, heaven is appropriately described in temple language because of both the *derivation* and the *nature* of the relationship between the two. In terms of *derivation*, the revelation given to Moses prompted the construction of the tabernacle; the association with heaven is not a later connection, but is there from the outset. We might describe this as genealogical: heaven begets temple. Or, in the terminology of philosopher Janet Soskice, the tabernacle is a homeomorphic model, one where 'the subject of the model is also its source',

17. In my understanding of 'model' I draw particularly on Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Clarendon Press, 1985). I owe the lead to David Moffitt, who has made fruitful use of her work in describing Hebrews' approach to the heavenly tabernacle, though he primarily employs terminology of 'analogy': David M. Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement: New Perspectives on Jesus's Death, Resurrection, and Ascension* (Baker Academic, 2022), 117–134. Contrast Jonathon Lookadoo's reading of Revelation's heavenly temple as metaphorical on a par with John's temple Christology and Paul's temple ecclesiology: 'Metaphors and New Testament Theology: The Temple as a Test Case for a Theology of New Testament Metaphors', *Religions* 13:436 (2022): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050436>.

18. The classic study remains George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980). Cognitive metaphor theories now tend to regard 'source domain–target domain' as insufficient both horizontally (sometimes there is not just a single source and a single target domain) and vertically, distinguishing between as many as four levels, from 'image schemas' at the highest level through domains, frames, to 'mental spaces'; see Zoltán Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 50–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108859127>.

as opposed to a paramorphic model ‘where source and subject differ’.¹⁹ It is a model of heaven and not only a model for heaven.²⁰

And in terms of the *nature* of the relationship, this is in its origins a visual, structural correspondence and not a linguistic one. The tabernacle is a model of heaven because Moses saw the real thing and then made a copy, much as Hornby 00 gauge replicates Britain’s steam railways.²¹ As a non-linguistic relationship, it is by definition not metaphorical.²² This is not to be dismissive of metaphor as ‘mere metaphor’, or to suppose that metaphor cannot denote reality. Models can be represented linguistically (as when biblical texts describe the temple) and can generate metaphors (as when the psalmists and others speak of a ‘sacrifice of praise’). And one can use metaphor to speak eloquently about theological reality. In this regard much of what we would want to say theologically about both model and metaphor does not sharply differ. For example, while the metaphor ‘God is king’ moves linguistically *from* the source domain of human kingship to the target domain of God in order to characterise his sovereignty, ontologically or theologically we would want to affirm that God is the source: he is sovereign before and apart from human monarchy, which gains its meaning from divine kingship.²³ An equivalent ontological claim would be made for the temple as a model of heaven. The difference lies in its status as genealogically derived from and visually or structurally aligned with the reality it represents.²⁴

19. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 102.

20. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 103.

21. Of course, this analogy is not perfect because steam railways remain immanent (despite rail enthusiasts’ protests to the contrary).

22. Metaphor is ‘a *speaking* about one thing or state of affairs in terms suggestive of another; a model need not be linguistic at all’ (Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 101 (emphasis original)).

23. Caird notes this inverse directionality when speaking theologically as opposed to linguistically, in connection with language of God as king (G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Duckworth, 1980), 177–178). That said, the notion of ‘king’ is arguably also derivative, moving from God to human monarchy (or certainly Israelite monarchy, cf. 1 Sam 8:6–7). A similar claim seems to be made for fatherhood in Eph 3:14–15.

24. Oliver Crisp makes use of the notion of ‘model’ in doctrine, drawing on the work of Ian Barbour: a model is ‘a theoretical construction that only approximates to the truth of the matter’, and they ‘are to be taken seriously but not literally; they are neither literal pictures nor useful fictions but limited and inadequate ways of imagining what is not observable. They make tentative ontological claims that there are entities in the world something like those postulated in the models’ (Oliver D. Crisp, ‘A Parsimonious Model of Divine Simplicity’, *Modern Theology* 35 (2019): 559,

4. Neglect of the heavenly temple theme

Given the extent and importance of the heavenly temple theme in the NT, one might wonder why it has been relatively neglected within biblical scholarship.²⁵ The well-documented Protestant bias against cultic material in the Bible, particularly evident in the characterisation of the Priestly source in the Pentateuch in some nineteenth-century scholarship,²⁶ hardly applies any more. Protestant and evangelical scholars have given serious and welcome attention to cultic material throughout Scripture, and by and large no longer treat it as a proxy for disagreements with Roman Catholicism. Moreover, anti-cultic bias does not account for the substantial interest that the themes of Jesus as temple and community or church as temple have attracted. Significant work has been done here, and it would be fair to say that the majority of work on the temple in the NT has focused on these two areas. This includes the Tyndale NT Lecture of 1950 given by Alan Cole entitled 'The New Temple', alongside Yves Congar, *The Mystery of the Temple*; Bertil Gärtner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament*; R. J. McKelvey, *The New Temple*; Craig Koester, *The Dwelling of God*; and more recently G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*.²⁷ The uneven attention is all the more striking given that the sheer

<https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12520>). The difference with the temple is that it is a revealed model and therefore not a human 'theoretical construction'.

