

# Heaven Outside the Church Walls: Depicting Heaven in Popular Culture through Contemporary Christian Album Covers

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This essay originates from my thesis, in which I surveyed art from the early Middle Ages to the present in an attempt to understand how people in different periods depicted heaven in popular art. Examining different renderings of heaven throughout history, I found that heaven continues to be a popular theme in today's culture. Christian visual arts have grown with the world around them, forming crossroads with popular culture, particularly through music. The musical celebration of heaven has been around for several millennia. When combined with the visual arts, music can engage the heart, connecting with people in an instant.<sup>1</sup> Utilizing multiple human senses, these art forms create a liminal space. Together, they form an all-encompassing, transcending experience that helps people engage with heaven.<sup>2</sup> Historically, people interacted with Christian art and music within the walls of a church. While this tradition has most certainly continued and will remain a key part of worship, the art form has also expanded beyond the Church. As circumstances and desires have changed in the contemporary age, the way music and art interacts in Christian settings has as well. Technology has created opportunities that were not previously possible, allowing people to connect to music from across the globe. People no longer need to go to a physical church to hear Christian music; they can now stream it practically anywhere, anytime.

Although an in-depth discussion of the music itself is beyond the scope of this study, the art associated with it is not. For many

musicians, artistic expression is not limited to music. They use their skills and creativity to design a full experience, combining music with visuals, letting one enhance the other. It is a contemporary continuation of physical church buildings and the art within them. Christian album covers are a particularly worthwhile example. Music's globalization allows us to make insightful observations on contemporary views of heaven as translated through popular visual art. This art is meant to be consumed by as many people as possible. So, as general art preferences change, artists take advantage of the varying modern styles to emphasize heaven. To illustrate this, I have made a selection of seven album covers that range in modern artistic styles. In addition to looking visually appealing to contemporary audiences, they also draw on heavenly iconography that has been developing since the early Middle Ages.

To start my inquiry, I looked for songs and albums that were about heaven. While it could be argued that all worship songs point to heaven, I looked for songs that explicitly addressed aspects of heaven in their lyrics. From here, I examined the cover art of their albums, looking for the visual connection to heaven. I chose several album covers that range in artistic style, each one using their specific style to draw out relevant meanings and feelings for the viewer. In an effort to be as recent as possible, all of the chosen albums came out between 2018 and 2023. I curated music from a range of genres within the umbrella category of Christian music, including contemporary worship, indie-folk, hip-hop, and narrative pop. These varying styles incorporate the views of a larger audience. This selection provides a framework to understand current Christian beliefs about heaven through popular visual art.

The first cover was created by the designer Jacob Boyles for the album *Here Comes Heaven* by the musical group, Elevation Worship (Fig. 1). Elevation Worship's musical style is consistent with a contemporary church setting.<sup>3</sup> Their reference to this setting can be seen in the album cover through the use of traditional Christian iconography and material. The album cover is made with physical paper and embossed with gold, a traditional material that reflects both physical light and the metaphysical light of heaven. Looking at the bottom of the album, we can see stones stacked to form the foundation of a building, referring to Ephesians 2:20 which states the church is the foundation of Christianity, with Christ as its

cornerstone. At the same time, the stones could also refer to an altar, symbolizing Christ's sacrifice for the salvation of humankind, which allowed Christian's entry into heaven.<sup>4</sup> Both interpretations place the bottom half of the cover in the earthly realm. The horizontal line above the stones makes this separation firm, defining the idea that Earth was separated from heaven after the fall of humanity. These stones are referenced again in the nimbus encircling the throne centered right above the foundation. This imagery helps the viewer connect the symbolism to Christ. With this in mind it is easier to understand that to the left, a shield and flame surrounded by doves represent the Holy Spirit. Then, on the right, a crown with eyes around it suggests God and his omnipresence. All three together form the Trinity, a symbol that has been a part of Christian iconography since the early Middle Ages. An example of symbols representing each figure in the Trinity is seen in a vessel from the Canoscio Treasure (Fig. 2).

