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THE ASCENSION MOTIF OF 2 CORINTHIANS 12 IN JEWISH, CHRISTIAN AND GNOSTIC TEXTS

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The heavenly ascent motif is common in religious documents of late antiquity. A preoccupation with the similarities between these accounts leads some to overlook the equally important differences. Care should be taken, however, to distinguish between mystical esotericism and extraordinary religious encounter.

Earlier Jewish traditions provide the proper context for understanding Paul's visions and revelations; certain Gnostic texts evidence yet another distinct stage of development in the ascension motif. But thematic parallels do not warrant the assumption that various religious traditions are basically identical in origins. And parallels should not lead to indiscriminate grouping of essentially unrelated texts.

* * *

THE motif of the ascension through the celestial spheres provides many insights into the religious thought of various traditions and sects in late antiquity. Here the primary texts for examination are: Paul's experience in 2 Cor 12:1-10, selected rabbinic narratives, the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the Nag Hammadi *Apocalypse of Paul*. Before turning to the textual examination, a few preliminary observations must be made in view of the great methodological problems presented by this theme. At the outset, it must be noted that the ascension motif is not uniquely Jewish or distinctively Gnostic. Neither does Paul's description in 2 Corinthians make it an exclusively Christian motif. In fact, the heavenly ascent is very widespread and appears in many religious contexts. In some of the ascent descriptions, it is difficult to determine if a literal heavenly journey is taking place or if a vision is being described. Sometimes, it is not clear whether an author is relating a specific revelation or if he is explaining the geography of the unknown celestial spheres. Other questions are related to these problems. Is the soul or the body

ascending? Is the ascent induced or does a heavenly messenger appear to initiate the experience unsolicited? When does the journey occur? How is it connected to death? Does the ascent begin after death or is it a mystical experience?¹

The heavenly ascent theme seems to be the common property of the ancient world. One finds it in the so-called "Mithraic Liturgy."² It appears in Jewish pseudepigraphic-apocalyptic literature,³ in Hermetic texts like *Poimandres*,⁴ in the Nag Hammadi codices,⁵ and also in

¹Some of these problems are discussed in a Seminar Paper which the writer received through the courtesy of M. Stone, see, *Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins*, "Heavenly Ascent in Graeco Roman Piety," meeting of October 18, 1977 at 7:00 p.m. in Williams Hall, University of Pennsylvania. The classic treatment of the theme appears in W. Bousset, "Die Himmelsreise der Seele," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 4 (1901) 136-69. Recently a number of studies have appeared which treat these questions. See especially A. F. Segal, "Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and their Environment," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II.23.2 (1980) 1333-94. M. Dean-Otting's thesis has been published, *Heavenly Journeys: A Study of the Motif in Hellenistic Jewish Literature* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1984). However Dean-Otting did not include what was defined as Christian texts and thus unfortunately the *Ascension of Isaiah* was excluded (cf. also M. Himmelfarb's review, *JBL* 106 [1987] 126-28). See also Hans-Josef Klauck, "Die Himmelfahrt des Paulus (2 Kor 12,2-4) in der koptischen Paulusapokalypse aus Nag Hammadi (NHC V/2)" *Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* 10 (1985) 151-53, where he discusses some of the various components of the ascension theme. J. Tabor has proposed four types of heavenly ascent, "(1) Ascent as an invasion of heaven (2) Ascent to receive revelation (3) Ascent to heavenly immortality (4) Ascent as a foretaste of the heavenly world," *idem*, *Things Unutterable Paul's Ascent to Paradise in its Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Contexts* (New York: Lanham Books, 1986) 69. Nonetheless extreme caution must be exercised. Even as a heuristic device, categorization of this theme can be misleading because the ancient writer may employ a combination of these familiar elements as he works to achieve his purpose.

²Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956) 130-36. See the new translation, M. W. Meyer, *The "Mithras Liturgy"* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976).

³See, e.g., 1 Enoch 14:1-15:4, and cf. Enoch's journeys in chapters 17 through 36; chapter 70; 2 Enoch 1-22 and the Testament of Levi 2:6ff. (J. H. Charlesworth, ed. *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. [New York, 1983-85] has made these texts more accessible; see also the recent critical edition of Enoch by M. Black, *The Book of Enoch* [Leiden, 1985]; and on the heavens in the Testament of the Levi, see H. W. Hollander and M. de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* [Leiden, 1985] 134, as well as n. 18 below). A. Segal's work (op. cit. n. 1) is especially helpful and he has also called attention to Philo of Alexandria (*idem*, 1354ff.). See also the works on the ascension theme cited in n. 1 above.

⁴Cf. R. Reitzenstein, *Poimandres: Studien zur griechisch-ägyptischen und frühchristlichen Literatur* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966, reprint of 1904 edition). As has often been noted, the English edition published by Walter Scott and A. S. Ferguson in the first volume of their *Hermetica* (Oxford, 1924-1936, four volumes) suffers from the editors' somewhat free emendation of the text. See also R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism* (New York: AMS Press, 1978) 211ff., and B. Layton's new translation and annotations, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1987)

New Testament Apocryphal texts like the Christian *Apocalypse of Paul*⁶ as well as in the New Testament itself.⁷ One also finds direct and indirect references to it in both rabbinic literature and in mystical Jewish texts.⁸ In fact, these texts only begin to illustrate the great amount of literature that is associated with this motif. The inherent dangers of comparative study are manifest: how, if at all, are these

449ff. Cf. also H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston, 1963) 165–73; Tabor, *Things Unutterable*, 66; and Segal, “Heavenly Ascent,” 1379–81. For a discussion of some of the questions raised by Reitzenstein’s conclusions and especially his proposal concerning a pre-Christian redeemer myth, cf. also C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1953) 10–53; A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (London, 1953) 26–29; C. H. Talbert, “The Myth of a Descending-Ascending Redeemer in Mediterranean Antiquity,” *New Testament Studies* 22 (1976) 418–39; C. Colpe, *Die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (1961) 16f.; and E. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983, revised edition) 69–83, 244–45. See also, E. Yamauchi, “Hermetic Literature,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, 408 and C. H. Dodd, “Hellenistic Judaism and the Hermetica,” *The Bible and the Greeks* (London, 1935, reprint 1964), part 2, 97–248. Grant observes, “The most obvious explanation of the origin of the Gnostic redeemer is that he was modelled after the Christian conception of Jesus. It seems significant that we know no redeemer before Jesus, while we encounter other redeemers (Simon Magus, Menander) immediately after his time” (*ibid.*, 18).