25. I raised this question in the conclusion to *The Open Sanctuary*, 190–193; this article picks up the thread. An exception to the theme's widespread neglect would be Seventh-day Adventist scholarship, where heavenly sanctuary has attracted more attention due to its prominence in Adventist teaching; see Kim Papaioannou and Ioannis Giantzaklidis, eds, *Earthly Shadows, Heavenly Realities: Temple/Sanctuary Cosmology in Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Jewish Literature* (Andrews University Press, 2017). Note also the essays predominantly from OT scholars across a wide timeframe collected in L. Michael Morales, ed., *Cult and Cosmos: Tilting toward a Temple-Centered Theology*, BTS 18 (Peeters, 2014).

26. See the illustrative examples given as the launching-off point for the seminal article by Jon D. Levenson, 'The Temple and the World', *JR* 64 (1984): 275–282, <https://doi.org/10.1086/487131>.

27. Alan Cole, *The New Temple: A Study in the Origins of the Catechetical 'Form' of the Church in the New Testament*, The Tyndale New Testament Lecture 1950 (The Tyndale Press, 1950); Yves Congar, *Le Mystère du Temple: l'Économie de la présence de Dieu à sa créature, de la Genèse à l'Apocalypse*, LD (Cerf, 1958); Bertil E. Gärtner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament: A Comparative Study in the Temple Symbolism of the Qumran Texts and the New Testament*, SNTSMS 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1965), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511659577>; R. J. McKelvey, *The New Temple: The Church in the New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 1969); Craig R. Koester, *The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature, and the New Testament*, CBQMS 22 (Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1989); G. K. Beale, *The*

quantity of material on heavenly temple outweighs that on either of the other two themes. Church as temple occurs in three brief passages in the Corinthian correspondence, and in Ephesians 2 and 1 Peter 2.²⁸ Christ as temple is limited to John's Gospel, where it is explicit in one verse albeit implied in several others, as we have seen;²⁹ a good case can also be made for subtle temple Christologies in Matthew and Luke, but these are implicit at best.³⁰

Attention to the heavenly temple is often a response to shortcomings of or threats to its earthly counterpart, as can be seen in Jewish texts as diverse as Ezekiel, 1 Enoch, Qumran's Temple Scroll, and 4 Ezra. McKelvey infers that this 'would suggest that one need not look for the conception of the heavenly temple in the New Testament. Were not such problems resolved in the incarnation and gift of the Spirit?' That is to say, temple Christology and temple ecclesiology remove the need for temple cosmology – Jesus as temple and church as temple should make heaven as temple obsolete. Now, as an honest exegete, McKelvey continues, 'Whatever the conclusions of the argument of logic would appear to be, the fact of the matter is that the conception of the heavenly temple is in the New Testament.'³¹ Nevertheless, McKelvey's comments illustrate the kind of 'logical' inference underlying modern scholarly neglect of the heavenly temple. In short, Jesus as temple and church as temple are held to be more significant because they do more theological heavy lifting, whereas to many interpreters the implications and necessity of heaven as temple are at best opaque and at worst non-existent.

5. Ancient cosmology as myth

One further possible reason for the neglect of the heavenly temple theme, and the one I want to focus on in this article, is the gap between ancient and modern conceptualisations of the universe. This gap is especially challenging for the heaven–temple connection, given the tight correspondence between the two which I have characterised as that of a model to its source. That is to say, temple is tightly bound conceptually to the arrangement of the ancient

Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God, New Studies in Biblical Theology 17 (Apollos, 2004).

28. 1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:4-8.

29. John 2:19-20, perhaps reinforced by 1:14; 1:51.

30. For Matthew, see Jesus as God's presence (1:18; 28:20) and 'one greater than the temple' (12:6). For Luke, language of 'overshadowing' (1:35; 9:34) and 'visitation' (1:68,78-79; cf. 7:16) is key. One might also note Christ's status as cornerstone in 1 Pet 2:4-8 (cf. citation of Ps 118 in Matt 21:42//Mark 12:10-11//Luke 20:17).

31. McKelvey, *The New Temple*, 139.

universe. If we do not accept a tiered structure for the universe, what sense can we make of a tiered temple whose purpose is to map that universe? The gap between ancient and modern cosmologies is not a new observation; the opening lines of Rudolf Bultmann's 1941 essay 'New Testament and Mythology' run as follows:

The cosmology of the New Testament is essentially mythical in character. The world is viewed as a three-storied structure, with the earth in the centre, the heaven above, and the underworld beneath. Heaven is the abode of God and of celestial beings – the angels. The underworld is hell, the place of torment. Even the earth [...] is the scene of the supernatural activity of God and his angels on the one hand, and of Satan and his daemons on the other.³²

A couple of pages later he goes on to say:

To this extent *the kerygma is incredible to modern man, for he is convinced that the mythical view of the world is obsolete*. We are therefore bound to ask whether, when we preach the Gospel to-day, we expect our converts to accept not only the Gospel message, but also the mythical view of the world in which it is set.³³

The terms 'myth' and 'mythology' are here used not in the popular sense of something untrue or fabricated,³⁴ but to mean an account involving supernatural causes which explains or justifies part or the whole of our experienced reality.³⁵ It is myth in this wider sense, when objectified, that Bultmann asserts as problematic for the modern reader of the NT.³⁶

32. Rudolf Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (SPCK, 1953), 1.

33. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', 3 (emphasis original).

34. Though, notably, the only NT occurrences of the word *μῦθος* all have the connotation of something untrue or pointless; this is thus not only a modern usage of the term, and doubtless influenced this sense: 1 Tim 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim 4:4; Titus 1:14; 2 Pet 1:16.

