

# Heaven: A Biblical View

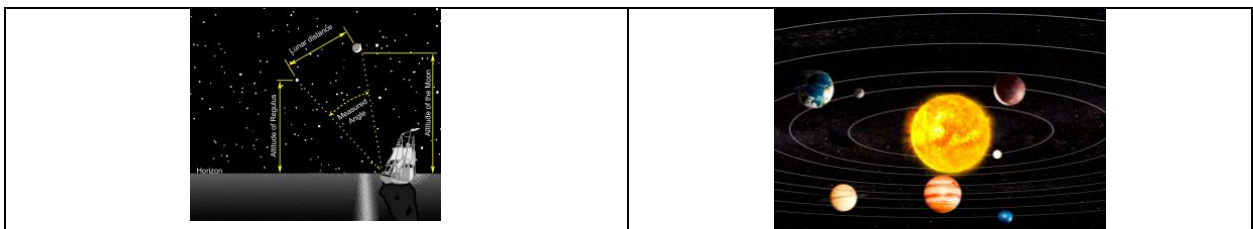
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## I. Epistemology: From the Sky to Physics, Literature, Religion

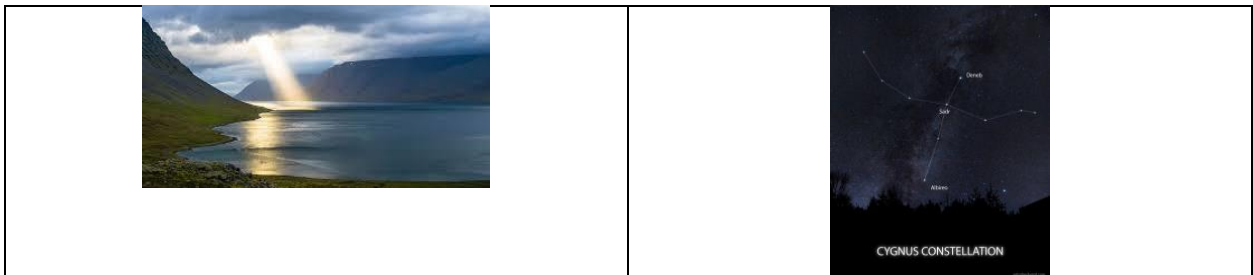


- Sky (heaven) is a constant part of our natural environment (sun, moon, stars, earth and ocean) and the spectacular movements in the sky (rain, snow, storm, lightning, tornado) are necessary and frightening phenomena that affect our lives and living, evoking curiosity and imagination.
- When you look up to the sky and gaze at the stars, day or night, what do you see?
- What do you want to know about the sky, the sun, the moon and the stars?
- What do you feel about the spectacular changes of the sky, its colors and forces?
- What do you figure about the Being or Power that may sustain the rhythm and patterns of the remarkable movement of the natural elements in the sky?
- In view of celestial phenomena, what do you think about yourself, the universe, and the life above and beyond?

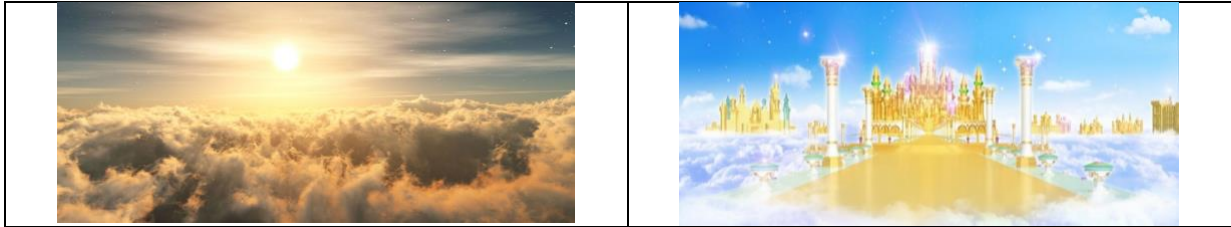
### I.1. Analyze > Physics: navigation, astronomy



