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"Consider the word and understand the vision." (Dan. 9:23)

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INTERNATIONAL JEWISH-CHRISTIAN BIBLE WEEK

HEAVENLY ASCENT IN SECOND TEMPLE LITERATURE AND BEYOND

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In Daniel chapter 7, Daniel has a vision of 'one like a son of man' being presented to the Ancient of Days, who is sitting upon a fiery throne surrounded by thousands of attendants. The imagery has deep roots, going back to Canaanite mythology.[1] However, I'm not proposing to look backwards from Daniel, but forwards, viewing chapter 7 as one of the earliest examples of what scholars term 'heavenly ascent'. I will be exploring texts from the late centuries BCE and early centuries CE, and discussing how the notion of 'heavenly ascent' fed, in different ways, into later Jewish and Christian mystical traditions.

On the accompanying handout are extracts from relevant texts. I won't be able to examine them in any detail, but I felt it important that you saw something of the texts themselves, and we may be able to discuss them further in the later session.

The earliest heavenly ascent text is usually taken to be *1 Enoch* chapter 14 – the first extract on your handout. *1 Enoch* is a long composite work of 108 chapters, made up of separate books originating from different periods. Chapter 14 falls within the Book of the Watchers (chapters 1 – 36), dated to the late third century or early second century BCE (i.e. pre-Maccabean). Fragments of the Book of the Watchers in Aramaic, including some of chapter 14, were found at Qumran; and most scholars think that Aramaic, rather than Hebrew, was its original language. Complete copies of the Book of the Watchers have been preserved in Greek and Ethiopic. Elaborating upon an enigmatic story in Genesis (6:1-4), it tells of fallen angels, named 'Watchers', who come to earth, have sexual intercourse with human women, and pass on illicit knowledge to humankind. They ask Enoch, of whom Genesis says, he 'walked with God; and he was not, for God took him' (Gen. 5:24), to intercede for them.[2] Enoch then dreams of being whirled up to heaven, where he passes through a threefold structure – an outer wall, and a 'house' within a 'house' – to behold the 'Great Glory' sitting upon a crystalline throne. There are precise details shared with Daniel's picture of the Ancient of Days, including the wheels on the throne, taken from Ezekiel's chariot vision; the streams of fire issuing from beneath the throne; the divine garment white as snow; and the ten thousand times ten thousand attendants. Although Daniel ended up in the Bible, and the Book of the Watchers did not, the consensus is that *1 Enoch* 14 is earlier than Daniel 7, although there is debate over whether Daniel draws from *1 Enoch* itself, or from a common source.

The vision of *1 Enoch* 14 marks a crucial turning point in Jewish literature, as unlike the biblical prophets, who receive divine words or visions on earth, Enoch ascends to heaven. It thus represents 'an important transition from the older Ezekiel tradition of the prophetic call to the much

1 See J. A. Emerton, 'The Origin of the Son of Man Imagery', *Journal of Theological Studies,* 9 (1958), 225-242.
2 *1 En.* 13:3- 6.

later tradition of Jewish Merkabah mysticism'.[3] The Book of the Watchers sets the tone for subsequent writings involving heavenly ascent, including *2 Enoch*, *Testament of Levi* and *Ascension of Isaiah*, which feature on the handout, and others such as Revelation, Parables of Enoch (*1 Enoch* 37 – 71), *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, and *3 Baruch*. Many are labelled apocalypses, because they uncover secrets – not, in their case, about the end of the world, but about celestial realities.

One of the problems of studying this material is that the surviving manuscripts often date from centuries after the proposed date of composition. And they are usually translations, or even translations of translations. *2 Enoch*, for example, was until recently only found in Slavonic manuscripts dating from the fourteenth century onwards, although some Coptic fragments, from the eighth to tenth centuries, have now been discovered. These are all translations from the Greek, but Semitisms in the text perhaps indicate that the original source was in Hebrew or Aramaic. There is one Greek fragment of *Ascension of Isaiah*; but the most complete surviving translation is in Ethiopic. There are also two Latin translations, a Slavonic version, fragments in two Coptic dialects, and a medieval Greek recasting.