Both the vessel and the album cover arrange the symbols in a triangle with Christ centered at the bottom. This arrangement emphasizes Christ's role on Earth by depicting him dipping down into the Church. These representations illustrate the transition to heaven, showing Christ's role as the mediator, connecting heaven and earth. At the top center, a doorway with stairs leads upward. It is enveloped with elaborate framing, turning a simple arch into an ornate gateway surrounded by angels. Churches have framed their entrances with angels for centuries in an effort to pronounce their role of guiding people to heaven. This is seen on an archivolt of Notre Dame de Paris where angels are depicted in an arch worshipping Christ enthroned in heaven (Fig. 3). As a gateway, it marks the entrance into heaven where time is infinite, and God is the beginning and end as stated in Revelation 21:6. Boyles demonstrates this connection through the two niches in the top corners that hold the sun and moon, and the infinite sky below them.<sup>5</sup>

The cover weaves together the narrative of the New Testament from the Gospels to the Book of Revelation. The even-weighted lines throughout the cover demonstrate that all parts are equally important. However, this consistency makes the large section of gold in the doorway stand out. It is bold and draws the eye by acting as a visual anchor for the rest of the piece, showing that while every element is significant, the main focus is meant to be on heaven. The

cover draws from the iconographic canon of traditional religious art established in the early Medieval period, placing itself within the long history of the Church. The art is a continuation of the traditional idea that through the Church people can understand the key to salvation.<sup>6</sup> From the sun and moon to the symbols of the Trinity, the cover modernizes Christian iconography to appeal to a contemporary audience.

Another cover that uses traditional imagery is from the album *There is More (Live)* by Hillsong Worship (Fig. 4). Wanting to visually engage their audience, the band includes imagery that nearly all Christians can identify, like the cross and crown of thorns. Yet they also include depictions that many people may not understand, like the peacock. Through creating a dichotomy of known and unknown, the band intrigues the viewers, enticing them to learn more. On their website, Hillsong Worship includes a breakdown of every single image, explaining its symbolism, where it comes from, and its relevance to the album as a whole.<sup>7</sup> The cover's complexity is meant to invite the viewer in, making them wonder what the piece is about, which both Hillsong Worship's music and website resources can answer. Each of the images has its own connection to heaven but when put together in an elaborate collage, they create levels of symbolism. Reflecting on symbolic interactions has been a devotion that Christian art has been a part of for centuries. For example, if we look at the apse mosaic in San Clemente, we see similar symbols (Fig. 5). Both utilize plants and birds to emulate paradise and ultimately center Christ. Each has a cross in the center to emphasize Christ's crucial role in paradise. The details in both pieces allow people to weave together different narratives and come back to them repeatedly, each time focusing on a different detail or interaction.

The peacock, a symbol of immortality, holds a chalice of blood, indicating how people can achieve immortality through the blood of Christ. Surrounding it are many flowers, plants, and water, which point to new life and paradise. At the very bottom of the cover, a Bible lays opened to provide direction for Christians. It opens into a stairway, and at the bottom of the stairs, Jacob is wrestling with God, a Biblical reference that represents the Christian struggle. Jacob is at the top of the stairs, symbolizing the beginning of the Christian journey. Ultimately, if he continues on his path, his struggles will lead to heaven. They will lead upward into the heart of

Christ, which visually holds the city of New Jerusalem. The image creates a timeline starting from the Bible, which leads to spiritual wrestling, and finally culminates in heaven at the top of the album. This train of thought demonstrates the popular idea of consolation theology, that the struggles of today will guide one's heart to God and a better life in heaven.<sup>8</sup> Through the use of traditional Christian iconography in the modern format of collage, the cover illustrates to both traditionalists and innovators the hope that “there is more” beyond this earth.