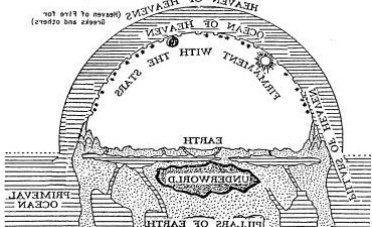

### I.2. Imagine > Literature: poetry, mythology



### I.3. Contemplate > Religion: heaven, paradise



## II. Cultural Context: Cosmologies in which Heaven is conceived

II.1 Ancient Greeks	II.2 Ancient Hebrews
	

### Hebrew Prophet vs. Babylonian Magi

- Isa 47:13 “You are wearied with your many consultations; let those who study the heavens stand up and save you, those who gaze at the stars, and at each new moon predict what shall befall those who study the heavens stand up and save you, those who gaze at the stars, and at each new moon predict what shall befall you.” [Isaiah mocks at Babylonian astrologists]
- Isa 51:13 “You have forgotten the LORD, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth. You fear continually all day long because of the fury of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction. But where is the fury of the oppressor?”
- Jer 10:2 “Thus says the LORD: Do not learn the way of the nations or be dismayed at the signs of the heavens; for the nations are dismayed at them.”

### II.3 Medieval Imagination: Michelangelo, Dante



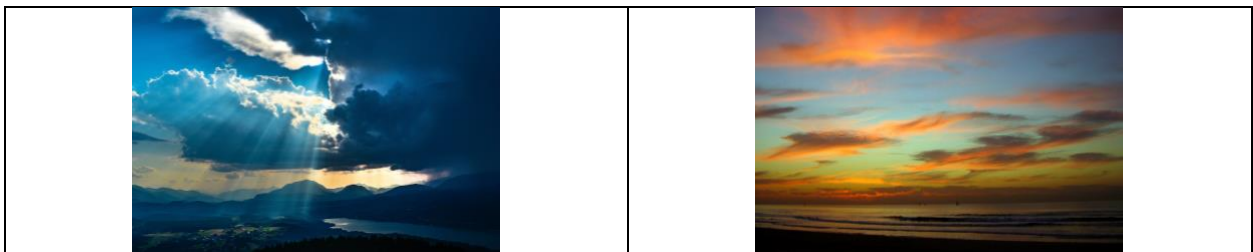
### III. Biblical Cosmology & Visions of Heavens

- Jesus and Heavens: at his birth, the magi saw a bright star, at his baptism the heaven was opened, in his ministry Satan fell from the heaven, and after his resurrection he was taken up to the heaven.



- In the Bible, “heaven” often appears in plural form as “heavens” [*shamayim* ( שָׁמַיִם ), ouranoi ( οὐρανοί )]. It is used more than 285x.
- “Heavens” is used in three ways:
  - Literal (describe the physical sky, firmament; Genesis 1)
  - Figurative (imagine it as God’s dwelling place and realm of power; Psalms)
  - Confessional (believe God sits on a throne reigning, being worshipped and planning to judge and renew the earth; Ezekiel, Revelation)
- The Bible is a “religious text” that preserves believers’ testimonies to their transcendent experiences and their confessional claims about God.
- “Heavens” reveals five things about God. The “heavens” is conceived in relation to the almighty God as a setting of God’s revelation and salvation in five features:
  - Magnificent, made by God the Creator
  - Glorious, where God reigns on a throne
  - Holy, a perfect realm above the earth
  - Peaceful, eternal home for believers
  - Mighty, will remove the evil and renew the earth

#### III.1 Heaven is Magnificent, made by God the Creator



- Gen 1: 1 “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (Psa 33:6; 89:11; 96:5)

