

**NB: A much fuller and more developed version of this argument is forthcoming in the published version of my thesis, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*.**

Circumventing Circumlocution: Did Jesus Really Use “Heaven” as a Periphrasis for God?

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**ABSTRACT:** A widespread assumption in NT scholarship is that “heaven” (*ouranos*) is often used by Jesus as a circumlocution for God according to the contemporary Jewish custom of avoiding the name of God. This assumption is especially used to explain Matthew’s frequent use of “heaven,” including the phrase, “kingdom of heaven.” A survey of the literature reveals that this common assertion comes from a singular source: Gustaf Dalman’s influential 1902 volume, *The Words of Jesus*. This paper will revisit Dalman’s argument to show that it is methodologically flawed and presents insufficient evidence. Moreover, the OT and second temple literature does not support the kind of widespread reverential circumlocution that has come to be assumed as operative in Jesus’ day. An alternative explanation will be given for Matthew’s frequent use of heaven language.

## Introduction

One does not have to read very far into the Gospel of Matthew before running into the interesting phrase, “kingdom of heaven” (or “kingdom of the heavens”) (ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν). One also does not have to read very far in the commentaries on Matthew to find this phrase explained as a circumlocution on the part of the Evangelist to avoid saying the name of God.

For example, Albright and Mann describe heaven as a normal Jewish synonym for God, “to save the devout from using even the substitute word *Adonai*.”<sup>1</sup> David Hill understands Matthew’s KOH as equivalent to KOG, “indicating faithfulness to the Aramaic and avoiding the name of God.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, F.W. Beare writes off any difference between KOH and KOG by stating that heaven is “simply a circumlocution adopted in Jewish usage to avoid speaking directly of God.”<sup>3</sup>

This account is given by the vast majority of commentaries (also including France, Filson, Plummer, Schnackenburg, Hagner, Schlatter, and Davies and Allison), both erudite and popular. It is not surprising that reference works follow the same line of thinking as the commentators. The explanation of οὐρανός as a (reverential) circumlocution is found in the standard dictionary entries under “Heaven,” including *TDNT*, *DJG*, *NIDNTT*, *NDBT*, and *ISBE*.

The argument in the case of Matthew is typically made in this way: A comparison of Matthew’s KOH with the Synoptics’ KOG reveals that the two have the same referent. Therefore, Matthew must have inserted KOH for the KOG found in his sources. Why did he do this? In light of the apparent “Jewishness” of Matthew, he must have been motivated by a shared Jewish aversion to the name of God. Therefore, heaven is simply a circumlocution to avoid the name of God.

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<sup>1</sup> W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 49.

<sup>2</sup> David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1972), 90. Here we see the two most common explanations for heaven language in Matthew put together, that of reverence-circumlocution and Semitic influence.

<sup>3</sup> F. W. Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 33.

In the brief time I have today I want to challenge this reasoning at each point. I do think heaven in Matthew often refers to God in a metonymic way (thus, KOG and KOH have the same referent). However, I am thoroughly unconvinced by the methodology and arguments which understand heaven simply as a reverential circumlocution. I think there is a better solution. The arguments given for heaven as a reverential circumlocution turn out to rest on very slim historical evidence. Nonetheless, as is often the case, the scholarly repetition of the same arguments has created a substantial edifice. I will seek to show the structural weaknesses in this edifice and dismantle it, thereby clearing the ground for a better explanation of Matthew's frequent use of heaven language.

For the sake of clarity, I will lay out my argument in four steps.

## 1. Collapsing of Categories

I must begin with a clarification of terms. "Circumlocution" or "periphrasis" refers to the mode of discourse in which one uses words "which move roundabout their subject rather than announcing it directly."<sup>4</sup> There are a number of reasons why one may speak in a circumlocutionary way: for euphemistic purposes, ironically, or even by mistake. A common circumlocution (of the euphemistic sort) is to speak of someone "passing away" rather than "dying."

Similarly, a speaker or writer may also use the related technique of "metonymy" in which he or she substitutes the name of a thing by the name of an attribute of it, or something closely associated with it.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we often hear on the news that "the White House has said such and such" with "White House" serving metonymically for the President.