Not all Christian album covers fit the mold of church tradition. Others are influenced by the ever-evolving art world. For example, Jonathan Ogden's album cover for *Future Forever* (Fig. 6) is stylistically based on minimalist and pop art. He uses simplistic shapes and rich colors, creating a striking contrast to capture attention. Though the image is obvious with its bright and graphic colors, its symbolic meaning is less apparent. The more modern style, which makes the album more visually exciting, also makes it harder to understand. The cover is a niche reference to Revelation 4:3, which states that an emerald-like rainbow surrounds God's throne. Although not well known today, the image has been used in the past. *Christ and the Last Judgement* in the Florence Baptistery depicts Christ on the arc of heaven, which is striped and arched like a rainbow (Fig. 7). Other artists have illustrated this verse by emphasizing the vibrant emerald color as seen in the mandorla in *The Getty Apocolypse* (Fig. 8). Ogden does not expect his audience to know such a specific reference, so he personally talks through the meaning of the album cover in an engaging short video format on social media. Through dramatic sound effects and quick-changing visuals, he appeals to a younger audience, reaching a demographic that might not find the traditional worship style of the previous artists attractive. He explains that the rainbow demonstrates the mercy of God, which extends back to the covenant made with Noah.<sup>9</sup> Noah was given the rainbow as a sign that God would not destroy the Earth by flood; instead, he would be merciful.

Ogden purposefully uses the sense of mystery that his album cover creates in the hope that people will pause to question what it depicts and how it relates to the deeper meaning of his album. Before becoming a full-time musician, Ogden was a graphic designer. His background comes through in his desire to enhance his music

visually.<sup>10</sup> Ogden sees the cover as a work of art and even signs it in the top right-hand corner to indicate that. He uses the mystery of modern symbolism to enhance the enigma that is heaven. He embraces the unknown rather than fixating on figuring out the answers. This lack of narrative helps the viewer reflect and connect the stories of the Old and New Testaments for themselves. With the help of his music, his audience is naturally led to meditate on the mysteries of heaven.

Personal contemplation tends to be the goal for many of these artists, and they use different modern styles to achieve it. The cover art for *Eternal Light* by Paul Zach and Liz Vice is an entirely abstract work, capturing the essence of light (Fig. 9). The cover is an acrylic painting by Audrey Sayer, titled *Without End or Beginning*. With its roots clearly in abstract expressionism and color field painting, Sayer uses modern techniques to convey heaven in the modern age.<sup>11</sup> By focusing on the association of colors, she evokes feelings of comfort and recognition for something that technically has no visual reference. Through abstraction, she shows the nature of heaven without needing to be specific. This demonstrates the contemporary trend to focus on the emotional connection and excitement surrounding heaven, rather than depicting exact scenes.

The predominant color of the work is yellow, but there is an array of other colors. The bottom layers are cool-toned greens, grays, and browns. They represent the colors of the Earth, grounding the cover. These colors are more prominent in the lower portion, which helps the viewer visualize the land being bathed in the light from above, symbolically representing the light of heaven shining over the Earth (Isaiah 60:19). This light is shown through the many layers of pastel yellow, orange, and pink painted on top of the earth tones. Their shades become paler further up the painting, thus indicating the direction the light is coming from. Medieval artists used the same technique in manuscripts. In Giovanni di Paolo's *Paradiso 18 Cielo del Sole*, the artist paints rays of golden light to show the viewer where heaven is (Fig. 10). Viewers naturally connect these bright tones with feelings of warmth. The audience is meant to associate that warmth with eternal light and life. Abstract expressionism provides an artistic model for the emotional connections to heaven.