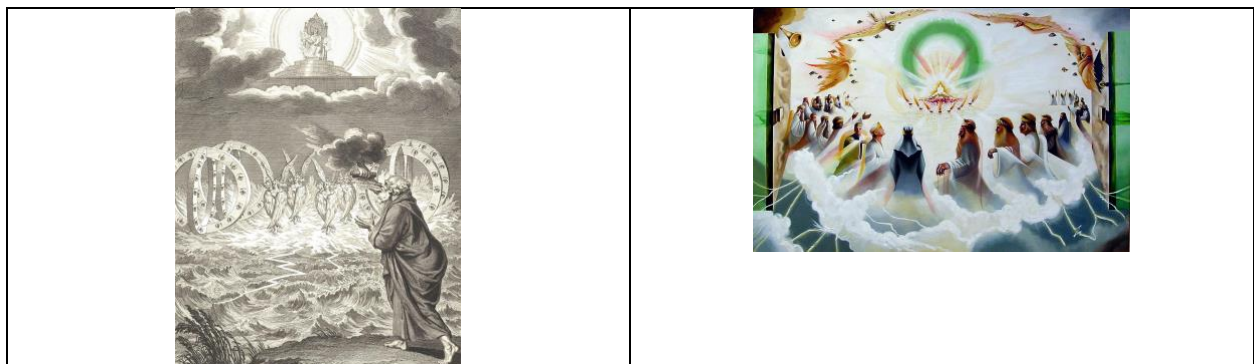
- Deut 4:19 “And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them.” [worship only God who made those celestial elements!]
- Nehemiah 9:6 “And Ezra said: “You are the LORD, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. To all of them you give life, and the host of heaven worships you.”
- Psa 19:1 “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.”
- Isa 45:12 “I made the earth and created humankind upon it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host.”

### III.2 Heaven is Glorious, where God regins on a throne

- Psa 103:19 “The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.” (11:4; 103:19; 115:3; 123:1)
- Psa 66:1 “Thus says the LORD: Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place?”
- Ezek 1:1 “... as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.” [throne, living creatures and chariots; the *kavod* (glory) of God leaves the Temple]
- Matt 6:9 “Our Father who art in heaven(s).”
- Heb 8:1 “Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.”
- Rev 4:2 “At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!” (15:8; 21:5)

### Ezek 1:1-28

- Ezek 1:1 “In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.”
- 4 creatures (1:4-14)
- 4 wheels (1:15-21)
- A dome (1:22-25)
- A throne (1:26-28)
- Rabbis prohibit children and “excitable persons” from reading the Chariot vision of Ezekiel (Merkavah mysticism).



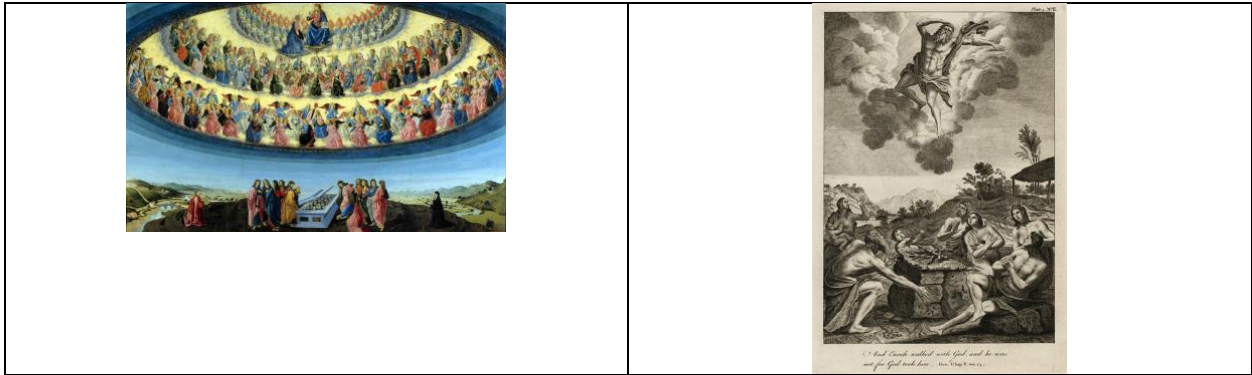
Rev 4: 1-11

- 4:1-3 "At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!"
- 4:4-5 Twenty-four elders  
4:6-9 Four living creature (Ezek 1)
- 4:10-11 Worship
- "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

III.3 Heaven is Holy, a perfect realm above the earth

- Job 22:12 "Is not God high in the heavens? See the highest stars, how lofty they are!"
- Psa 57:5, 11 "Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth."
- Matt 6: "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."
- 1 Thess 4:16-17 "For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever."
- John 3:31 "The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all."