There is nothing new here. But the first point I need to make is that when discussing heaven as a circumlocution, there is commonly a confusion or collapsing of categories. Namely, that "circumlocution" has been narrowed in meaning to refer only to one, specific kind of circumlocution – the Jewish avoidance of the name of God – a definition which is really only a subset of the meaning of circumlocution.<sup>6</sup>

The problem with this narrowing or collapsing of categories is that it disables us from being able to recognize circumlocution at work without assuming it is being used to avoid the name of God. In other words, if we have in our minds that "circumlocution" means "a round about way of saying something *to avoid the name of God*" (which is really only one kind of circumlocution) then when we see heaven being used instead of God (as in KOH for KOG in Matthew), *by definition* we assume it to be a reverential circumlocution.

But as I will argue below, there are indeed other reasons why Matthew uses heaven rather than God in phrases such as KOH. This could be called a circumlocution (in the broad sense), but far better would be to use the simpler and less loaded term, metonymy. In light of the usage of heaven in the OT, second temple literature, and even down to today, heaven does often serve as a metonym for God, even as White House does for President.

## 2. The Chronology of Creeping Circumlocution

The second plank in my argument concerns the chronology of creeping circumlocution. Avoidance of uttering the divine name has a long history in Judaism. Yahweh was the revealed name of the God of the Jews, however, at some unknown point, a

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2d ed.; Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 1992), s.v. circumlocution. These terms are basically synonymous. Biblical scholars discussing Matthew tend to use circumlocution more than periphrasis.

<sup>5</sup> Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, s.v. metonymy.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* we find circumlocution used in this narrower sense as if that were the only definition of the word. Jonathan Lunde, "Heaven and Hell," in the *DJG* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 307-12.

sacred taboo was placed on pronouncing it. The Tetragrammaton occurs over 6000 times in the Hebrew Bible, though, as is well known, the tradition of reading Adonai eventually replaced the pronunciation of the divine name.

Eventually, this reverential attitude spread to scribal practices as well. At Qumran, a number of techniques were used to avoid writing the Tetragrammaton.<sup>7</sup> We also find in the Septuagint that at times κύριος replaced the Tetragrammaton,<sup>8</sup> and some traditions began to shy away from even the generic, θεός. In the Rabbinic materials we find mixed rules on the pronunciation and writing of the name. One prohibition gives seven names of God which can never be erased.<sup>9</sup> We also find that a custom develops which prohibits the destruction of any biblical manuscripts in case the section contains the name of God.

Over the centuries, such reverential customs continued. By the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, many German and French Jews referred to God with the title, “The Eternal.” And many Jews today are even reticent to write the generic “god,” but instead use the form, “g\*d.” This phenomenon could be called a “creeping [reverential] circumlocution” – an expanding development which included more practices over time by accretion.

As this creeping circumlocution continued, a plethora of techniques arose which were designed to protect the sense of God’s transcendence. One familiar to students of the NT is the “divine passive,” in which the passive voice is used to refer in a roundabout way to God’s actions.<sup>10</sup>

At some point in the history of Judaism, this creeping circumlocution flowed widely enough to begin also to use “Heaven” on occasion for such a purpose. We do find instances in the Rabbinic material where heaven is used as a metonym for God, and it is possible (though not certain) that this is motivated by reverential circumlocution.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the dating of such highly stratified documents is notoriously difficult.

And this gets to my point in this stage of the argument: There is no doubt that reverential circumlocution was a phenomenon in Jewish practice. But the question remains as to the chronology and geography of the spread of such practices. That is, avoidance of the divine name (YHWH) is one thing; avoiding other ways of referring to God is another (e.g., Elohim or θεός); substituting heaven is yet another development beyond these.<sup>12</sup> But *when* these practices occurred and how widespread they were at any given time is very difficult to determine. For example, in Qumran alone we find quite a bit of variance in how the Tetragrammaton is treated. I would contend that it is not at all clear that in the time and practice of Jesus that heaven was a common way of avoiding direct reference to God. Apart