35. This is reflected in the latest *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, s.v. 'myth' 1a. Yet, strikingly, the second edition of the *OED* (1989) combined the two senses in its entry 1a: 'A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events ...' Compare Bultmann's definition: 'Myth intends to talk about a reality which lies beyond the reality that can be objectified, observed, and controlled, and which is of decisive significance for human existence' (Rudolf Bultmann, 'On the Problem of Demythologizing (1961)', in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Fortress Press, 1989), 169).

36. Many have pointed out that Bultmann uses 'myth' in multiple ways. E.g. Ricoeur highlights three: prescientific explanation of natural phenomena; a true understanding

Bultmann's brief summary or evocation of ancient cosmology is essentially accurate. The ancients conceived of the universe as a fixed disc of earth surrounded by water, with the underworld (Sheol, Hades, Tartarus) below, and heaven as a solid dome or firmament above.³⁷ Greek astronomers and mathematicians including Aristotle and Ptolemy qualified this picture: they did not radically alter the tripartite division into earth and what is below and above, but they did transform understanding of the nature and extent of heaven.³⁸ They conceptualised the earth as a sphere, still fixed, surrounded by seven planetary spheres, one each for the moon, sun, and the five planets from Mercury to Saturn. On this understanding, 'heaven' is no longer the domain above a solid firmament, but becomes multiple permeable heavens. It remains possible to locate God in the highest heaven, or beyond it in the realm of the unmoved mover.

Second Temple Jewish and NT writers sit somewhere between the ancient Israelite cosmology and understandings of Greek cosmology that had filtered down to a popular level.³⁹ J. Edward Wright charts the evolution as a displacement of ancient and biblical models by Greek models.⁴⁰ That is correct, but we should not overlook features within the biblical tradition that are amenable to the multiple Greek heavens. If you believe that numbers such as three, seven, and ten are theologically significant, and you know of a temple that is said to reflect heaven and is divided into a minimum of three or potentially several more chambers, porches, and courts, then it is not hard to assimilate the information that the heavens comprise numerous planetary spheres. The Ptolemaic model held until the age of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, who demonstrated that Earth too was a planet and orbited the sun, and who thus heralded the dawn of modern scientific cosmology. We, in the modern

of the faith hidden in the objective language of myth; and a tendency of revelation to demythologise itself (Rudolf Bultmann, *Nouveau Testament et mythologie: Avec un texte inédit de Paul Ricoeur* (Labor et Fides, 2013), 142–152).

37. For accessible introductions to biblical cosmology see Robin A. Parry, *The Biblical Cosmos: A Pilgrim's Guide to the Weird and Wonderful World of the Bible* (Cascade, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cg4jr4>; Kyle Greenwood, *Scripture and Cosmology: Reading the Bible Between the Ancient World and Modern Science* (IVP Academic, 2015). On the NT specifically, see also the useful essays in Jonathan T. Pennington and Sean McDonough, eds, *Cosmology and New Testament Theology*, LNTS 355 (T&T Clark, 2008).

38. 'The new images of the cosmos simply gave more definition to the space that intervenes between the human and divine realms' (J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 139).

39. 'Astronomical knowledge did not pass quickly or evenly among all peoples of the ancient Mediterranean world' (Wright, *The Early History of Heaven*, 138).

40. Wright, *The Early History of Heaven*, 139–184.

scientific age, are not in a position to revert to any pre-modern cosmology as an accurate portrayal of the physical universe we inhabit.⁴¹

6. Demythologising ancient cosmology

A number of responses to the gulf between ancient and modern cosmologies can be envisaged, and I want to outline three briefly before giving more attention to two that involve demythologisation.⁴² One possibility is *description*, where ancient understandings of the universe are described in such a way as to make them comprehensible. This is the approach of contemporary historians, which is valuable on its own terms, but which does not treat the theological questions of how such ideas should be handled when they occur in the church's authoritative text of Scripture. This dynamic is exactly what prompts Bultmann's essay. A second approach is *adoption*, whereby ancient cosmology is taken to be an accurate description of our physical universe. This would be a fundamentalist stance. Although Bultmann states categorically that 'it is impossible to revive an obsolete view of the world by a mere fiat',⁴³ it is at least possible to try, as the existence of the Flat Earth Society suggests;⁴⁴ the Society denies the theory of gravity and holds that the firmament of heaven 'serves very well' as a scientific explanation.⁴⁵ A third possibility is *dismissal*, where ancient cosmological ideas in the Bible are acknowledged but then simply ignored. This is the approach of nineteenth-century liberalism, itself a child of the Enlightenment, which disregards the particular form of the NT in order

41. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', 3.

42. For other categorisations of approaches to biblical cosmologies/mythologies, see Robert Ewusie Moses, *Practices of Power: Revisiting the Principalities and Powers in the Pauline Letters* (Fortress Press, 2014), 9–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt22nm7p1>; Thomas J. Farrar, 'New Testament Satanology and Leading Suprahuman Opponents in Second Temple Jewish Literature: A Religio-Historical Analysis', *JTS* 70 (2019): 22–26, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/fly165>; T. J. Lang, 'Cosmology and Eschatology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Pauline Studies*, ed. Matthew V. Novenson and R. Barry Matlock, Oxford Handbooks Online (Oxford University Press, 2014), 509–511, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199600489.013.36>.

43. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', 3.