Another challenge is deciding what is 'Jewish' and what is 'Christian'. Older scholarship tended to assume that these were Jewish works which had been preserved and copied in Christian monastic settings, where the scribes made some additions. Remove the Christian interpolations, and the Jewish original would be revealed. Now it is recognised that matters are not simple, and the context in which a text was preserved is taken more seriously. The result is that many are viewed as Christian compositions inspired by Jewish traditions. A more radical proposal is that our categories of 'Jewish' and 'Christian' do not fit this material, and more nuanced historical reconstructions of identity are required. *2 Enoch* displays neither the interest in *halakhah* that might be expected of a 'Jewish' work, nor the focus on Christ that might be expected of a 'Christian' one. God's chosen agent is Enoch, not Abraham, Moses or Jesus. It has also been suggested that texts such as Revelation, *Ascension of Isaiah*, and *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* might be 'the work of *continuous* communities of halakhically-observant Jewish groups – perhaps of a sectarian nature – that incorporated Jesus into their cosmologies and liturgies while retaining an essentially Jewish, or even *priestly*, self-definition'.[4] *Testament of Levi,* like the rest of *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs,* was written in Greek in Christian circles, probably during the second half of the second century CE. However, fragments of an Aramaic work dealing with Levi were found in the Cairo Genizah and at Qumran. This *Aramaic Levi Document* dates to the third or early second century BCE. *Testament of Levi* clearly made use of a document resembling the *Aramaic Levi Document,* although, as 5.2 (the last verse on the handout) demonstrates, the reworking introduced references to the coming of Jesus Christ.

A third locus of scholarly debate is the nature of these texts – do they in some way reflect the 'actual visionary activity or analogous religious experience' of the individuals or communities that produced them, or are they 'literary documents' – acts of imagination in which the author manipulates conventions?[5] It is a question to which I will return.

First, let us look at the broad features of heavenly ascent texts. They usually involve a figure from the far biblical past being granted a glimpse of the heavenly throne room, and then given a revelation addressed to the earthly community. The heaven described is a strange place. In *1 Enoch* 14,

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3 George W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch, Chapters 1 – 36; 81-108* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 259.

4 David Frankfurter, 'Beyond "Jewish Christianity": Continuing Religious Sub-Cultures of the Second and Third Centuries and Their Documents', in Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 134-5.

5 Michael E. Stone, 'A Reconsideration of Apocalyptic Visions', *Harvard Theological Review* 96: 2 (2003), 167; Himmelfarb, Martha, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 97-8.

the outer wall is built of hailstones surrounded by tongues of fire. The second house is 'greater than the former one', and yet appears to be contained within it.[6] 'Heaven is a totally paradoxical, topsy-turvy world where the terrestrial laws of nature do not apply.'[7] Sometimes, as in Daniel, the ascent happens in a dream or vision. *2 Enoch*, however, reports that Enoch was woken from his sleep and taken bodily into heaven by two huge men with eyes like burning lamps and golden wings.[8] They carry him up through six heavens showing him sights both cosmological and angelic, and imparting calendrical information. At the edge of the seventh heaven, they withdraw, and the archangels Gabriel and Michael bring him 'in front of the face of the LORD'.[9] Philip Alexander argues,

> Bodily ascent to the alien environment of heaven has huge theological implications, and demands the transformation of flesh and blood into a more spiritual substance. The material body in its present terrestrial form cannot endure the fiery celestial regions.[10]

At the command of God, therefore, Enoch is anointed and reclothed, becoming transformed, 'like one of the glorious ones'.[11] This theme of distinctive celestial clothing is common, a metaphor for the absence of flesh and blood in heaven; and the clothing imagery starts with God. The garment of the Great Glory in *1 Enoch* 14:20 is not only white, but luminous, shining more brightly than the sun. Thus, it overwhelms human vision, ensuring that the divine cannot be seen. The white and luminous clothing of other heavenly figures – angels, the righteous dead, ascending heroes – is a second-hand likeness of this divine glory. In *Ascension of Isaiah,* Isaiah's transformation seems to take place gradually: 'the glory of my face was being transformed as I went up from heaven to heaven'.[12] When he arrives at the seventh heaven, a voice asks, 'How far is he who dwells among aliens to go up?'; but another voice, that of Christ, answers, 'The holy Isaiah is permitted to come up here, for his robe is here.'[13]