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<sup>7</sup> See Donald W. Parry, “Notes on Divine Name Avoidance in Scriptural Units of the Legal Texts of Qumran,” in *Legal Texts and Legal Issues* (eds. M. Bernstein, F. Garcia Martinez, J. Kampen; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 437-449. Marianne Dacy, “The Divine Name in Qumran Benedictions,” *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 15 (2001): 6-16. Dennis Green, “Divine Names: Rabbinic and Qumran Scribal Techniques,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Fifty Years After Their Discovery* (eds. L. Schiffman, E. Tov, J. VanderKam; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2000), 497-511. P. W. Skehan, “The Divine Name at Qumran, the Masada Scroll, and in the Septuagint,” *BIOSCS* 13 (1990): 14-44.

<sup>8</sup> See Albert Pietersma, “Kyrios or Tetragram: A Renewed Quest for the Original LXX,” in *De Septuaginta: Studies in Honour of John William Wevers* (eds. A. Pietersma, C. Cox; Mississauga, Ont., Canada: Benben Publications, 1984), 85-101. This replacement occurred at times though not always, as was previously argued. Cf. also George Howard, “The Tetragram and the New Testament,” *JBL* 96 (1977): 63-83.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (London: Dartmon, Longman & Todd, 1973), 141. Green, p.501, discusses which titles could be erased and which could not.

<sup>10</sup> Similarly, we find in Revelation a voice “coming out from the throne.” Richard Bauckham suggests this avoids directly attributing the judgments to God’s activity. Cf. also 2 Peter 1:17.

<sup>11</sup> For example, “the kingdom of heaven” (*m. Ber.* 2:2; *b Hag.* 5b), “the fear of heaven” (*m. ’Abot* 1:3; *b. Ber.* 33b), “the sake of heaven” (*m. ’Abot* 4:11), and “the name of heaven” (*m. ’Abot* 4:4; *b. Hag.* 16a).

<sup>12</sup> Green, “Divine Names,” discusses the debates among Rabbis with the taxonomy of different tiers of prohibitions.

from the Gospel of Matthew, where this practice is assumed, there is very little supporting evidence.<sup>13</sup> And this leads to the third part of my argument.

### 3. Suspiciously Singular Source

I began by quoting a number of Matthean scholars who explain heaven in the first Gospel as a reverential circumlocution. A glance at the footnotes in any commentary will reveal that this widespread idea stems from a common source: Gustaf Dalman's, *Wörter Jesu* (ET: *The Words of Jesus*).<sup>14</sup> This influential volume stands in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century tradition of a philological and Aramaic approach to Gospel studies.<sup>15</sup> The subtitle of Dalman's work – "considered in the light of post-biblical Jewish writings and the Aramaic language" – reveals two key assumptions behind the work: 1) that discerning the Aramaic prototype of Jesus' words is essential to interpreting them;<sup>16</sup> and 2) that the rabbinic sources' use of words and phrases gives vital information for understanding the NT ideas.

Dalman proceeds by discerning fourteen "fundamental ideas" in Jewish literature which are used to explain the words of Jesus. Within this discussion, a significant part of the book (chapters V-VIII) deals with the issue of other names being substituted for the Tetragrammaton. Dalman begins with the Mishnaic tractates and then works *backwards*, arguing that this kind of circumlocution was occurring also in Esther, 1 Maccabees and Daniel.

Chapter VIII, "Evasive or Precautionary Modes of Referring to God," is devoted specifically to the issue at hand. Under this heading, Dalman gives fourteen words or phrases, which, according to him, reveal the development of the evasion of God's name by Jews.<sup>17</sup> Seven of these are tied directly to the word, heaven.<sup>18</sup> Under each of these, he lists NT examples followed by rabbinic examples, some of which parallel closely and others less so. He concludes this section by stating that Jesus followed the standard Jewish custom of avoidance of the name of God.<sup>19</sup>

Not long after Dalman, the now famous (and infamous) volumes by Strack and Billerbeck appeared.<sup>20</sup> These commentaries on the NT are based on rabbinic parallels which are supposed to shed light on our understanding of the meaning of NT expressions. The widespread influence these volumes had on a generation of scholars is matched only by the vehemence with which they were subsequently attacked as idiosyncratic and methodologically mistaken.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> There is one usage of heaven in the Gospels that could be understood in this way: Luke 15: 18, 21. Here the prodigal son confesses that he has "sinned against heaven." This is certainly a case of metonymy. Whether it is also a case of reverential circumlocution depends on whether there is sufficient evidence to posit this practice elsewhere. Alternatively, this singular example could be the exception which proves the rule.