44. A late antique 'adoption' approach is found in Cosmas Indicopleustes, sixth-century Egyptian monk and author of a *Christian Topography*, who insisted on a three-tier universe on biblical grounds (Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 2nd edn (Yale Nota Bene, 2001), 80).

45. Though they do not specify *of what* the firmament is a functional explanation; <https://www.theflatearthsociety.org/home/index.php/about-the-society/faq>.

to retain its alleged essence: universal principals of religious life and ethical norms.⁴⁶

Bultmann's own proposal is *demythologisation*. In a later essay he defines it as follows:

By 'demythologizing' I understand a hermeneutical procedure that inquires about the reality referred to by mythological statements or texts. This presupposes that myth indeed talks about a reality, but in an inadequate way.⁴⁷

In his original essay, Bultmann articulates that reality like this:

The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially.⁴⁸

The NT thus retains its privileged spiritual status by offering the possibility of human self-understanding and salvation through encounter with Christ.⁴⁹ Bultmann's proposal has been extensively discussed and critiqued, and I will not revisit those arguments here.⁵⁰

Variations on Bultmann's approach can be conceived. These might differ on the *nature* of the core reality to which myth points, identifying it, for example, in political, psychological, or sociological rather than existential terms. Another variation would be on the *scope* of demythologisation. For example, demythologising core items of the Christian confession such as Christ's pre-

46. Bultmann terms this 'eliminating', and critiques Harnack by name; Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', 12–13.

47. Bultmann, 'Problem of Demythologizing', 164.

48. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', 10.

49. For Bultmann, the kerygma is grounded in the 'Christ occurrence', which is an historical and not a mythical event, one which has already been demythologised within the NT. This differentiates the NT from philosophy: for the latter, merely understanding the human condition is the route to overcoming our fallenness, whereas for the NT God must rescue us from sin.

50. Some press for a more thoroughgoing demythologisation, e.g. Schubert M. Ogden, 'Bultmann's Project of Demythologization and the Problem of Theology and Philosophy', *JR* 37 (1957): 156–173, <https://doi.org/10.1086/484941>. Others think Bultmann has gone too far, including many of the contributors to Hans Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (SPCK, 1953); *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate: Volume II*, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (SPCK, 1962). Some think a rearticulation of Bultmann's position is basically correct, most prominently in recent scholarship David W. Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology* (Fortress Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt12878n5>.

existence, incarnation, and so forth might be taken to be unnecessary, and only those aspects of a biblical worldview that are, in the interpreter's view, in more evident contradiction of contemporary science are demythologised. Even on this reduced scope, three-tiered cosmology and Paul's ascent to heaven likely don't make the cut.⁵¹

The final approach I want to highlight might be called *prior demythologisation*. This holds that the biblical authors expressed themselves in ways that indicate they understood the nonliteral nature of mythological terms, and deployed them accordingly.⁵² That is, they use such language to describe realities that they know are in fact other than the terms in which they portray them. This view is expressed by George Caird:

[T]he first mistake we can make is to imagine the people of biblical times naive enough to believe that God lived in the sky. There are always some naive people in any age, our own as well as theirs. But the writers of the Bible and its leading figures were not among them. They might, to be sure, look up to heaven in token of looking up to God (Mark 7:34) ... But they knew that this was only a picture.⁵³

The same point is made by Caird's doctoral student, N. T. Wright:

We must not caricature ancient Jews and Christians as though they were naïve cave-men, believing in a three-decker universe with 'supernatural' upstairs, 'natural' downstairs and something nasty down in the cellar ... Perhaps some did 'take it literally', but that is not the main point.⁵⁴

I have several concerns with this approach. First, it shares Bultmann's presupposition – that ancient cosmology is naive and primitive – and simply draws the line differently between such naivety and those people who properly understand the nature of reality. That line apparently falls between the biblical writers and everyone else, or between ancient Jews and Christians and

51. See, e.g., the interpreters who read Paul's ascent to the third heaven in 1 Cor 12:2 as an ecstatic experience, noted in Paula Gooder, *Only the Third Heaven? 2 Corinthians 12.1-10 and Heavenly Ascent*, LNTS 313 (T&T Clark, 2006), 11.

52. So, e.g., J. D. G. Dunn, 'Paul himself engaged with his own demythologisation', *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Eerdmans, 2006), 109–110.

53. Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 42–43.

54. N. T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (London: SPCK, 2019), 159. The language is directly influenced by Caird: 'The world is envisaged as a three-story [*sic*] house, in which mankind lives on the ground floor, God and his angels on the floor above, and some much less desirable tenants in the basement' (Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 193). Cf. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (SPCK, 2003), 655.

everyone else, or between the intelligent and the stupid.⁵⁵ Yet to move the line in any of these ways has the air of special pleading, more than in Bultmann's case, given that he at least draws the line between ancient and modern modes of thinking. This leads to my second concern, which is that this approach is open to the criticism that it is apologetically motivated – it makes ancient writers acceptable to modern readers by portraying them as very much like twentieth- or twenty-first-century thinkers. Thirdly, and most substantively, I think at least some NT writers in at least some cases do hold some form of cosmological realism.⁵⁶ By this I mean that what we might describe as their physical cosmology and their theological cosmology overlap.⁵⁷ Or, put in terms close to Bultmann's, their mythology is to some degree 'objective'.⁵⁸

7. Cosmological realism in the New Testament

It is this third contention, that the NT does display cosmological realism, that I take up in this section. At a basic level it is incontrovertible that the NT writers held a pre-scientific understanding of the cosmos. The two key questions are as follows. What was their understanding of the physical universe – was it essentially the ancient Near Eastern schema, or did it reflect Greek understanding to a greater or lesser extent? And, most crucially, what overlap was there between their physical cosmology and their theological cosmology – what is the relationship between the heavens above and heaven as the realm of God?