⁵In addition to the Nag Hammadi *Apocalypse of Paul* discussed here, see also e.g., *The Gospel of Truth* I.3.21–22; *The Apocryphon of John* II.1.20; *The Apocryphon of James* I.2.10–15; *The Tripartite Tractate* I.5.123; *On the Origin of the World* II.5.116, 127; *The Exegesis on the Soul* II.6.134. Cf. also the discussion of “Nag Hammadi” in the *Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins* and the work of Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: the Nature and History of Gnosticism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987) 171–203.

⁶E.g., *The Apocalypse of Paul* 11ff., cf. H. Duensing’s edition, in E. Hennecke and J. W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* (London: SCM, 1974), 2:763ff. See also n. 10 below.

⁷2 Corinthians 12:1–10. See also V. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 523–32.

⁸Cf. b. Chagigah 14b (parallels tos. Chag. 2.1; j. Chag. 77b, Chap. 2. hal. 1) and see E. E. Urbach, “Hamazorot Al Torat Hasod Betekufat Hatannaim,” *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to G. Scholem* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 7 n. 25 where he notes the texts from tos. Megilah 3 (4):28 (Leiberman’s edition, 361–62) and the parallel in b. Megilah 24b, “They said to R. Judah: Many have discerned sufficiently [with their mind’s eye] to expound the Chariot, and yet they never saw it” (אמרו לו לרבי יהודה הרבה צפו לדרוש במרכבה ולא ראו אותה מימיהם). Some of the methodological problems of comparative study have been outlined by P. Alexander, “Comparing Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism: an Essay in Method,” *JJS* 25 (1984) 1–18, and for a summary of the research, see Yehuda Liebes, *The Sin of Elisha: the Four who Entered Paradise and the Nature of Talmudic Mysticism* (Hebrew University Monograph Series, 1986) 3–33 (Hebrew). See also I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1980) 29–72; he discusses *Ascensio Isaiae* on pp. 57–62; cf. G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, revised edition, 1965); *Ma’aseh Merkavah* and *Hekhaloth Rabbii*; For editions see

exemplary texts related and what are the differences between them. Nevertheless it is certainly a grave error to minimize the importance of the differences in an effort to prove that all religious traditions of late antiquity are similar or basically identical.⁹ The differences may appear insignificant to a modern outsider, but to insiders, i.e. those initiated in cultic practice and belief, subtle distinctions were often decisive.

It should be noted, however, that the idea of the heavenly ascent carries a considerable weight of importance within the framework of Gnostic religious thought. For instance, the Nag Hammadi *Gospel of Truth* teaches, "Since perfection of all is in the Father, it is necessary for the all to ascend to him" (I, 3.21.20).¹⁰ While it may not be clear when the ascent will occur, it does appear that all will be required to ascend. In other words, the ascent is unavoidable. As Grant has shown, the soul's ascent may be understood in some contexts as the spirit's escape from evil matter.¹¹ No doubt the Gnostic believer viewed his ascent through the celestial spheres as his journey to the highest degree of perfection. This ascent through the hostile celestial

S. Wertheimer, *Batei Midrashot* (Jerusalem: Ktav Vasefer, 1980); A. Jellinek, *Beit Hamidrash* (Jerusalem: Bamberger and Wahrmann, 1938); S. Mosaiov, *Merkavah Shelemah* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1972); Rachel Elior, "Hekhalot Zutarti," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, Supplement 1 (1982), based upon Jewish Theological Seminary manuscript 8128; and especially the important work of P. Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1981). The present study will show that careful research of specific texts is the best way to approach these questions.

⁹*Pace* Tabor, *Things Unutterable*, 4ff.; Tabor claims, "Jacob Neusner has repeatedly documented similar attempts to mark off periods or figures or sources belonging to a 'pure' past (conceived in various ways) by scholars working in the area of Judaism in late antiquity. This essentially 'fundamentalist' tendency is encountered often in the history of the 'history' of religions." Tabor continues, "The perennial 'Hellenistic vs. Judaic' debate will not appear [in Tabor's book], since I am convinced that emerging Christianity and the other forms of Second Temple Judaism are, by definition, 'Hellenistic' (strictly, Roman imperial) religions, essentially similar to the other religions of the period" (ibid). On the contrary, a tendentious blending together of all religious traditions because of some similarities and by ignoring the limitations of time, historical figures and careful analysis of literary sources as well as the distinctive characteristics of each tradition will certainly lead to questionable results. Objective historical analysis requires consideration of these factors in order to understand and to interpret early religious texts within their original cultural milieu.

¹⁰Compare also the *Epistula Apostolorum*, 20-21, prepared by H. Duensing, in E. Hennecke and J. W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:205. In addition, cf. J. Dresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (Vermont, 1986) 146-248, who deals with the tractates individually as he comments upon the tenants of gnostic beliefs.