Book of Enoch



III.4 Heaven is Peaceful, eternal home for believers

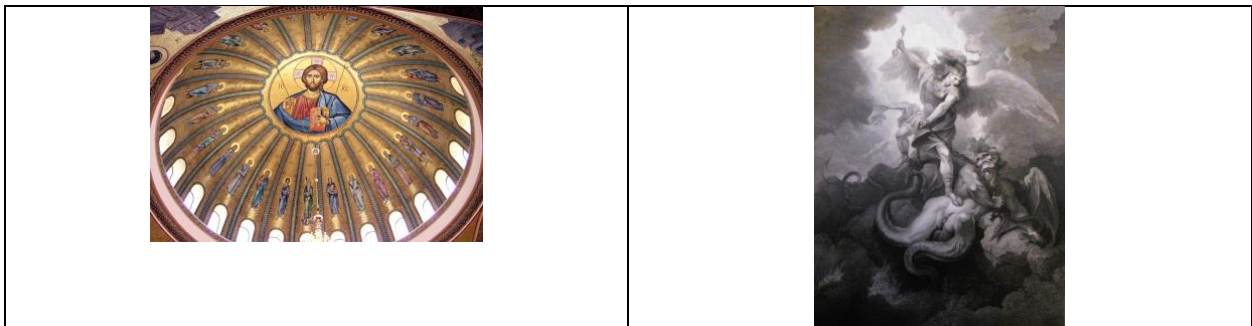


- John 14:2 “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”
- 2 Cor 5:1 “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”
- Heb 4:14 “Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.”
- Rev 21:1-4 “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; ... And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, ... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”
- John 14:1-3 Jesus said: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

“One like a human being” (the son of man)

- Daniel 7:2-14 “I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. ... As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. ... As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.”

### III.5 Heaven is Mighty, will remove the evil and renew the earth



- Psa 50:4 “He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people”
- Isa 65:17 “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”
- Matt 3:16 “And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.”

- 2 Pet 3:10 “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.”
- Rev 12:12 “Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

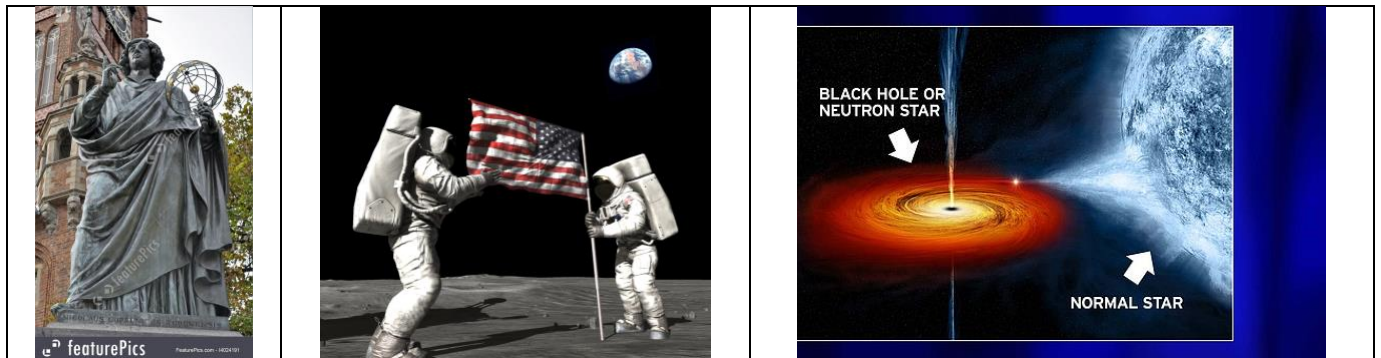
#### Christ Pantocrator

Eph 4:10 “He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.”

#### Michael defeats Satan

Rev 12:7-10 “And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ... Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.”