<sup>14</sup> Gustaf Dalman, *The Words of Jesus* (trans. D. M. Kay; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902).

<sup>15</sup> See the helpful overview to this tradition in Craig Evans introduction to the third edition of Matthew's Black's *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1998), v-xxv.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the translator's prefatory remarks: "the Greek versions of the Synoptists cannot be finally interpreted without taking due account of the Aramaic prototype," vii.

<sup>17</sup> Dalman had done some preparatory work on this in his 1889 article, "Der Gottesname Adonaj."

<sup>18</sup> The fourteen phrases are: 1) The voice (from heaven); 2) Swearing by heaven; 3) Reward, treasures in heaven; 4) Names written in heaven; 5) Before the angels, before God; 6) Bound, loosed in heaven; 7) Heaven; 8) From heaven; 9) Hosanna in the highest; 10) From on high; 11) Use of the passive voice; 12) Amen; 13) The dwelling (Shechinah), the glory, the word; 14) The place.

<sup>19</sup> Dalman, *Words*, 233.

<sup>20</sup> Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (6 vols; Munich: C. H. Beck, 1922-1961).

<sup>21</sup> Several works by Jacob Neusner have criticized the traditional approach to rabbinic materials. A very helpful and straightforward illumination of the problems of using rabbinic materials in the way that Strack and

In light of the similarities in approach to Dalman, it is not surprising to find in Strack and Billerbeck the same explanation given for the use of heaven in Matthew, that of reverential circumlocution.<sup>22</sup> In fact, it turns out that this explanation is more than a coincidental occurrence – Dalman is the *only* secondary literature source listed in Strack and Billerbeck for this entire section! Thus, we find again that the fount of this argument is clearly Dalman, as even those Matthean commentators who also quote Strack and Billerbeck are leaning on Dalman’s original argument.<sup>23</sup>

In light of the pervasive influence of Dalman’s view, how are we to evaluate it? A careful analysis reveals several weaknesses in his case. I will demarcate four:

#### a) Collapsing of Categories

In the first instance, Dalman is guilty of violating the issues I raised in points (1) and (2). In his argument for circumlocution, he collapses the categories of meaning and is not at all clear on the chronology of circumlocution. As a result of the latter, he lumps together all kinds of techniques and levels of avoidance to make his case, thereby wrongly mixing earlier and later developments. He fails to distinguish between utterance of the Tetragrammaton and other techniques, and he neglects pointing out that when we move from Hebrew and Aramaic to Greek, the question of the actual four-letter divine name becomes moot.

#### b) A Flawed Methodology

A second weakness in Dalman is that his methodology is simply not careful enough. One hundred years ago, in the wave of excitement over applying Rabbinic materials to the interpretation of the NT, fundamental methodological errors were rampant. Many scholars, such as Dalman, and Strack and Billerbeck, jumped in with both feet, as it were, before carefully checking the water.

As is typical, there was eventually a backlash of criticisms of this methodological approach. One example of a more mature, balanced approach to the use of rabbinic materials comes from Philip Alexander. He offers seven reasons why NT scholars must be very circumspect in handling the rabbinic material. These include the state and dating of the texts, the accuracy of the attributions, as well as various other considerations. While Alexander’s goal is constructive (unlike Neusner’s), at the end, he is compelled to convey “some idea of the degree of doubt and uncertainty which must hang over any pronouncement” coming from the study of rabbinic literature.<sup>24</sup>