When Enoch ascends to heaven in the Book of the Watchers, the threefold structure through which he passes corresponds to the ground plan of the tabernacle. The ceiling of the first house is 'like shooting stars and lightning flashes', among which are 'fiery cherubim', just as cherubim decorate the walls of the tabernacle, Solomon's temple, and Ezekiel's vision of the rebuilt temple.[14] Inside the second house, the Great Glory sits upon a throne guarded by cherubim, equivalent to the cherubim over the ark in the holy of holies. This picture of heaven as a temple cum palace, with the divine chariot-throne (the *merkavah*) at its centre, continues, even as more features are added (such as a multilevel schema). It was no doubt informed by Moses' vision on Mount Sinai of the 'pattern' of the tabernacle (Ex. 25:8), taken to be the heavenly divine dwelling, of which the earthly tabernacle was assumed to be a copy. The angelic attendants are therefore celestial priests. It has been suggested that first disillusionment with the Jerusalem temple, and then its destruction, may have fuelled this turn to its heavenly archetype.[15]

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6 *1 En.* 14:15.

7 Philip S. Alexander, 'The Dualism of Heaven and Earth in Early Jewish Literature and its Implications', in Armin Lange, Eric M. Meyers, Bennie H. Reynolds and Randall Styers (eds), *Light against Darkness: Dualism in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and the Contemporary World* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 173.

8 *2 En.* 1:4-8.

9 *2 En.* 22:6. In some manuscripts there are ten heavens.

10 Philip Alexander, *The Mystical Texts: Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and Related Manuscripts* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 77.

11 *2 En.* 22:10.

12 *Ascen. Isa*. 7:25.

13 *Ascen. Isa*. 9:1-2.

14 *1 En.* 14:11. Cf. Exod. 26:1; 1 Kgs 6:29; Ezek. 41:20.

15 Himmelfarb sees in *1 Enoch* only mild criticism of the Jerusalem priesthood, with much stronger condemnation reflected in *Testament of Levi* and *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*: Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 22. Schäfer, by contrast, understands Enoch's heavenly temple 'as a devastating critique of the Temple in Jerusalem', since Enoch's vision could imply that the holy of holies in the earthly temple is empty, God having withdrawn himself to his temple in heaven: Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 66.

Needless to say, there is no animal sacrifice in heaven.[16] Revelation mentions heavenly offerings of incense (5:8, 8:3-4), which represent the prayers of the saints. Similarly, in *Testament of Levi*, 'the angels of the presence of the Lord ... minister and make propitiation to the Lord for all the sins of ignorance of the righteous, and they offer to the Lord a pleasant odour, a reasonable and bloodless offering'.[17] This offering of sweet scent is not made for the sake of the angels, but because of human sin and need. More typically, the bloodless offering made by angelic priests is praise. Revelation gives the words sung, drawing on biblical precedents, notably the Qedushah / Sanctus of Isaiah 6:3, but adding new elements. In *2 Enoch*, there is singing in each of the heavens from the third heaven onwards. And the seventh heaven contains 'all the heavenly armies assembled, according to rank, advancing and doing obeisance to the Lord', along with 'all the army of cherubim around his throne, never departing, and the six-winged ones covering his throne, singing in front of the face of the Lord'.[18] The goal of the ascending hero is not so much to glimpse the divine throne as to participate in this heavenly worship. In *Ascension of Isaiah,* Isaiah observes the angelic praise in each of the seven heavens, and then in the seventh heaven joins the righteous dead in singing praises first to Christ, then the Holy Spirit, and finally the Great Glory, and each time the angels follow suite. Enoch's reclothing in *2 Enoch* can be understood as a priestly investiture, giving him angelic status, worthy to be in the presence of the divine throne. *Testament of Levi* is explicit about this: in a second ascent, Levi is met by 'seven men in white clothing' who anoint and wash him, and then dress him in priestly vestments.[19]