¹¹R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959) 61.

regions was considered dangerous and special knowledge or a guide was needed to make the trip successfully. Some systems emphasized the need for this knowledge and increased the number of spheres that the traveler must pass. Basilides, for example, maintained that there were three hundred and fifty six heavens.¹²

Whether this ascent happens at death is not always clear. At least, the Christian *Apocalypse of Paul* provides a parallel that could be related to the Gnostic idea. At death, when a soul passes from its body, wicked angels and holy angels are waiting to meet it. On the one hand, the evil angels take the sinner's soul to the place of torment and on the other hand, the holy angels escort the righteous one's soul through the perilous heavenly spheres to paradise.¹³

How did the ascension theme develop? Any attempt to try to trace its genesis back to a single origin is unsatisfactory. The widespread use of the motif makes it difficult to show that influence comes from one source. This phenomenon did not arise in a vacuum. It appears to be the product of a combination of themes that were circulating within a common religious environment. At this point, any identification of this mutual religious environment and its relationship to Gnosticism is premature. Rather than trying to isolate a specific sphere of influence, it is more productive to view elements within specific texts and to understand their relationship to each other. Here after a careful textual examination, different stages of development will become clear. On the one hand the scholar must take care not to group unrelated texts together, but at the same time he must carefully consider parallel themes and the connections between them.

PAUL'S VISIONS AND MERKABAH MYSTICISM

That Paul had polemical motives in mind when writing 2 Corinthians has often been noted. Apparently he was polemicizing with a group of super-pneumatics and wanted to say that he had also received numerous visions and revelations. As reported in the account

¹²See Irenaeus, *adv. haer.* 1, 24:3 and cf. J. Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (London: The Westminster Press, 1964) 75.

¹³*The Apocalypse of Paul* 14-17; in E. Hennecke and J. W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:766ff. Cf. with the Testament of Job 52:1ff., S. P. Brock, *Testamentum Iobi* (Leiden: Brill, 1967) 58, and the new English translation by R. P. Spittler in J. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:867. (David Flusser called my attention to the Testament of Job.) Compare also the Coptic texts discussed in J. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy* (New York: Arno, 1977) 328-36, and on the Greek conception of death, cf. R. Garland, *The Greek View of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1980).

of Acts, and it seems that this work is closely connected to Paul himself, Paul had at least eight visions.¹⁴ Bowker has argued that these experiences of Paul may very well somehow be related to Paul's training in merkabah contemplation.¹⁵ Perhaps Scholem has been the most prominent advocate for claiming that Paul's experience as described in 2 Cor 12:1-10 is a description of early merkabah mysticism, "It is obvious that Paul, who wrote these lines about the year 58 C.E., was speaking of an idea with which his readers were familiar, a Jewish conception that he as well as his readers in Corinth, had brought over into the new Christian community."¹⁶

Recently Schäfer has challenged Scholem's approach and a number of scholars may question whether the story of the four who entered into the מַרְקָבָה as recorded in talmudic literature should be discussed in the context of the ascension motif.¹⁷ The controversy surrounds the rabbinic tradition concerning the four sages who entered into the מַרְקָבָה and Paul's ascent (literally being caught up) into the third heaven where he was in "Paradise" (ἡράπηγῃ εἰς τὸν παρά-

¹⁴J. Bowker, "'Merkabah' Visions and the Visions of Paul," *JSS* 16 (1971) 159 n. 2. Here are some of Paul's visions recorded in Acts and his epistles: his Damascus road experience (Acts 9:3-6, 26:12-18); his vision of Ananias (Acts 9:12); the appearance of the Macedonian man after which Paul responds by immediately trying to travel to Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10); the vision of encouragement in Corinth (Acts 18:9-10); his experience in the Temple where apparently Paul was in ecstasy or some kind of trance-like state (γενέσθαι με ἐν ἑκστάσει, Acts 22:17-21; and compare the language used to describe Peter's vision, Acts 11:5; see n. 29 below); the night vision after his appearance before the council (Acts 23:11); the angel who appeared to him before his shipwreck (Acts 27:23-24); and of course 2 Cor 12:1-10. It should also be noted that Paul speaks of the gospel he preached as being derived through revelation (Gal 1:12) and that he took time to sojourn in Arabia apparently for contemplation (Gal 1:17).

¹⁵Ibid. David E. Aune has observed that 2 Cor 12:9 forms an oracular response which has parallels both in Greco-Roman sources as well as in the prophetic narratives of the Old Testament and in the ancient near eastern literature. He understands the passage in 2 Cor 12:1-10 as describing two different experiences. Here I have suggested that the continuation of the passage (2 Cor 12:7-10) is a further description of his ascent (vv 1-6). Although Aune notes the form of a *Heilsorakel* giving the apostle assurance, Aune believes that the description is probably an *actual experience* rather than a mere parable which is used for Paul's purpose (see Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983] 249-50).

¹⁶G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: The Jewish Seminary of America, 1965) 17. It seems that Scholem probably was too quick to make a connection between early Christianity and Jewish mystical texts especially when he proposes that merkabah mysticism was well known among the Corinthian congregation.

¹⁷P. Schäfer, "New Testament and Hekhalot Literature: The Journey into Heaven in Paul and in Merkavah Mysticism," *JJS* 35 (1984) 32ff. While the present author has difficulties with Scholem (see preceding note), Schäfer's approach seems to lead too far in the other direction.