In the case of Dalman, such a needed note of “doubt and uncertainty” is missing. Instead, he blithely jumps from NT phrases assumed to be reverential circumlocutions to a concatenation of rabbinic parallels, some of which seem close and others which are simply not. His argument is by no means airtight. At best, his case illumines the *possibility* of early circumlocution; at worst, it is a classic example of Sandmel’s “parallelomania.”<sup>25</sup>

#### c) The Rabbinic Materials are Mixed

But even setting aside the methodological problems, we find that in fact the rabbinic material is quite mixed in its prescriptions regarding reverential circumlocution. Even on the

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Billerbeck suggested can be found in Philip Alexander, “Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament,” *ZNW* 74 (1983): 237-246.

<sup>22</sup> See Str-B 1:172-185 on Matt 4:17 and 1:862-865 on Matt 21:25.

<sup>23</sup> One of the most striking examples of Dalman as the singular source for the reverential circumlocution argument is found in the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Heaven.” This ten-volume work, written by Jews for Jews, argues for reverential circumlocution in the biblical and rabbinic literature. At the end of the article, there is only one bibliographic source given: the *German Protestant* Dalman.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander, “Rabbinic Judaism,” 238.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Samuel Sandmel’s well-known article by this name in *JBL* 81 (1962).

question of the pronouncement of the Tetragrammaton – certainly the highest tier of reverence and clearest form of circumlocution – the practices differed widely among various groups in the second temple period and beyond.<sup>26</sup> Some Rabbis announce as cut-off anyone who pronounces the name with its vowels (*m. Sanh.* 11:1; *b. Sanh.* 90a), while another tradition ordains that Jews should use the name when greeting one another (*m. Ber.* 9:5). Such inconsistencies should caution us from a flat reading of the materials that assumes heaven was used consistently in a circumlocutionary way, if at all.

#### d) The Second Temple Evidence is Not Sufficient

Dalman begins with the rabbinic materials and works backwards, attempting to connect the dots of his argument by finding evidence of reverential circumlocution in the second temple literature. He proffers three examples: the book of Esther, Daniel 4:23, and 1 Maccabees.

In the case of Esther, Dalman asserts that avoidance of the name of God is the explanation for the absence of “God” throughout the book. This argument is far from conclusive, especially when one considers that the various Septuagintal versions, which are ostensibly later, insert references to God. Moreover, the case of Esther proves irrelevant to the question of whether heaven is being used in this way. There are *no* instances of heaven or any other circumlocutionary terms in Esther at all.

An examination of the reference to Daniel 4:23 [4:26 in Septuagint and English] is far from conclusive as well. Here, in Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, the prophet says that “Heaven rules” (שָׁמַיָא רִשָׁתָא). This serves for Dalman as the sole canonical example of a reverential circumlocution. That this is a case of metonymy—with “heaven” substituted for “God” – is unquestionable, but the context and language of Daniel cast doubt on whether explaining these words as a reverential circumlocution is justifiable. Just four verses earlier we read that Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom and dominion have extended to heaven and to the ends of the earth; his greatness seems insurmountable. But the true God is now about to humble him and show his utterly *earthly* nature by making him a beast of the *earth* who will lie down in the dew which comes from *heaven*. Thus, in this context, full of such word-plays, Yahweh is called by epithets such as the “God of heaven” (2:18, 19, 37, 44), the “Most High God” (3:26; 4:2; 5:18; 5:21), and more simply, “the Most High” (4:17, 24, 25; et al.) Likewise, in 4:23 we have another of these metonymic titles, “Heaven,” which, like the others, serves a *rhetorical* purpose rather than a reverential one – to emphasize the universal greatness of the God of the Jews over all sovereigns, even the one who holds them in bondage.<sup>27</sup>

The only plank left in Dalman’s argument for an early pattern of reverential circumlocution is 1 Maccabees. It is only here that his theory finds any supporting evidence. There are fourteen occurrences of heaven in 1 Maccabees and none of “God” or “Lord” in reference to Yahweh. In all but two of the occurrences of “heaven,” there is a clear metonymic reference to God. In several instances, the replacement of heaven for God is so abrupt that it renders the sentence sounding rather odd. For example, “On their return they sang hymns and praises *to Heaven*, for *he* is good, for *his* mercy endures for ever” (4:24). Thus, we have some evidence here of heaven as an intentional circumlocution or metonymy.