The charm of pure emotion is not the only way musicians connect to heaven. The album cover, *Forever* by The Gray Havens,

appeals to the scientific understanding of the universe (Fig. 11). The goal of the cover is to show that science is not inherently opposed to Christianity; rather, it can be used to point to the qualities of God and heaven. For centuries, people believed that God literally dwelled in the cosmos, and today the cosmos is still used as a metaphor for heaven. The cover of *Forever* demonstrates this connection, as it is almost entirely black and covered with stars. In the center, there is a galaxy twisted into an infinity symbol. When paired with the title “Forever,” the cover points to the infinite nature of the universe and, consequently, the infinite nature of the God who created it. Other artists, like Oresme, also demonstrate their scientific understanding of the cosmos in religious art (Fig. 12). During the time Oresme painted, people believed the cosmos consisted of nine spheres and that God resided in the one furthest away from Earth. Beyond purely scientific avenues, artists also used the stars to instill a sense of wonder in the viewer. When a viewer looks up into the ceiling of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, they are confronted with hundreds of stars with a floating cross in the middle. All else fades away creating a transcendent moment (Fig. 13). This iconography references 2 Peter 3:8, which relates that a thousand days is like one day and one day is like a thousand days in heaven. Essentially, the verse suggests that even time in heaven is incomprehensible. The universe is always expanding, which means one could explore it forever and never reach the end. One would constantly be learning new things, which is why the cosmos provides a perfect metaphor for the unending spiritual revelations in heaven. The Gray Havens’ goal is to make this connection clear through their music as a potential starting point for people’s questioning and understanding of heaven.<sup>12</sup> Even the name they chose for their group emphasizes their goal. The Gray Havens is based on the Grey Havens, an ocean port in J.R.R. Tolkien’s book series, *The Lord of the Rings*, that allowed elves to go to the Undying Lands, a metaphorical destination symbolizing the afterlife.<sup>13</sup> By connecting art to science and literature, the band provides a frame of reference for others to understand heaven. They use metaphors beyond strict Christian iconography in an attempt to better resonate with their audience. They want their music to be the starting point of something more.

All of these covers help Christians further explore heaven, so much of the iconography is similar. Another album titled *No Longer*

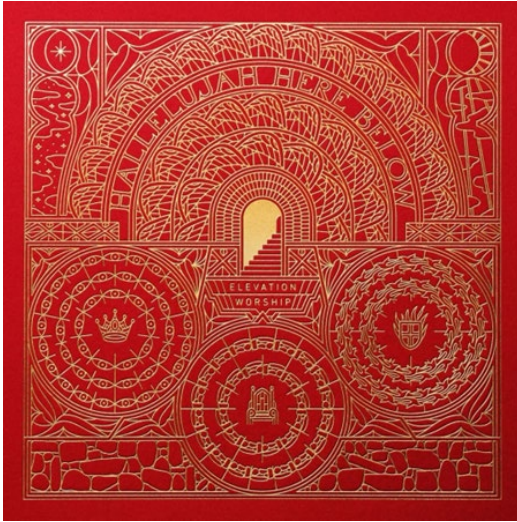
*Bound*, by Forrest Frank and Hulvey, uses sky imagery to represent heaven (Fig. 14). Their cover includes an open Bible, making the contents of their songs obvious. *Christ Pantocrator* is an early example of similar iconography (Fig. 15). It, comparably, uses an extensive sky to represent paradise. Christ is at the bottom center, holding an open biblical text, indicating how one is going to enter into the heavenly sky. The Bible on the album cover is being flipped open, similar to the Bible in the *Mérode Altarpiece* (Fig. 16). The text comes alive through the Spirit. The open pages show that the Word is God. By formatting the cover as a simple collage, the artists create high contrast and drama. The cover's bold design shows the intensity of the message. Even though it seems deceptively simple it shows that, for Christians today, the key to heaven is found in the Bible. The cover focuses on the more individual-based heaven that became prominent through Protestantism, indicating that people should read the Bible for themselves and come to their own understanding.<sup>14</sup> Although there is a filter over the image, it is still possible to see that the Bible is opened to Psalms 23, of which the last verse reads, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." The house of the Lord is in heaven, and with the title on the cover being, "No Longer Bound," the creators make the statement that they are not bound to sin nor to the Earth. Their understanding of heaven is based on their more concrete understanding of the world. Instead of emphasizing what heaven is, they confirm what they know heaven is not. They know there is no sin in heaven and use that to better conceptualize it.