δαισον).¹⁸ Schäfer has suggested that originally the story about the four sages was probably “meant to demonstrate four different types of Torah teachers and, by way of the type represented by Akiba, to show the desirable model.”¹⁹ He bases this interpretation primarily on the reading of the Tosefta which records that R. Akiva “entered and came out” instead of the terminology that would betray a mystical tendency, namely that he ascended and descended.²⁰

¹⁸Ibid., 25–26 and 32. The meaning of the word סַרְפָּד in the story of the four sages and the word παράδεισος in 2 Corinthians will continue to be a controversial question. The word סַרְפָּד only appears three times in the Old Testament (Cant 4:13, Neh 2:8 and Eccl 2:5). In rabbinic literature a סַרְפָּד may be nothing more than a garden or an orchard. The Hebrew word seems to be derived from the Avestan *pairidaēza*, and is a loanword from old Persian, *pairi-dāza-* (read *pari-daiza-* or *-dēza-*) which originally meant “beyond the wall,” and hence an enclosure, a pleasant retreat or park. See also L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, 776, and especially J. Jeremias’ treatment in *TDNT*, 5:765–73. In addition, cf. Tabor, *Things Unutterable*, 115–21. Tabor carefully deals with the materials in parallel sources but wrongly suggests that Paul describes a two stage journey in 2 Corinthians 12 in which the third heaven was a station on the way to paradise. However his suggestion makes little sense from the context of Paul’s epistle where the third heaven is best understood as being parallel to the term παράδεισος. The question has been entertained by Klauck who suggests, “Der dritte Himmel ist zugleich der höchste Himmel. ‘Paradies’ sagt nur etwas mehr über seine besondere Qualität aus,” Klauck, “Die Himmelfahrt des Paulus (2 Kor 12,2–4) in der koptischen Paulusapokalypse aus Nag Hammadi (NHC V/2),” 155. Moreover as has often been noted, according to the better reading, the T. Levi 2:7–10; 3:1–4 also conceives of three heavens). Moreover it is important to note that the LXX translators used the term παράδεισος when referring to the Garden of Eden. The Greek word has also been connected to the place of blessedness for the righteous (e.g., T. Levi 18:10 and Luke 23:43, and cf. with Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, 2:265, 3:532–35). As has been noted by others, the Aramaic portions of Enoch discovered in Qumran Cavè 4 have provided further witness to the “Paradise of righteousness” פִּרְדֵּם קִשְׁטָא (J. T. Milik, *The Books of Enoch* [Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976] 232, [357], 289–90). The “Paradise of righteousness” is also mentioned in the *Vitae Adae et Evae* where Adam ascends, “. . . raptus sum in paradisum iustitiae” (see n. 31 below). In II (Slavonic) Enoch (8:1f.), Paradise is located above in the third heaven (compare *Apocalypsis Mosis* 40:1–2). IV Ezra (4:8) also seems to elevate Paradise above the earth, but there is not universal agreement (see n. 8b by F. I. Andersen, “2 Enoch,” Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:114–15; and see M. Stone, “Paradise in 4 Ezra iv:8 and vii:36, vii:52,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 17 [1966] 85–88). See also the entry for *paradeisos* in the revision of W. Bauer’s *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* by F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) 614; and cf. the *Aruch Hashalem*, 6:413. One must also ask why the LXX translators render the Garden of Eden by the term Paradise while the later Aramaic Targumim give a more literal translation. Was “Paradise” demythologized at a later time?

¹⁹Schäfer, 28.

²⁰Ibid., 25. Schäfer suggests that the more original version, “he entered in peace and went out in peace” was altered by later mystics and this accounts for the reading in the Vienna manuscript, “he ascended in peace and descended in peace” (Lieberman, *tos. Chag. 2:3*, 381, and Zuckermann *tos. Chag. 2:4*, 234). Of course Schäfer is

While terminology is an important aspect of all textual studies, in the case of the four who entered the פְּרָדֶס, the difference between the terms entering and leaving and between ascending and descending does not change the basic facts of the story. These four sages are said to have undergone a very dangerous experience. In all the parallels of the tradition, one of the sages actually dies and only one of them survives without injury—R. Akiva. Moreover, it is not clear that the version of the story in the Vienna manuscript, which contains the phrase, “R. Akiva ascended in peace and descended in peace,” is secondary.²¹ It might be ventured that the terminology of ascending and descending is used in regards to R. Akiva because he is the only one of the four sages not to be harmed by the encounter. But even if this story is understood as a metaphoric paradigm as Urbach and Schäfer suggested—it is doubtful if it was designed primarily to present R. Akiva as the model Torah teacher, but rather to teach the dangers of mystical contemplation and at the same time to demythologize the whole tradition.²²

The exact connection between this story of the four who entered the פְּרָדֶס and Paul’s experience will remain a mystery. Nevertheless it seems that the two traditions are indeed closely related. Paul speaks about being “taken up” as if his ascent were involuntary or at least unsolicited. The way that he describes the whole affair makes it difficult to determine whether he felt that the ascent was self-induced

correct when he claims that an issue like this cannot be solved by noting that the Vienna manuscript is thought to be superior to that of Erfurt (*ibid.*). However if a mystic was making a modification in the text he most certainly would have used the more common expression of *yarad* for the ascent. In addition, it is also quite possible that a scribe may have adapted the phrase “R. Akiva ascended in peace and descended in peace” to the introduction of the story “four entered the *pardes*.” After a harmonization had been made, other scribes would quite easily have corrected the Tosefta on the basis of the parallels. While it is difficult to be dogmatic on this point, much evidence supports the reading of the Vienna manuscript, “R. Akiva ascended in peace and descended in peace.”

²¹See the preceding note. The main texts of the story are found in *tos. Chagigah* 2:3 4; *j. Chagigah* 77b, chap. 2, hal. 1; *b. Chagigah* 14–15b; and see now D. Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1980) 86ff.