This may indeed be a reverential circumlocution. However, my own studies lead me to ponder whether there might be a different explanation even here: I tentatively propose that

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<sup>26</sup> See Dacy, “Divine Name,” 10-12. Cf. also E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 1:128ff.

<sup>27</sup> In my Ph.D. work I have done extensive work on heaven language in Daniel. There I also offer argumentation that the Aramaic in Dan 4:23 likely stems from a later period than the Theodotion or OG, neither of which line up with the Aramaic use of heaven in this verse.

1 Maccabees lacks any references to God because it is an intentionally secular account which focuses on human military prowess, designed to curry favour with the Romans.

But even if I'm dead wrong on that, and 1 Maccabees does provide evidence for heaven as a reverential circumlocution, then it is the noticeable exception, not the evidence for a widespread trend.<sup>28</sup> As Dalman himself admits, this pattern "in other writings is not in every case so consistent."<sup>29</sup> This proves to be an understatement, as it is *only* in 1 Maccabees that such a clear pattern is evident at all.<sup>30</sup>

There is one other crucial corpus of second temple literature that argues against Dalman's theory: the scrolls of Qumran. In this instance, no blame can be laid on him, as the first scrolls came to light only after his death (d. 1941). Nonetheless, the use of heaven in the DSS provides strong counter-evidence to his theory that heaven was an early reverential circumlocution. Of the approximately 200 occurrences of heaven in the non-biblical documents, not one functions in this way.<sup>31</sup> While this is admittedly an argument from silence, this is a case where silence is louder than words. In light of the scrupulous care taken with the divine name at Qumran, the lack of the use of heaven in this way is strong evidence against its usage before the later rabbinic period.

To sum up, the widespread adoption of Dalman's conclusion proves to be as precarious as an inverted pyramid. Although the breadth of the belief is large today, it rests on a singular and very weak point. The evidence for heaven as a reverential circumlocution in the time of Jesus is simply too slim to adhere to this theory. It may indeed be that the (later) rabbinic material reflects a real trend toward reverential circumlocution in the (earlier) NT period, but this yet remains to be proven. Further, the variegated nature of first-century Judaism militates against postulating a definitive trend, even if it were rather widespread in the literature.<sup>32</sup>

Today, Dalman's methodology and many of his other findings have been largely discredited.<sup>33</sup> However, for no good reason, his assumption of reverential circumlocution has

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<sup>28</sup> Oesterley points out that 1 Macc is in fact the noticeable exception in its use of heaven. He proposes that it may be for reverential reasons but suggests that alternatively, it points to the first-century BCE emphasis on God's transcendence. (Oesterley, *An Introduction to the Books of the Apocrypha* (London: SPCK, 1953), 78).

<sup>29</sup> Dalman, *Words*, 195-196.

<sup>30</sup> One nearby contrary example is 2 Maccabees where there are twenty-one instances of "heaven," many of which are clearly *not* reverential circumlocution, in addition to forty-nine explicit references to God, including several in conjunction with heaven.

<sup>31</sup> This figure comes from my own examination of all of the occurrences of Hebrew or Aramaic "heaven" in the non-biblical fragments. Unfortunately, there are no extant fragments of Dan 4:23 from Qumran. This would have provided interesting data to evaluate the interpretation of that usage of heaven.

<sup>32</sup> There are also several examples in Hellenistic Greek where οὐρανός is used as a circumlocution, but by the nature of their source, clearly not because of "a Jewish aversion to pronounce the name of God." Examples from various centuries include *Philippides Com.* 27; according to Clement of Alexandria: *Protr.* 5, 66, 4; Appian, *Hann.* 56; Herodotus I, 131; and the "Epigram for Apollonios of Tyana." (Quoted in G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1978* (North Ryde, Australia: Macquarie University; 1983), 49-50.) Some have suggested that this secular usage was in fact the source of the later Jewish custom. (Cf. Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology*, 143.) The point is that using *heaven* as a metonym (or circumlocution in the technical sense) does not require the explanation that this came about because of the (later) Jewish habit of avoiding the name of God. As the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* points out, speaking of God in figurative and symbolic ways is in fact the normal way for humanity to converse about the divine, "since through this imagery we proceed from the known to the lesser known or unknown, making it an excellent way to talk about God." (Leland Ryken et al., eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2000), s.v. God.)