The NT texts clearly reflect ancient cosmology at a number of points. Philippians 2:10 speaks of everyone 'in heaven and on earth and under the

55. As both Caird and Wright suggest at different points: 'Biblical man [...] was not silly enough to imagine that aviation could reach [heaven] or excavation [Sheol]' (Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 120–121). 'Some may indeed have [thought heaven is a far-off location within our cosmos]; there is no telling what things people will believe; but we should not imagine that the early Christian writers thought like that' (Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 655). Compare Bultmann: 'No one who is old enough to think for himself supposes that God lives in a local heaven'; Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', 4.

56. The phrase is used by Lang, 'Cosmology and Eschatology', 510. Farrar denotes a similar idea in terms of the 'concretely mythological', 'New Testament Satanology', 26.

57. This is not to say that I think there is *no* demythologisation in the Bible; for example, Gen 1 is a good candidate for a demythologisation of ancient Near Eastern creation myths, yet at the same time it reinscribes a related-yet-distinct cosmic mythology in relation to God.

58. I say 'objective' rather than 'objectified' because the latter implies the *making objective* of something that in origin or essence is not objective; yet that would seem to beg the question.

earth' bowing before the exalted Jesus. Revelation 5:13 similarly talks of every creature 'in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea' worshipping the Lamb on the throne (cf. 5:3; 10:6; Exod 20:4 // Deut 5:8). This could simply be conventional language for denoting the whole of the created order, without implying cosmological realism.⁵⁹ Yet there are several places where this route is not so easily taken, especially when it comes to the essential 'upness' of heaven.

In Mark 1:10, as Jesus emerges from the Jordan at his baptism, he sees 'the heavens torn apart [σχιζομένους]' and the Spirit and divine voice descend from heaven towards him. As only Jesus is said to have seen this, one might deny that it is cosmologically significant. In Matthew 3:16 'the heavens were opened [ἤνεώχθησαν] to him', though some manuscripts omit 'to him' (αὐτῷ), suggesting they took it as a more publicly available occurrence. Matthew's account is in any case more public, as the divine voice makes a general proclamation, 'This is my Son', rather than a direct personal address 'You are my Son' (3:17). For Luke, the event is described with no subjective qualifications and apparently takes place in view of 'all the people' who had been baptised with Jesus: 'the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form [σωματικῶ εἶδει]' (3:21-22). Strikingly, the account of Jesus's baptism becomes more realist or public through the developing Synoptic tradition rather than less.

From the very beginning of Jesus's earthly ministry, we move to the very end, his ascension, and here Luke is again our key source. The text of Luke 24:50-53 is challenging, with some manuscripts omitting 'and was carried up [ἀνεφέρετο] into heaven' to leave just 'Jesus withdrew from them'. The text of Acts 1 is clearer: while the disciples were looking at him, Jesus 'was lifted up' (ἐπήρθη, 1:9), and then obscured from sight by a cloud. As the disciples are gazing towards heaven, angels come and ask them why they are looking into heaven, and they describe Jesus as 'the one who was taken up from you into heaven' (ὁ ἀναλημφθεὶς ἀφ' ὑμῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν, 1:11; cf. 1:2; Luke 9:51). Luke is generally held to be among the more sophisticated NT writers,⁶⁰ yet here he portrays a literal ascension.

59. This is the line taken by Julius Schniewind, who states with some exaggeration 'the New Testament has completely abandoned the three-storied universe' ('A Reply to Bultmann: Theses on the Emancipation of Kerygma from Mythology', *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (SPCK, 1953), 96.)

60. For those who hold to the Q hypothesis, although Luke does preserve allegedly more primitive Q material than Matthew (e.g. compare the anthropomorphic 'finger of

Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:1-5 refers to 'a man in Christ' who ascended to the third heaven. The language used is of being snatched or seized (ἀρπάζω) rather than of ascent, and some have taken this to be an ecstatic experience only. However, Paul's uncertainty about whether this was in the body or not, and the language of three heavens, suggest a vertical model and the possibility, even if not the actuality, of going there in one's body and not only in a visionary or spiritual manner. This is the only place in the NT which explicitly enumerates different heavens, and there is an open question as to whether Paul thought this was the highest heaven or only the third of a larger number.⁶¹ In other Jewish and Christian literature of the period we find five, seven, and ten heavens, and seven is a number which recommends itself both as a biblical symbol of perfection or completion, and as accurately denoting the seven Greek planetary spheres.⁶² Paul also speaks of the Parousia in similar terms in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11, where the Lord descends and the dead arise and are seized up (ἀρπάζω again) to meet him in the clouds and the air.

Hebrews describes Christ's ascension as going 'through the heavens' (4:14), language which seems to imply a journey through multiple heavens, and which coheres with the later statement that Christ is now 'higher than the heavens' (ὕψηλότερος, 7:26). And in Revelation, John is invited to 'come up' (ἀνάβα ὧδε, 4:1) into heaven, and in his eschatological vision, from the vantage point of the earth, he sees the new Jerusalem 'coming down from heaven' (καταβαίνουσιν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, 21:2).