²²The various restrictions from early sources which were placed upon those desiring to become involved with the merkabah strengthen this approach, and see Halperin, 19–63. See E. E. Urbach, “Hamasorot Al Torat Hasod Betekufat Hatannaim,” *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to G. Scholem* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 12–13 (Hebrew). Urbach suggests that the whole story should be treated as a parable. He interprets the phrase, “R. Akiva ascended in peace and descended in peace” as referring to his climbing the fence of the פְּרָדֶס in the מִשְׁלַל. But if this were the case surely a fence would have been mentioned in the text.

or not. Paul's description is very intriguing because it is a first hand report about his own experience. The rabbinic story is preserved in narrative form and this may account for some of the differences between the traditions. Paul does not know whether he is in the body or out of the body, a fact which he repeats for emphasis. He begins to tell the story about himself in the third person perhaps in order to express his feeling of detachment during his ascent or less likely as a literary device.²³ Though not all will agree, a careful reading of 2 Corinthians 12 will show that verses 5–10 are most likely a further elaboration of Paul's revelation. Interestingly three times Paul asks that this messenger of Satan be removed from him and he receives the response, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."²⁴ It may be that he made his request and heard this voice as he entered each celestial sphere, though Paul does not explicitly say this himself.

When the connection between 2 Corinthians 12 verses 1–5 and verses 6–10 is thus understood, the whole mystical experience is a response to Paul's complaint concerning his "thorn in the flesh" for which many explanations have been developed. It is most likely that the thorn in the flesh was related to the difficulties and persecution that Paul suffered which are discussed in the context of this epistle.²⁵ This interpretation also fits Paul's expression, the "messenger of Satan," which he used to describe this thorn in the flesh. It harasses Paul in order to prevent him from becoming too elated "by the abundance of revelations" (vs. 7). Hence, Paul's mystical experience seems to have had a dramatic effect and a great influence upon his personal life. The message, "My grace is sufficient," and "My power is made perfect in weakness," was probably what Paul considered to be one of his most profound revelations—at least he selected this experience to demonstrate to the super-pneumatics at Corinth that he also was acquainted better than they with visions and revelations. This message, as well as 'being snatched away,' was important for Paul's purposes.

While Paul does not describe seeing anything specific in this revelation (in contrast to the four sages in rabbinic literature), it

²³2 Cor 12:8–9.

²⁴Of course another reason why Paul repeats himself here may be because he had not fully organized his thoughts before writing. Some have suggested that Paul was referring to someone other than himself because of his use of the third person (e.g., F. Jackson and K. Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 4:281 on Acts 22:17). However for among other reasons, this theory hardly seems tenable because it is highly unlikely that Paul would have described someone else's vision in order to impress the pneumatic Christians at Corinth.

²⁵E.g., 2 Cor 11:23–28 and 12:10.

should not be hastily concluded that this experience was not accompanied by some sort of visual phenomena, as well as by the message concerning God's grace and the ἄρρητα ῥήματα.²⁶ For one thing Paul does state quite clearly that he has had "visions and revelations of the Lord" (vs. 1). The various revelations described in Acts often include both visual phenomena and auditory messages. Since Paul could not determine whether he was in or out of his body, he was apparently seeing something or he was in some trance-like state or both. Paul is relating a personal experience and one in which he received a special message. He desired to communicate this aspect of his revelation to the Christians at Corinth and not merely to boast about his ascent and the "unutterable things" that cannot be told. In the other visions of Paul described in Acts, one can see that he often received directions or that each revelation had a specific purpose. On the road to Damascus Paul is said to have seen a bright light; in Troas a man from Macedonia appeared to him; and on the ship he saw an angel.²⁷ In 2 Corinthians, Paul does not describe the heavenly spheres, but he is aware that he has entered the παράδεισος in the third heaven and thus he must have seen something.

The story of the four who entered the מִרְקָבָה seems to be related to Paul's mystical experience in the third heaven. The precise nature of this relationship will remain somewhat of an enigma because of the fragmentary state of the evidence. Urbach has suggested that the story from rabbinic literature should be interpreted metaphorically. Even though Urbach considers it as a type of allegory, he maintains that the object which the rabbis were viewing (רְצִיָּה) was the merkabah.²⁸ Nevertheless Urbach would not describe Akiva's and his colleagues' experience as an ecstatic revelation. Certainly the self-induced mysticism described by Hai Gaon does not seem to be appropriate for these four sages' experience.²⁹ Flusser pointed out that outside of this text in rabbinic literature and 2 Corinthians, the

²⁶Perhaps Schäfer (op. cit. n. 18 above, p. 23), has been too hasty to conclude that Paul only heard and did not see anything. Of course Schäfer's well thought out argument does call attention to the fact that in 2 Corinthians, Paul does not claim to have viewed the merkabah.

²⁷See n. 14 above.

²⁸See E. E. Urbach, "Hamasorot Al Torat Hasod Betekufat Hatannaim," *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to G. Scholem* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 12-13. Urbach's position is treated by Schäfer, op. cit., n. 17, p. 26.

²⁹See B. Lewin, *Otzar Hageonim* (Jerusalem, 1931) 13-15, quoted by Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, 3. According to Hai Gaon, the one who possessed the special qualities to look at the merkabah had to prepare himself. He had to fast, place his head between his knees and recite specific songs and hymns. Hai Gaon's description is one that suggests a self-induced trance or ecstatic state. It is difficult to ascertain if some were involved in this kind of activity during Hai Gaon's

terms $\sigma\tau\eta\tau\eta\sigma$ or παράδεισος are never used to describe the “destination of the mystic’s ascent of the soul.”³⁰ This fact makes the connections between the texts that much more significant. If Paradise was commonly understood as being located above the earth, then it is no wonder that Paul had to ascend. In the *Vita Adae et Evae* Adam describes a vision to his son Seth:

... while we were praying, Michael the archangel and messenger of God came to me. And I saw a chariot like the wind and its wheels were fiery. I was carried off into the Paradise of Righteousness, and I saw the LORD sitting and his appearance was unbearable flaming fire. And many thousands of angels were at the right and at the left of the chariot.³¹

This text describes how Adam “was caught up into the Paradise of righteousness” where he saw the Lord. But can this text and Paul’s experience elucidate the story about Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Elisha ben Avuyah and R. Akiva? What exactly happened to these sages? The truth is that no one will ever know because the rabbinic passages describing the four who entered the $\sigma\tau\eta\tau\eta\sigma$ do not elaborate.