For Christians, the negative experiences of the world create a longing for the comforts of heaven. This longing is explored in *Home Called Heaven* by LOVKN (Fig. 17). Here the theme of sky imagery repeats, pointing to heaven (Fig. 15.) Unlike previous covers, he uses a photograph as his album cover. In the scheme of art history, photography is a relatively new medium. This alone brings the artist's idea of heaven into the modern age. Taken at sunset, the photograph has a bright and colorful background, and LOVKN is in silhouette. He holds a mirror, reflecting and capturing the light of the sky. The silhouette effect obscures his figure, and makes him relatively small in the work as compared to the expansive sky. This style shows that while the album is his work, he is not the focus; the focus is heaven. The mirror covers most of his body, filling him up, literally and



metaphorically. As the title suggests, heaven is his home, and with the help of the mirror, he is able to take hold of it. He looks down into the mirror, seeking comfort in the hope it holds. The mirror is most likely a reference to 1 Corinthians 13:12, which states, “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” Through the mirror, he is able to grasp heaven, but he is ultimately still waiting for the joys of eternity. Even the title, which is written on the album, points to the idea of heaven being comforting.<sup>15</sup> A home has the connotation of belonging and peace, and he wants to show this sense of belonging through the album.<sup>16</sup>

These album covers demonstrate artists’ ability to use traditional iconography of heaven in innovative ways. By creating artistic album covers connected to their music, they create an immersive experience by engaging both the viewer's sense of hearing and sight. Each artist chose specific symbols within the wide range of iconographic canon that fit into the message of their songs. They demonstrate that the iconography of heaven is still alive today. Additionally, these albums illustrate that while the methodology of depicting symbols has changed, the messages remain the same. By making album covers using modern styles and techniques, artists can connect to a wider audience. As a form of popular art meant to be consumed, it benefits them to stay within the artistic contexts that most people find visually appealing. Culturally relevant art makes their song and message more pertinent. If these albums are understood as a collective, they demonstrate the Christian community’s overarching beliefs about heaven. Together, they depict the Christian desire for the ultimate comfort that can only be found in heaven and demonstrate the current view that heaven is inherently linked to the Earth and can be best understood through the human experience.



(Figure 1) Here Comes Heaven, *Elevation Worship*, 2018



(Figure 2) Vessel from Canoscio Treasure, engraved silver, 6th century



*(Figure 3) Archivolt, Notre Dame de Paris, Stone, 13th Century*



*(Figure 4) There Is More (Live), Hillsong Worship, 2018*



*(Figure 5) Apse, San Clemente, Mosaic, Rome, 12th century*



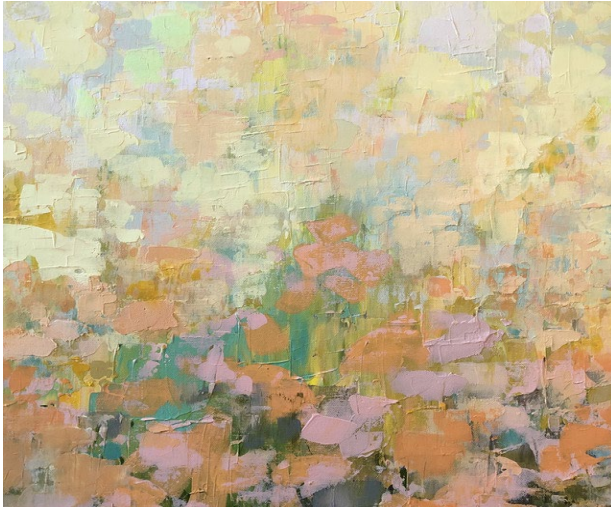
*(Figure 6) Future Forever, Jonathan Ogden, 2022*



(Figure 7) Left: Christ and the Last Judgement, *The Florence Baptistery*, Mosaic, 1225-1330