The evidence suggests, then, that NT writers were largely content to make use of the ancient threefold distinction, without sharply or clearly distinguishing between various heavens, though we do also find intimations of multiple, permeable heavens which may reflect Greek cosmology and may also reflect aspects of OT symbolism.⁶³ Within this, there is ready use of language

God', Luke 11:20, with 'Spirit of God' in the parallel passage in Matt 12:28), neither the baptism nor the ascension form part of the Q material.

61. Paula Gooder interprets this passage as a failed ascent narrative, with Paul arriving at but not entering the third of a larger number of heavens (Gooder, *Only the Third Heaven?*, 190-211).

62. Seven heavens: Apoc. Ab.; Ascen. Isa. 7-9; Ep. Apos. 13; 51; b. Hagigah 12b. Ten heavens: 2 Enoch 21-22 (though some mss have only seven). Some scholars contend that earlier versions of T. Levi have three heavens, though others believe the presence of seven heavens was earlier. In 3 Bar. 11-17 Baruch reaches the fifth heaven but there may be further heavens beyond. See further Gooder, *Only the Third Heaven?*, 184-187, and esp. Wright, *The Early History of Heaven*, 139-184.

63. J. E. Wright places the NT among biblical and ANE conceptions, with the exception of 2 Cor 12, which he classes under 'the adoption of Hellenistic models' (*Early*

of the ‘upness’ of heaven as the location of God, including in narrative texts which purport to describe historical occurrences, especially Jesus’s ascension and events at his baptism.

8. Remythologising the cosmos

The previous section indicates that I agree with Bultmann, against Caird and Wright, that NT authors were to some extent cosmological realists. Yet I disagree with both positions that demythologisation, whether ancient or contemporary, is either necessary or sufficient. One indication that demythologisation may not be necessary is the fact that talk of the ‘upness’ of heaven has proved remarkably persistent even in the centuries since Copernicus and friends dealt a decisive blow to the notion of planetary spheres.⁶⁴ For people who were taught modern science at school to describe heaven as ‘up there’ is not a sign of stupidity or the suspension of their critical faculties. Instead, it suggests that, at the same time as knowing the physical universe to be a certain way, we continue to find language of ‘upness’ unproblematic and indeed satisfying way to speak of heaven.

Demythologisation may not be necessary, then, and even when it does take place it is insufficient. We see this in the pervasiveness of what might be termed *remythologisation*.⁶⁵ It is notable that in discussing heaven, a range of biblical scholars engage, in passing, in remythologising, only using a more contemporary idiom. For example, the OT scholar Meredith Kline states that ‘The world of the Glory theophany is a dimensional realm normally invisible to man, where God reveals his presence ...’⁶⁶ Rabbinic scholar Philip Alexander uses comparable language of a ‘different dimension’ or a ‘parallel universe’ to describe heaven in early Jewish literature.⁶⁷ And N. T. Wright, commenting on

History of Heaven, 132–135, 148–150).

64. See Wright, *Early History of Heaven*, vii–viii; Lucas John Mix, ‘Decoupling Physical and Spiritual Ascent Narratives in Astronomy and Biology’, in *The Institutions of Extraterrestrial Liberty*, ed. Charles S. Cockell (Oxford University Press, 2022), 233–253, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192897985.003.0016>.

65. My use of this term is similar to that of Sallie McFague, who uses ‘remythologising/-isation’ to mean creating new metaphors acceptable to the contemporary age, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (SCM, 1987), xi.

66. Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Baker, 1980), 17.

67. Philip S. Alexander, ‘The Dualism of Heaven and Earth in Early Jewish Literature and Its Implications’, in *Light against Darkness: Dualism in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and the Contemporary World*, ed. Armin Lange et al., *Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements* 2 (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 173–174.

Paul, suggests that ‘Heaven (we might say) is a different *dimension* of reality, not a location within *our* dimension.’⁶⁸

Such language offers an alternative mythology rather than a demythologised explanation. This mythology is drawn from the intersection of contemporary science, philosophy, science fiction, and fantasy rather than from the ancient world, but it is still mythological in the terms discussed earlier. A thought experiment will illustrate my point. Imagine a group of scholars in two thousand years’ time trying to make sense of what exactly twentieth- and twenty-first-century theologians believed about heaven. As they encounter this language in our texts, they comment ‘Of course, they didn’t *literally* mean heaven was in another dimension; ever since we sent the first inter-dimensional probe we’ve known that other dimensions are simply part of the multiverse, and that God is not to be found there.’⁶⁹ Only since the late nineteenth century has the term ‘dimension’ been used to speculate about a fourth dimension to spatial extension,⁷⁰ and then (once *time* was described as the fourth dimension by general relativity theory) a fifth dimension.⁷¹ The iconic opening to the cult 1960s television series *The Twilight Zone* used language of ‘another dimension’ and ‘a fifth dimension’. While science fiction and fantasy have no doubt done much to popularise such language,⁷² it is also current – though not uncontroversial – in recent scientific discussion, where string theory posits

68. Tom Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (SPCK, 2018), 221 (emphasis original). Note also his description of use of ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’ ‘to denote the parallel and interlocking universes inhabited by the creator god on the one hand and humans on the other’, Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 655. Contrast T. J. Lang, ‘Paul’s third heaven is not a metaphor for an alternative “dimension of reality”’ (‘Cosmology and Eschatology’, 510).