The tradition is related about the rabbis and it is unfortunate that no authentic texts have been recovered in which the sages involved describe their own experiences. Paul obviously feels that his journey to the third heaven was a very impressive revelation—one

time. The vivid and detailed description would suggest an affirmative answer. Mystical experience is very difficult for scholars to analyze. One researcher employed this metaphor: scholars studying mysticism are like accountants planning finances—they know all about the treasures of others but are unable to use them. This does not mean that personal mystical experiences would aid scholarly research—but it does point to the difficulties of analyzing someone else’s encounter. Hai Gaon may be making an attempt to understand what happened. In the book of Acts, it may be Luke who adds the detail ‘while he was praying’ to some of the accounts concerning visions (Acts 9:5?; 11:5; 22:17) which probably was not in his source but surely is a characteristic Lukan addition (compare the appearance of the word *proseuchomai* in the texts of the synoptics).

³⁰D. Flusser, “Scholem’s Recent Book on Merkabah Literature,” *JJS* 11 (1961) 62.

³¹*Vita Adae et Evae* 25:1–3 (M. D. Johnston, “Life of Adam and Eve,” Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:266–68, and W. Meyer, *Abhandlungen der Bayrischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 14/3 [1878] 229; the text was discussed by Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 17; see also J. Licht, “Adam and Eve, Book of the Life of,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2:246–47 and cf. with J. Charlesworth, *The Pseudepigrapha and Modern Research with a Supplement*, 74–75). On the location of Paradise, see n. 18 above. On the idea that certain verses of scripture like Ezekiel’s merkabah were used in mystical contemplation, compare Urbach, “Hamasrot Al Torat Hasod Betekufat Hatannaim,” 2, 16–17, and Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, 179–85. Adam sees the Lord enthroned above and the merkabah.

that would commend his epistle to the pneumatic Corinthians. Nevertheless Paul does not indicate that this revelation was dangerous but rather describes its meaning to his readers. Like Paul, the rabbis are said to have had some kind of extraordinary experience in the $\sigma\tau\eta\tau\eta$.

The precise nature of this experience is difficult to define. There is an appropriate uneasiness with the term "mysticism" when it comes to the passage concerning the four rabbis and also with respect to Paul's testimony in 2 Corinthians. A sharp distinction should be made between a sort of mystical esotericism and an extraordinary religious encounter. However, if one can understand mysticism in the sense of a deep or dynamic spiritual experience, then it could be that both Paul's testimony and the narrative about the four sages in some way reflect a kind of early pre-Christian mysticism concerning which modern scholarship knows comparatively little. In this way without denying that such experiences have occurred and probably have influenced a number of the great religious geniuses of history, it is possible to de-mystify the spiritual encounter from an extreme esoteric and sometimes self-induced mysticism that appears in some form or another in multiple religious traditions. However, in the final analysis, Paul's visions and revelations and specifically his experience when taken up to the third heaven should be interpreted in the context of an early stream of pre-Christian Jewish mystical contemplation.³²

ASCENSIO ISAIAE

Ascensio Isaiiae also deals with a vision as the text describes the prophet's ascent through the celestial regions. The *Ascension of Isaiah* was well known and widely circulated. Manuscripts are extant in Ethiopic, in Coptic, in Slavonic, in Latin and some portions of

³²Flusser has pointed to the Essene influence in the second stratum of Christianity in his article, "The Dead Sea Sect and Pre-Pauline Christianity" *Scripta*, 4:215-66. It should be noted that the Essenes believed in the prophetic gift. But one should not be too hasty to see a connection with early Christian pneumatics (see n. 29 above; and the work of David E. Aune, op. cit. n. 15 above). Nevertheless, in 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul discusses various $\piνευματικοί$. Fascinatingly enough Paul's wording, $\alpha\rho\tau\iota\ \delta\iota\ \epsilon\sigma\acute{o}\pi\tau\rho\upsilon\ \epsilon\nu\ \alpha\iota\nu\acute{\iota}\gamma\mu\alpha\tau\iota$, is partially paralleled in some midrashic texts which speak about the divinely inspired utterances and experiences of the prophets and of Moses. In one of these texts preserved in the name of R. Judah bar Ilai, one of the five disciples of R. Akiva who survived the revolt, one finds that the midrash contrasts Moses to the other prophets by observing, "But Moses beheld [prophetic visions] through a polished [glass] *specularium*, as it is said, *The similitude of the Lord doth he behold* (Numbers 12:8)." (Lev. Rabbah 1:14, Soncino translation, 17, see also the critical edition of Margulies, 1:30-32). Thus Moses was able to view the אֱלֹהִים . Compare also b. Yebamot 49b, "All the prophets looked into a dim glass [*specularium*], but Moses looked through a clear glass [*specularium*]." See the context in b. Yebamot 49b where Isaiah's theophany and his words, "I saw the LORD," became a point of controversy.

Greek. Most of the scholars who have worked with the text agree that it is a composite work, written by a number of authors at different periods. While Laurence, Burkitt, and Burch have argued for the unity of the text,³³ scholarly consensus rests decidedly with the view that the work is a composite variously divided anywhere from two distinct sections to four separate parts.³⁴ The first part is "the Martyrdom of Isaiah" which is thought to be of early Jewish origin. Knibb suggests that it was composed during the period of persecutions of the Jewish people by Antiochus Epiphanes (167–64 B.C.E.).³⁵ Flusser has connected it with the Dead Sea sectarians.³⁶ The other sections seem to augment the account of the Martyrdom in the first section.³⁷ Here it would be ventured that the text is a composite of three basic sections, the "Martyrdom of Isaiah," the "Testament of Hezekiah" and the "Ascension of Isaiah." The last section, which deals with Isaiah's ascension through the heavenly spheres is important for the present discussion.