These heavenly ascent texts use vivid, sometimes paradoxical, imagery to represent a dimension beyond the ordinary material world. Language of ascending to heaven was widely used across Late Antique cultures: Jewish, Christian, and pagan. At a time when science and religion were not so rigidly separate, physical and spiritual heavens could be equated (nowadays, it is astronauts not mystics who travel beyond the earth's atmosphere!). I have included examples on the handout from two writers, one Jewish and one Christian, influenced by Platonic philosophy. Philo talks of the soul of the lover of God leaping from earth to heaven and winging its way on high. And Origen demonstrates that it was not difficult for the Platonic realm of Ideas to be equated with the notion of a heavenly temple. In both cases, earthly realities were conceived as copies of the heavenly models. And travelling to heaven involved becoming more like the divine, whether that was seen as shedding the body and ascending with the soul or mind (in Platonic anthropologies), or becoming reclothed in a glorious body (in apocalyptic heavenly ascent texts).

The way in which heavenly ascent imagery could be combined with Platonic philosophical resources was to prove key for the development of Christian mysticism. Bernard McGinn has written that the Jewish 'apocalypses and the philosophical-religious tradition begun by Plato were major components of the background of Christian mysticism'.[20] Fourth century writers converted the descriptions of heaven into metaphors for the inner life of faith. Alexander Golitzin has coined the phrase 'the interiorization of apocalyptic' for this process – 'the transposition of the cosmic setting of apocalyptic literature, and in particular of the "out of body" experience of heavenly ascent and transformation, to the inner theater of the Christian soul'.[21] He writes à propos of Evagrius (c. 345-399) and Pseudo-Macarius, key figures in the development of monastic spirituality,

> The ascent to heaven, the vision of the throne of the glory, the initiation into the mysteries of God's purposes: all of these now reside within the soul ... Purity of heart for both (Evagrius and Pseudo-Macarius) means the

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[16] The only text, Jewish or Christian, which refers to sacrificial blood in heaven is Hebrews 9:12: '(Christ) entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption'.

[17] *T. Levi* 3:5-6.

[18] *2 En.* 20:3, 21:1.

[19] *T. Levi* 8:2-10.

[20] Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 5.

[21] Alexander Golitzin, '"Earthly Angels and Heavenly Men": The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Niketas Stethatos, and the Tradition of "Interiorized Apocalyptic" in Eastern Christian Ascetical and Mystical Literature', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers,* 55 (2001), 141.

> cleansing of the inner (person), the temple within, in order to receive the glory of God, the substantial light of the Trinity, upon the altar of the human spirit or *nous*.[22]

The journey up to heaven thus became an inward journey.

When it comes to the development of Jewish mystical traditions, matters are somewhat different. Guy Stroumsa notes that, thanks to Platonism, 'Christian theologians – but not Jewish thinkers after Philo ... could claim the vision of God to be a spiritual vision, which had nothing to do with the vision of the corporal eyes'.[23] He argues that Jews retained archaic patterns of thought for much longer, so that it is hard 'to find a serious disengagement from anthropomorphic conceptions of God among Jews before Maimonides'.[24] Thus the tradition of vivid imagery depicting a transformational journey to glimpse the divine *merkavah* throne and join the angelic liturgy continued for much longer. I have given you two examples of Jewish texts that were not absorbed into Christianity. The first, from Second Temple times, is an extract from *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, which was unknown until its discovery at Qumran. The fragmentary manuscripts have been reconstructed into thirteen songs. The first songs focus on the liturgy of praise performed by angelic beings. From song 7 onwards, the emphasis shifts to the structure of the heavenly temple. Songs 9 to 12 spiral inwards from the outer vestibules of the temple to its central inner sanctuary, with song 12 invoking the manifestation of the divine glory upon the *merkavah*. There is, however, no description of this glory, only of the chariot as a structure of angels (or chariots – the use of singular and plural is inconsistent). Praise here seems to be by gesture – the raising and lowering of wings – rather than by word. Song 13 describes the sacrifices offered by the angelic high priests, along with their ritual garments, which seems to some scholars something of an anti-climax. It has been suggested that the liturgical poetry of *Sabbath Songs* aims to create a mystical experience of communion with the angels in their heavenly worship – in other words, a collective ascent. Carol Newsom writes,

> The hypnotic quality of the language and the vividness of the description of the celestial temple cause even the modern reader of these fragments to feel the power of the language to create a sense of the presence of the heavenly temple.[25]