<sup>33</sup> For example, James Barr and others have shown the errors in the common German approach which sought to organize words and texts around "fundamental ideas" as in Dalman and exemplified most greatly in Kittel.

gone on unchecked. A fresh analysis of his argument reveals that it is too weak to support the weight that has been placed upon it.

#### 4. Contrary Evidence in Matthew

But what about the Gospel of Matthew? Is this not the missing link that corresponds to the rabbinic materials on the practice in question? We can now turn to the final stage of my argument: There is contrary evidence in Matthew that argues against the traditional reverential circumlocution interpretation of heaven in the first Gospel.

Although the assumption of reverential circumlocution is so widespread that it functions as a consensus in Matthean studies, a close reading of Matthean scholars reveals that on occasion, a minor note of disagreement has been sounded. E. Schweizer, Morris, Carson, Gundry, Marcus and McNeile each tip their hats to the circumlocution explanation, but go on to suggest that there may be some *additional* factor at work in Matthew. Schweizer suggests that Matthew uses the ambiguous term heaven in KOH so that both God the Father and Christ can be understood as king without conflict.<sup>34</sup> Morris vacillates somewhat on his explanation, but at one point states that the heaven in KOH is intended to communicate a kingdom that extends beyond the earthly realm.<sup>35</sup> D. A. Carson contains both of these suggestions,<sup>36</sup> while McNeile remarks that the use of heaven emphasizes a contrast between heaven and earth.<sup>37</sup> In an article on 16:18-19, Joel Marcus makes a passing comment about circumlocution while discussing the meaning of KOH.<sup>38</sup> He argues that circumlocution is probably only a “partial truth” because, according to 6:10, the KOH “is the projection of God’s heavenly rule into the earthly sphere.”<sup>39</sup> Among those in this group, Gundry offers the strongest challenge and states, “the Jewish practice only gave Matthew a means of stressing another of his favorite motifs, the majesty of God’s universal dominion.”<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, each of these commentators still maintains that circumlocution is at least part of the explanation for Matthew’s usage.

More strongly than these writers, a few scholars writing on Matthew have decidedly disagreed with the reverential circumlocution idea. David Garland, in his “literary and theological commentary,” states that KOH is not a pious aversion, but is used to refer to “God’s transcendent work and lordship that is coming down from heaven,” though he offers no argumentation for this rejection.<sup>41</sup> In an article arguing for Matthew as a Gentile author, Kenneth Clark also rejected the circumlocution explanation. His reasoning was that Matthew did often use the term θεός (including in his four occurrences of KOG) and that evidence from other Jewish writers such as Paul and Mark shows that using θεός apparently did not violate the aversion to speaking the name of Yahweh.<sup>42</sup> Very recently, Robert Foster made similar arguments in rejecting circumlocution as the background of KOH.<sup>43</sup> Most clearly

<sup>34</sup> E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (trans. D. Green; London: SPCK, 1976), 47.

<sup>35</sup> Morris, *Matthew*, 53.

<sup>36</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, s.v. 3:2.

<sup>37</sup> A. H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: MacMillan, 1915), xxiii.

<sup>38</sup> Joel Marcus, “The Gates of Hades and the Keys of the Kingdom (Matt 16:18-19)” *CBQ* 50 (1998): 443-455.

<sup>39</sup> Marcus, “The Gates of Hades,” 447.

<sup>40</sup> Gundry, *Matthew*, 43. Notice also the connection with the use of heaven language in Daniel.

<sup>41</sup> D. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 47.