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the tradition concerning Isaiah's tragic death at the hands of Manasseh was popular in Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic circles. The Talmud reports that Rabbi Shimon ben Azai found a scroll in Jerusalem which told that Manasseh killed Isaiah.³⁸ The death sentence was decreed because Isaiah had claimed

Both I Cor 13:12 and Leviticus Rabbah 1:14 are closely connected to Num 12:8. See Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 3:452–53; cf. *Aruch*, 1:191. The midrash deals with exegesis and the relationship of Moses to the other prophets. Paul addresses a specific problem at Corinth.

³³R. H. Charles, *The Ascension of Isaiah* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1900), p. xxxvi—recalls that Laurence, *Ascensio Isaiae Vatis*, 1819, viewed the text as a unit; J. Flemming and H. Duensing, "The Ascension of Isaiah," *New Testament Apocrypha*, eds. Hennecke and Schneemelcher, 2:643, cite F. C. Burkitt, *Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, 1914, and Vacher Burch, *Journal of Theological Studies* 21 (1920) 249ff., as supporting single authorship; cf. James H. Charlesworth, *The Pseudepigrapha and Modern Research* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1976) 125–26. See especially the article by David Flusser, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 9:71.

³⁴See M. A. Knibb, "Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah," Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:147–49.

³⁵See Knibb, "Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah," 147–49.

³⁶See David Flusser, "The Apocryphal Book of *Ascensio Isaiae* and the Dead Sea Sect," *Israel Exploration Journal* 3 (1953) 30–47. Flusser has presented some strong arguments concerning the terminology, ideology and historical allusions to the so-called "Martyrdom of Isaiah" which link the text with the Dead Sea sect.

³⁷See Box, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, ix–x. Box further segments the text into "The Testament of Hezekiah" (chapter iii. 13–v. 1a), the completion of Isaiah's Martyrdom (chapter v. 1b–14), and finally "Isaiah's Vision" (chapters vi–xi). On the composite nature of the text, see also M. A. Knibb, "Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah," 147–48.

³⁸B. Yebamot 49b; cf. b. Sanhedrin 103b; and see also j. Sanhedrin 28c, chap. 10, hal. 2 where Isaiah is elevated to the status of Moses—probably to heighten the gravity

to have seen the Lord sitting upon His throne of glory. Isaiah's vision opposed what Moses had taught, namely, that no one may see the Lord and live (Ex 33:20). In an attempt to escape, Isaiah hid himself within a tree. Manasseh had the tree sawn in two and killed the prophet in the process. Thus Isaiah was executed because he claimed to have seen the Holy One enthroned on high! The whole story is somewhat ironic because Manasseh is by no means portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures as a king who displayed interest in theological purity and yet Manasseh had Isaiah executed because of the prophet's mystical vision of the Lord enthroned in His glory.³⁹ Does this tradition betray tension against mystical contemplation?⁴⁰

Within the Christian tradition, Isaiah's death is more than likely alluded to in the New Testament. The Epistle to the Hebrews relates that some saints were sawn asunder, contending for their faith (Heb 11:37). Often with good reason, commentators have suggested that here Hebrews seems to make reference to Isaiah's death. Early Christian writers such as Justin Martyr (*Dial. c. Tryph.* chapter cxx) and Tertullian (*De patientia* chapter xiv; *Scorpiace*, chapter viii) mention Isaiah's execution by the wood saw. The tradition was also known to Origen, Epiphanius, and Jerome.⁴¹

The reference to Isaiah from the Nag Hammadi Tractates, is related to the prophet's death. The writer of *The Testimony of Truth* was familiar with the legend. Unfortunately, some lacunae are found in the text, but the translators have rendered the passage as follows:

But the word of [. . .] and spirit [. . .] is the Father [. . .] for the man [. . .] like Isaiah, who was sawed with a saw, (and) he became two. [So

of Manasseh's sin and the greatness of God's compassion in forgiving him. At any rate, in the Jerusalem Talmud the greatness of Isaiah is emphasized, for like Moses, God spoke to him more directly. See C. C. Torrey, *The Lives of the Prophets* (Philadelphia: The Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, 1946) 20, 34; D. R. A. Hare, "The Lives of the Prophets," J. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:385f.; and also M. Stone, *Armenian Apocrypha Relating to the Patriarchs and Prophets* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982) 160-61 and cf. n. 1.

³⁹Cf. preceding note and R. H. Charles, "The Martyrdom of Isaiah," *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 2:158. Also see Billerbeck, 3:747. Also it should be noted that Flusser observed, "It is not surprising that the author of *Ascensio Isaiae* projects the religious disputes of his own day into the period of Isaiah, and presents them as a dispute between Isaiah and the false prophets," idem, "The Apocryphal Book of *Ascensio Isaiae* and the Dead Sea Sect," 40.

⁴⁰It is reasonable to assume that some sages would have viewed visions and mystical experiences as a possible danger. A charlatan could have employed stories of visions to lead the people astray.

⁴¹For a more complete list of references see Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891),

also the Son of Man divides] us by [the word of the] cross. It [divides the day from] the night and the corruptible [from] incorruptibility, and it [divides] the males from the females. But [Isaiah] is the type of the body. The saw is the word of the Son of Man which separates from the error of the angels.⁴²

Here the author has taken the tradition and allegorized it into his framework of dualism. He seems to have stylized this passage on the famous verse in the Epistle of the Hebrews:

The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, and joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Heb 4:12 NIV).

At least, these texts show that the tradition concerning Isaiah's death was known to Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic writers alike.