The last three extracts on the handout are from the Hekhalot literature. That title refers to the palaces (*hekhalot*) through which the adept must journey, their doors guarded by fearsome angels. The process of ascent has become 'a highly perilous adventure'.[26] Entering each *hekhal* requires knowing the right passwords – mystic names of God – with the goal of standing before the throne in the seventh *hekhal* and joining in with the celestial Qedushah. The texts have survived in medieval manuscripts, but this is an extremely fluid literature, reflecting a long process of evolution. The content varies greatly from manuscript to manuscript. The ascending heroes are not biblical figures but prominent rabbis, such as Ishmael and Aqiva. Scholars disagree, however, over whether any of the material can be traced as far back as the second or third centuries CE, with some arguing that the bulk of it is post-Talmudic. The Hekhalot texts are not a straightforward read. Descriptions of ascent are intertwined with prayers, hymns, and magical adjurations containing long lists of nonsensical names. These have been assembled with no discernible pattern, and only very occasionally is there anything that resembles a narrative. *3 Enoch* stands apart – it appears to

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22 Alexander Golitzin, 'Temple and Throne of the Divine Glory: "Pseudo-Macarius" and Purity of Heart, Together with Some Remarks on the Limitations and Usefulness of Scholarship', in Harriet A. Luckman and Linda Kulzer (eds), *Purity of Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature: Essays in Honor of Juana Raasch, O.S.B.* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 129.

23 G. G. Stroumsa, 'To See or not to See: On the Early History of the *Visio Beatifica*', in Peter Schäfer (ed.), *Wege mystischer Gotteserfahrung: Judentum, Christentum und Islam / Mystical approaches to God: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2006), 72

24 Stroumsa, 'To See or Not to See', 71.

25 Carol A. Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice: A Critical Edition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 72.

26 Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 340.

be 'a late fusion of Hekhalot and apocalyptic narrative traditions'.[27] It opens with Rabbi Ishmael being presented before the throne of glory by Metatron, Prince of the Divine Presence. Later, Metatron reveals that he is Enoch, having undergone a transformation into blazing fire. Peter Schäfer argues that

> … after the classical rabbinic period, some Jewish authors felt free not only to revert to the apocalyptic tradition but also to utilize it against their Christian opponents, who, after all, had usurped the early Jewish ascent apocalypses and converted them into Christian writings. It is against this background that Metatron begins to compete with Jesus Christ.[28]

The authors of the Hekhalot literature, however, their social location and relationship to the rabbinic movement, are shrouded in mystery.

Indeed, there are many unanswered questions about heavenly ascent texts as a whole. They are difficult to fit into our categories. In *1 Enoch*, Enoch dreams – a psychological state – of ascending to heaven, where he learns both about God – theology – and about rivers, mountains, rocks, winds, and stars – cosmology. Possibly embedded in the text is polemic against the priests of the Jerusalem temple – politics. There has been much debate over the rival claims of 'exegesis' and 'experience'. Are heavenly ascent texts reflective creations taking the biblical text as their starting point, or are they descriptions of personal experience? Do they provide any evidence for conventicles of practising mystics, or should they be seen instead as literary fantasy – to be understood 'not as rites to be enacted but stories to be repeated'?[29] Their authors certainly claim a religious experience for their pseudepigraphic heroes, but not as a private, subjective matter. The throne of God is the epicentre of holiness and power. To claim knowledge of an ascent to that throne is to claim authority. Whatever the power politics of the day, a vision of heaven was produced as a trump card, used both by disaffected minorities and by religious authorities trying to curb unruly enthusiasm.

In conclusion – we've come a very long way from the book of Daniel! But I hope to have shown how the language and imagery of that short heavenly scene in chapter seven has had a long and fertile afterlife. Indeed, the imagery still features in our liturgies today. For both Jews and Christians claim to be joining in with the angelic worshippers before the heavenly throne when they recite the Qedushah / Sanctus at key moments in their services.

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[27] Michael D. Swartz, 'Mystical Texts', in Shmuel Safrai, et al. (eds), *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature* (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006), 411,

[28] Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 343.

[29] Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 109.