<sup>42</sup> Kenneth W. Clark, “The Gentile Bias in Matthew” *JBL* 66 (1947), 169. Davies and Allison, 1:21, dispute Clark’s arguments but not convincingly. Their opposition to Clark stems from his insistence on Gentile authorship, which Davies and Allison (rightly) reject. However, a rejection or revision of the circumlocution argument in no way necessitates rejection of the Jewish flavoring, provenance or authorship of Matthew, especially if there is no strong evidence for reverential circumlocution as a Jewish practice in the time of Jesus.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Foster, “Why on Earth Use ‘Kingdom of Heaven’?: Matthew’s Terminology Revisited” *NTS* 48 (2002), 488.

argued is Robert Guelich who observes that Matthew “does not exhibit any predilection for avoiding the divine name” but that heaven “has a much broader function in his Gospel than simply as a metonym for God . . . [it refers to] God’s realm where, enthroned, he rules over all the world.”<sup>44</sup>

The uncertainty of Dalman’s argument combined with the observations of these last two groups of scholars puts us well on our way toward a rejection of the reverential circumlocution argument in Matthew. I would add to these arguments a few observations of my own. As we observed, often the circumlocution argument in Matthew stems from the recognition that Matthew’s KOH corresponds to the other evangelists’ KOG. While I agree that these terms correspond and have the same referent, the implication is that Matthew must have not wanted to use θεός, thus following the supposed Jewish custom. However, as has been observed by others, Matthew shows no such aversion but in fact uses θεός 51 times, even more often than KOH. As McNeile observes, it doesn’t make much sense to say Matthew systematically avoided θεός in the KOH instances out of a scrupulous aversion to the name of God, but failed to do so in scores of other parallels where the Mark or Luke have “God.”<sup>45</sup> There must be something going on other than reverential circumlocution.

Finally, and most importantly, there is simply a better solution with more explanatory power than reverential circumlocution: Matthew’s frequent use of heaven is part of the rubric of heaven and earth which is woven richly throughout his Gospel account. I do not have time to develop this idea here, but suffice it to say that this heaven and earth theme in Matthew is manifested by the frequent recurrence of this word-pair, the predominance of the uniquely Matthean KOH, and the repeated reference to the Father in heaven.<sup>46</sup> Rather than dismissing heaven in Matthew as a reverential circumlocution, we need to understand its great literary and theological significance in the first Gospel. It does not stand alone but must be interpreted in light of the whole narrative of Matthew.

## Conclusion

To sum up the argument, the widespread reliance on Dalman to explain heaven in Matthew is an unfortunate mistake. This simplistic solution has in fact blinded our ability to see the much more elaborate scheme at work in Matthew’s use of οὐρανός. While some scholars have suggested the insufficiency of this explanation, the note has not been sounded loudly enough to call into question the widespread assumption. The history of the reverential circumlocution idea is an example of an unsubstantiated suggestion becoming an unquestioned assumption through the magic of publication, repetition, and elapsed time. Our return *ad fontes* reveals the deficiency of Dalman’s original argument which has become a supposition for most Matthean scholars.

The way out of this self-inflicted conundrum is to attend anew to careful definitions of the terms in question. Circumlocution and periphrasis should not be limited to the narrower definition of *reverential* circumlocution that has come to dominate. This narrowing of the definition, or maybe better, this conflation of two different ideas – a roundabout way of saying something and avoidance of the divine name – has served to eliminate the possibility of clear thinking on the matter. It is possible that the literary/rhetorical practice of circumlocution can be used with no motive of avoidance of the divine name, but instead for other reasons: style, variety, literary allusions, word-play, or theological purpose. There is no doubt that Matthew usually uses heaven to mean “God.” This is circumlocution in the general sense, or maybe better, we should say, metonymy.

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<sup>44</sup> Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Dallas: Word, 1982), 77.

<sup>45</sup> McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, xxiii.

<sup>46</sup> This is the main thesis of my Ph.D. work in progress. I can do nothing but assert this thesis at this point due to the limited scope of this paper.

In light of the weakness of the historical basis and a more convincing explanation at hand, it is time that we circumvent the assumption of reverential circumlocution for the use of heaven in Matthean studies.