69. ‘While the [anthropic] fine-tunings [which dispose some physicists towards a multiverse model] certainly do not provide unequivocal evidence for God, nor would the existence of a multiverse preclude God since [...] there is no reason why a Creator should not act through the multiverse’ (Bernard Carr, ‘Introduction and Overview’, in *Universe or Multiverse?*, ed. Bernard Carr (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107050990.003>).

70. Elizabeth L. Throesch, *Before Einstein: The Fourth Dimension in Fin-de-Siècle in Literature and Culture*, vol. 1, Anthem Nineteenth-Century Series (Anthem Press, 2017).

71. The *OED* entry for ‘dimension’, which was written in 1896 and has not yet been updated, does not include this usage to refer to a parallel reality, which indicates how recent it is.

72. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (the name itself is instructive!) illustrates some of the more recent exploitations of the narrative possibilities of the multiverse (e.g. *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, 2022) and the ‘quantum realm’ (as, e.g., in the Ant Man films).

many dimensions,⁷³ and some theoretical physicists use terms such as ‘parallel universe’ within discussions of a hypothetical ‘multiverse’.⁷⁴

Given that such language is mythological, its use vindicates the explanatory power – indeed, perhaps the inescapability – of myth-making. Moreover, it is striking that in trying to make sense of ancient cosmology some biblical scholars have turned to the frontiers of modern cosmology, albeit very briefly and imprecisely. In so doing, they are acting in much the same way as the NT writers, or indeed those medieval scholastic thinkers who placed heaven in the realm beyond the planetary spheres, with angels and the righteous in the Empyrean realm of fire and God himself in the heaven of heavens beyond.⁷⁵ While ‘dimensions’ and ‘universes’ may evoke a more readily available and thus more amenable myth for the modern mind, such language is, when one stops to think about it, equally as strange if not stranger than ancient or medieval cosmology.⁷⁶ At their worst, all of these cosmologies present not so much a ‘God of the gaps’ as a ‘God of the edges’, moving ever further away into realms that are just beyond our current scientific capacity for empirical observation. Yet at their best, all of these cosmologies seek to articulate the location and nature of heaven in ways that integrate both transcendence and immanence.

9. Temple as a model for heaven

I have suggested that demythologisation is an unnecessary and insufficient response to the cosmological gap. What I want to do in this final section, then, is not remythologise but return to the mythology we are given in the NT. In light of the inescapability of myth, the relationship of temple to heaven as model to source is not problematic but instead full of potential. Because the temple, within Scripture, is a model of heaven, it can serve as a model for heaven for earth-bound humans who have yet to experience heaven. We turn

73. A total of ten or eleven dimensions in some theories; string theory also gives rise to posited ‘vacuum states’ sometimes described as ‘possible universes’, which are estimated to number in the order of 10^{500} .

74. Because some aspects of multiverse theories are in principle unobservable, there is debate about whether they fall within the scope of physics, mathematics, or philosophy. For a sense of the issues see Carr, ‘Introduction and Overview’, and the other essays in that volume.

75. McDannell and Lang, *Heaven*, 80–88. For a fuller account of the thought-world of medieval cosmology, see C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1964), 92–121.

76. ‘[W]hen we ask a profound question about the nature of reality, we surely expect an answer that sounds strange.’ Max Tegmark, ‘The Multiverse Hierarchy’, in Carr, ed., *Universe or Multiverse?*, 123–124, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107050990.009>.

again, therefore, to the temple, not so much as the gate of heaven, as Bethel was for Jacob (Gen 28:17), but at least as a model for heaven, a way for us to try to see what Moses saw. I draw out six features of heaven that emerge from the NT writers' use of heavenly temple language.

1. Heaven is a place where God is specially present. This is the core purpose of a temple.⁷⁷ God's presence is specially concentrated in the most holy place and over the ark of the covenant which represents the divine throne or its footstool. At the climax of Stephen's speech in Acts 7 he looks into heaven and sees 'the glory of God' (Acts 7:55). In John's vision the first thing he sees in heaven is the throne, and 'one seated on the throne' (Rev 4:2). Similarly, for Hebrews, 'the throne of the Majesty' is 'in the heavens' (Heb 8:1), and 'the presence of God' is in 'heaven itself' (9:24). The throne/ark is the central and recurrent item of furniture, but other cultic furnishings and vessels are present as well: an altar or perhaps different altars (Rev 6:9; 8:3; 9:13), bowls (5:8), lampstands (5:5), and censers (8:3,5). These are implements in the worship of God, present because he is present.

2. Heaven is a place from which our world is influenced. The tabernacle was physically central to the Israelites in the wilderness, both when moving and when encamped (Num 2), just as the temple stood at the heart of the nation in Jerusalem. The temple structured Jewish life: diaspora prayer times matched the morning and evening sacrifices in Jerusalem, much as the Pharisees sought to extend temple purity to the whole of life for every layperson. Such influence from the heavenly temple is seen in the sending of angels such as Gabriel, who announces himself to Zechariah as one who stands 'in the presence of God' (a priestly posture, Luke 1:19, cf. 1:11). Throughout Acts angels bring revelation, and in Cornelius's case they do so at the hour of the evening sacrifice (Acts 10:3). In Revelation, angels are cultic servants who offer bowls of incense within the heavenly temple and later emerge from it to pour out bowls of wrath and plague upon the earth (Rev 15:5-8).