### IV. Space Science, Theoretical Astrophysics & New Questions to Faith



#### IV.1 Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), mathematician and astronomist

- 1541, Copernicus proposed a heliocentric system of the universe with the planets orbit around the Sun which is near the center of the universe, while the earth orbits around the Sun once annually and on its own axis once daily.
- *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium (On the revolutions of the heavenly spheres)*: “Perhaps there will be babblers who, although completely ignorant of mathematics, nevertheless take it upon themselves to pass judgement on mathematical questions and, badly distorting some passages of Scripture to their purpose, will dare find fault with my undertaking and censure it. I disregard them even to the extent as despising their criticism as unfounded.”
- “To know that we know what we know, and to know that we do not know what we do not know, that is true knowledge.”
- Kepler and Galileo defended him, and Newton’s theory of universal gravitation provided theoretical evidence to support his theory 150 years later.

## IV.2 Space Science

- 1957 - First satellite Sputnik
- 1969 - First moon landing, Apollo 11
- 1976 - First Mars landing, Viking 1

## IV.3 Stephen Hawking, "Black Hole" theory 36 IV.4 Challenging Questions

- Where exactly is "heaven" as the visible sky and God's dwelling place?
- How do we understand the depictions and statements of heavens?
- Do we interpret them as actual description, figurative symbol or religious truth?
- What can we say about the meaning of "heavens" in biblical view?
- How do we respond to the challenges of modern cosmology?

## V. Three Lines of Response

### V.1 Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology* (1941)

- An intellectual/historical perspective.  
"Can the Christian proclamation today expect men and women to acknowledge the mythical world picture as true? To do so would be both pointless and impossible. It would be pointless because there is nothing specifically Christian about the mythical world picture, which is simply the world picture of a time now past which was not yet formed by scientific thinking. It would be impossible because no one can appropriate a world picture by sheer resolve, since it is already given with one's historical situation." (p. 3)
- The talk of heavens (God in heaven, Christ from heaven, and going to heaven) is a faith language of religious experience in ancient cosmology. Compared to modern cosmology, it can be called "mythology," i.e. the narrative of extraordinary experience of ancient people.
- Cultural context changes over time, but we don't have to throw away the experience and belief of heavens in biblical narrative, which are genuine and valuable to them.
- We can "de-mythologize" the form (Gestalt) of biblical narrative concerning "heavens" and "translate" the meaning of their contents (*die Sache; subject matter*) into a language that a scientific mindset may comprehend and appreciate.
- For instance, Jesus comes from heaven means he has true understanding of God (proved by his miracles) and he has divine authority to redeem us by his death (demonstrated by his resurrection from the dead).

### V.2 Dr. Eben Alexander III., *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife* (2012)

- An experiential/testimonial perspective.
- A Harvard-trained neurosurgeon's account of his own near-death experience and what he discovered in the heavenly realm that happened in 2008 under medically-induced coma when treated for meningitis.