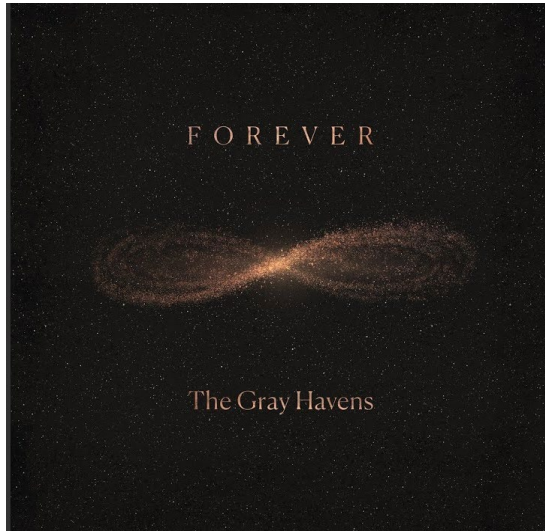
(Figure 8) Right: The Vision of the Throne of God and the Twenty-Four Elders from *The Getty Apocalypse*, *The J. Paul Getty Museum Ms. Ludwig III 1*, fol. 3v, ca. 1255



(Figure 9) *Eternal Light*- Paul Zach & Liz Vice, 2021



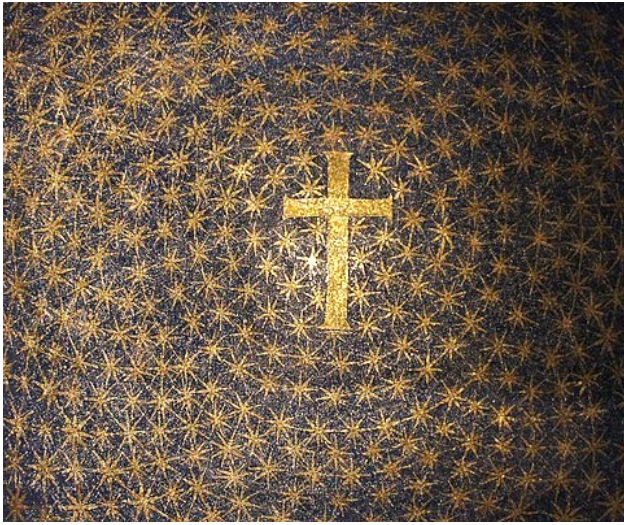
(Figure 10) *Giovanni di Paolo, Paradiso 18 Cielo del Sole, Manuscript, 1440s*



(Figure 11) Forever, *The Gray Havens*, 2018



(Figure 12) Left: Page from Oresme's *Livre du Ciel et du Monde*, *Tempera*, 1377



*(Figure 13) Right: Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ceiling Mosaic, 425-450*



*(Figure 14) No Longer Bound, Forrest Frank & Hulvey, 2023*





(Figure 15) Christ Pantocrator, *Church of Santa Pudenziana, Rome, Mosaic, 410-417*



(Figure 16) Robert Campin, *Mérode Altarpiece, Oil on Panel, 1427-28*



*(Figure 17) Home Called Heaven, LOVKN, 2018*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art*, 125.

<sup>2</sup> McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*, 167.

<sup>3</sup> Elevation Worship creates their music with the intention of churches using them during their services. On their website they include the lyrics, chords, and even video tutorials for several instruments. From “Here Comes Heaven.”

<sup>4</sup> “Behind the Album Artwork.”

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*, 104.

<sup>7</sup> “There Is More Album Artwork.”

<sup>8</sup> McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*, 140.

<sup>9</sup> “Fun Facts About the Cover Art!”

<sup>10</sup> Ogden, “Bio.”

<sup>11</sup> Sayer, “About Audrey.”

<sup>12</sup> “Forever.”

<sup>13</sup> David Radford, “The Gray Havens.”

<sup>14</sup> McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*, 107.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>16</sup> LOVKN, *Songs & Stories*.

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