3. Heaven is a place within the created sphere and therefore a place that humans can go to in bodily form, much as the priests and high priest enter the temple. Like Elijah before him (2 Kings 2:11), Jesus ascends in bodily fashion in Luke and Acts, and is present in recognisable form in heaven in Stephen's vision at his martyrdom. Paul twice states that he does not know whether he ascended in the body or outside of the body, and in doing so he clearly signals his belief that both are possible. Although Hebrews has often been taken to

77. Hence the widespread use of 'house [of God]', and dwelling language (e.g. in Exod 25:8; 40:34; 1 Kings 8:10-13).

equate a spiritual ascension with the moment of crucifixion, a strong case can be made that Jesus's physical ascension is not merely assumed but in fact necessary for the sacrificial logic of the letter to work.⁷⁸ And in Revelation, alongside proleptic visions of a populated heaven (7:4-15), there are also martyrs under the altar (the specification that it is their 'souls' that are present there may mean they are disembodied, though it may simply be synecdoche for their whole selves, 6:9-11). A correlate of heaven's participation in the created order is that it too can be tainted by sin and stand in need of cleansing (see Heb 9:23 and compare, for example, Lev 8:15).

4. While heaven is somewhere humans can enter, it is also a place to which most people cannot go, and to which even special people may not normally go, and it is thus a place which needs special conditions or enabling in order to enter. The impenetrable nature of the Jewish temple, except under certain conditions, reached its most developed forms under Solomon and then later under Herod, with spatial differentiation corresponding to distinctions between different classes of person and gradations of holiness. The NT shows awareness of various courts in the Jerusalem temple (John 10:23; Acts 3:11; Rev 11:2), and Hebrews makes much of the fact that only the high priest could enter the most holy place (Heb 9:6-7). This becomes a model for Jesus's entry into 'heaven itself' (9:24), not once a year, but once for all (9:12,26), with his blood and presenting his own body before God (9:12; 10:10). The transformation of human flesh in order to enter heaven is a commonplace in various early Jewish and Christian apocalypses.⁷⁹ In Jesus's case it is intimated in the transfiguration, and it seems that, for Luke-Acts and Hebrews, the quality of his resurrected flesh is what enables him to ascend (Luke 24:31,36-43; Heb 7:16,26).

5. The preceding points amount to saying that heaven is on the border between the immanent and the transcendent. This is indicated spatially, as when Hebrews speaks of Christ passing 'through the heavens' (4:14) in order to enter 'heaven itself' (9:24), just as the high priest would pass through the outer court and outer chamber of the tabernacle to enter the most holy place. The transcendent-immanent border is also suggested by descriptions of superlative precious stones and metals in Revelation, much as Solomon's temple was decorated throughout with gold (1 Kings 6:20-22). It is further reflected in language of light and cloud which conceal as much as they reveal, whether at

78. David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, NovTSup 141 (Brill, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004206519.i-338>.

79. E.g. 2 Enoch 22.8-10. In Ascen. Isa. 7.25 Isaiah's appearance is transformed, though 6.10-11 suggests his ascent is in mind only.

the transfiguration, the ascension, or Paul's Damascus road encounter.⁸⁰ Cloud is present at the inauguration of the tabernacle, and light and cloud over the ark as the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness (Exod 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8:10-12).

6. Finally, heaven is a place that has been decisively opened by Jesus. This is the Christian transformation of a notion otherwise shared with Second Temple Jewish literature. The temporary openings at the baptism and transfiguration, and in visions in Acts, and the visionary ascents of John the Seer and Paul are all of a piece with other apocalyptic literature. The veil-tearing in the Synoptic crucifixion accounts hints at something more permanent, though this is not elaborated by the evangelists and is elusive at best. Hebrews points to a definitive opening in its references to hope that enters through the curtain (6:19-20) and to an entryway through the curtain (10:19-20). This opening of heaven underlies exhortations elsewhere in the letter to approach the throne of grace, the heavenly ark of the covenant (4:14-16; 10:19-22). Openness also characterises Revelation's closing vision, with twelve gates in a holy-of-holies shaped New Jerusalem which are never shut (21:25).

10. Conclusion

The heavenly temple is an important notion for many NT texts. It has been neglected for a range of reasons. Here I have focused on the dissonance between ancient and modern cosmologies. While some argue that demythologising needs to take place or has already taken place, I have suggested that demythologising is not always necessary, and that when it does happen it needs to be accompanied by remythologisation. The temple offers us a privileged way of thinking about heaven, not only because it is present in Scripture but also because of the particular relationship posited between temple and heaven, that of model to source. Contemporary, medieval, and ancient cosmologies all can be assessed by how well they embody the features of heaven that the temple displays. It is a real place, somewhere that can interact with our known world and somewhere to which, conceivably, humans might travel, even as it is somewhere to which we cannot or do not normally now go. It is on the border between immanent and transcendent, and crucially it is somewhere that has been transformed by Christ. In sum, in our own age as in every age, we will do well to think of heaven in temple terms, and to make use of the temple as a model for heaven.

80. For 'cloud' (νεφέλη) see Luke 9:34-35; Acts 1:9; for 'light' (φῶς) see Acts 9:3; 22:6-11; 26:13 (Paul specifies that it was 'brighter than the sun').

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