- Seven days after his induced coma, Dr. Alexander awoke and remembered a journey into a realm more real than this earthly one, where he met a deceased birth sister he had never known existed.
- He describes what he saw in Ch. 7. A slowly spinning pure white light descended and drove away darkness around him. At the center of the light was an opening. Through the opening he moved up fast and ended up in a new world. It looked "brilliant, vibrant, ecstatic, stunning ... I felt like I was being born. Not reborn, or born again. Just ... born."
- "Below me there was countryside. It was green, lush and earthlike. ... I was flying, passing over trees and fields, streams and waterfall, and here and there, people. A beautiful, incredible dream world ... Except it wasn't a dream. I was absolute sure of one thing: this place I'd suddenly found myself in was completely real.
- "I don't know how long, exactly, I flew along. ... But at some point, I realized I wasn't alone up there. Someone was next to me: a beautiful girl with high cheekbones and deep blue eyes. We were riding along together on an intricately patterned surface, alive with indescribable and vivid colors—the wing of a butterfly. In fact, millions of butterflies were all around us—vast fluttering waves of them, dipping down into the greenery and coming back up around us again. ... as if they were a river of life and color, moving through the air." (p. 40)
- "Without using any words, she [the girl] spoke to me. The message went through me like a wind, and I instantly understood that it was true. ... The message had three parts, ... something like this: "You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever." "You have nothing to fear." "There is nothing you can do wrong."
- "We will show you many things here, ... But eventually you will go back."
- He also described seeing some Beings flying above the clouds and hearing them sing with great joy and a warm wind, divine breeze.
- "I began wordlessly putting questions to this wind and to the divine being that I sensed at work behind or within it. *Where is this? Who am I? Why am I here?* Each time I silently posed one of these questions, the answer came instantly in an explosion of light, color, love, and beauty that blew through me like a crashing wave."
- "I continued moving forward and found myself entering an immense void, completely dark, infinite in size, yet also infinitely comforting. ... My situation was, strangely enough, something akin to that of a fetus in a womb. The fetus floats in the womb with the silent partner of the placenta, which nourishes it and mediates its relationship to the everywhere present yet at the same time invisible mother. In this case, the "mother" was God, the Creator, the source who is responsible for making the universe and all in it."
- There are many universes. Love lay at the center of them all. Ultimate message: you are loved.
- As a medical scientist, Dr. Alexander wanted to find out whether his brain could have played a trick on him, but his brain was completely shut down under the induced coma. The only reasonable conclusion is human consciousness somehow exists without brain.
- This experience converts him into a believer of the unconditional love of God and brought reconciliation to his birth family.
- "So here I am. I am still a scientist, I am still a doctor, and as such I have two essential duties: to honor truth and to help heal. That means telling my story. ... I am living proof." (the end of the book)

### V.3 Jürgen Moltmann, *Resurrected to Eternal Life* (2021)

- A theological/spiritual perspective
- Ch. 1 We can experience dying, but not death itself. We suffer for others' death, because we love them.
- "Eternal life is neither infinite extension of this life, nor immortalization of a short life, but an eternal liveliness. A moment of true contentment is like an atom of eternity, and its light is like a flicker of the eternal light." *nunc aeternum* (eternal moment).
- Ch. 2 Jesus said to Mary Magdalene, "Go to my brothers and tell them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." (John 20:17). "Her friendship with the mortal Jesus evolved into a divine fellowship with the resurrected Christ."
- "In the resurrected Christ, the disciples and the women got a glimpse of eternal life."
- Luther (1519): "Gaze at the heavenly picture of Christ, who descended into hell (1 Peter 3:19) for your sake and was forsaken by God as one eternally damned when he spoke the words on the cross ... (Matt 27:46).  
... In that picture your hell is defeated and your uncertain election is made sure."
- Ch. 3 "The pains of death are the birth pains into eternal life."
- "The new body in the resurrection – the *soma pneumatikon* – will be a body intensively alive in the divine life force in accordance with the body of the resurrected Christ, which was "transfigured" in the majesty of God."
- Ch. 4 Elizabeth Moltmann's autobiography, "Whoever does not touch the earth cannot reach heaven."
- Old tradition in Germany to open a window at the moment of somebody's death.
- "Whereat my soul extended Its wings toward skies to roam O'er quiet lands, suspended My soul was flying home."
- "When the deceased are "in heaven," they are within the "invisible" world. They are in a sort of "second present" with their entire life stories and their concisous souls."
- "Does love die with the death of a loved one, or is love "as strong as death"? Where love is carried with hope in the resurrection and an eternal life together, it is truly stronger than death."
- Ch. 5 The "living soul" that awakens to eternal life is not a ghost in a machine, but the *Lebensgestalt*, the shape and story of a life, its human and divine contexts, its "whole."

### **Some Not-Final Thoughts**

- Ancient cosmology. The language of "heavens" in the Bible needs to be interpreted in ancient cultural context, in particular its cosmology, as well as in its historical and social contexts.
- Theological vision. Different from our cosmology today, biblical testimonies and claims about heavens nonetheless convey theological insights and spiritual reflections on religious experience which was hard to articulate.
- Fusing of Horizons. We need to be "bi-lingual," able to understand both biblical and modern cultural terms about heavens and explain its core meaning
- Remain open-minded. There are still many "unknown" phenomena in science and "inexplicable" mysteries in human experience, keeping our minds open to new revelation may deepen our experience God's presence and God's work in the world and in our lives.