When the story concerning Isaiah's death existed independently is difficult to determine. The legend is apparently based upon the scriptural accounts of Manasseh's blood letting (2 Kgs 21:16) and perhaps upon the reports concerning King David's executions carried out by the means of saws (2 Sam 12:31; I Chron 20:3, cf. LXX). The tradition seems to be an early one. Of course, it is difficult to answer the question: How long did these texts and traditions exist before they were made into a composite work? An equally important difficulty is the tradition's form and stage of development when the above ancient writers became acquainted with it: these early references do not necessarily refer to the same text or to the same form of the text which has been preserved today.⁴³

division II, 3:144-45, and the new edition, revised and edited by G. Vermes, F. Millar and M. Goodman, 3/1:337ff.

⁴²*The Testimony of Truth* (IX, 3.40,105); quoted from James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1977) 409-10 (referred to ahead as *NHL*).

⁴³Cf. Flusser, "The Apocryphal Book of *Ascensio Isaiae* and the Dead Sea Sect," 31. The difficult chronological problems of the text cannot be avoided. It is generally agreed that the present form of the text is not to be considered earlier than the second century (Charlesworth, 125-26). However, the various sections of the text appear to come from the first century. First it should be noted that the Testament of Hezekiah seems to be dependent on the *Ascension of Isaiah* (Chapter 3.13; cf. A. K. Helmbold, "Gnostic Elements in the 'Ascension of Isaiah,'" *New Testament Studies* 17 [1972] 227). Then it must be observed that a union of three independent themes has occurred within the text: 1) Antichrist, 2) Beliar 3) Nero redivivus. Such a fusion of motifs would most probably have occurred not long after Nero's death (68 A.D.) and seemingly not much later than 100 A.D. Of course, one must maintain an open mind in dealing with texts that have a complex history like *Ascensio Isaiae*. (Cf. Charles, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, pp. li-xxv; Daniélou, 12ff.). See also M. A. Knibb, "Martyrdom

The vision of Isaiah is contained in chapters six through eleven. This unit is properly called a vision because Isaiah goes into a trance and an angel from the seventh heaven comes to him. The text gives the following description:

And while he [Isaiah] was speaking with the Holy Spirit in the hearing of them all, he became silent, and his mind was taken up from him, and he did not see the men who were standing before him. His eyes indeed were open, but his mouth was silent, and the mind in his body was taken up from him. But his breath was (still) in him, for he was seeing a vision. And the angel who was sent to show him (the vision) was not of this firmament, nor was he from the angels of glory of this world, but he came from the seventh heaven (VI.10ff.)⁴⁴

Thus Isaiah commences his vision and his ascent through the heavenlies. Later Isaiah relates the vision to the king and the prophets, but not to the people (VI.16–17; XI.39).

The text's view toward the structure of the cosmos fits well into its contemporary understanding of the heavenly spheres. The author describes seven heavens. His main concern is not to give a detailed description of the heavenlies, for unlike Slavonic Enoch he avoids elaborate descriptions of the heavens, the angels, or their tasks. The writer of *Ascensio Isaiae* makes little differentiation between the first five heavens. A throne is situated in the center of the sphere with angels on the left and angels on the right.⁴⁵ The angels on the right

and Ascension of Isaiah," 149–50. Knibb views the martyrdom as coming from the end of the first century but prefers a second century date for the ascension. However, he follows Charles' argument quite closely and does not present compelling evidence to reject Charles' conclusion concerning the date, i.e., "Thus the composition of the Vision in its primitive form G belongs to the close of the first century" (Charles, *Ascension*, p. xlv). Indeed some form of the text of the *Ascension of Isaiah* may well have existed before the beginning of the second century. At least while the date cannot be determined with precision, nothing in the narrative points to a later time.

⁴⁴Here the *Ascension of Isaiah* provides a description of the visionary's state while he is experiencing his vision. Few texts actually provide these details and this should be compared both to the *Epistula Apostolorum* (20–21, op. cit. n. 10) and also to Paul's description in 2 Cor 12:2, "... whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise . . ." (see also n. 18 above). Concerning the angel who appears to Isaiah, compare also Enoch 20:8 "Remiel, one of the holy angels, whom God set over those who rise" (Charles, *The Book of Enoch*, 44, see note on 20:8 as the text is missing in a number of manuscripts). In the present work, Knibb's translation of *Ascensio Isaiae* has been used (M. A. Knibb, "Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah," op. cit. n. 34; and see R. H. Charles, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, London: Adam and Charles Black, 1900) and compare E. Tisserant, *Ascension d'Isaie* (Paris, 1909). A new critical edition of the text would be highly useful.

⁴⁵While this on the whole is true, it should be noted that, in comparison with some other texts, the writer of the *Ascension of Isaiah* provides more information concerning the heavenly realms than some other similar narratives.

are somewhat more glorious than those on the left side. The angels praise Him who sits on the throne in the seventh heaven (VII.16–17).⁴⁶ The praise of the angels on the right is superior to the praise of the angels who occupy the left. As Isaiah ascends, the heavens become more glorious and the praise is more sublime. The higher heavens have more light than the lower heavens. One finds a dualism between light and darkness. For instance, in the sixth heaven Isaiah's angelic guide explains: "If you rejoice over this light, how much more (will you rejoice) in the seventh heaven when you see the light where the LORD is and his Beloved . . ." (VIII.25). As Isaiah relates the vision, he comments that on earth there is "much darkness"⁴⁷ when compared to the heavenly region. In the sixth heaven, the scene changes and all the angels look alike and their praise is alike. No throne is present. The power of the seventh heaven is so strong that it coordinates the functions of the sixth heavenly sphere. The angel makes this clear to Isaiah and explains: ". . . (they [angels of the sixth heaven] are directed) by the power of the seventh heaven, where the One who is not named dwells, and his Chosen One . . ." (Chapter VIII.7).

A similar structure of seven heavens is found in the *Apocryphon of John*. Yaldabaoth has fashioned for himself seven heavens with rulers for each realm.⁴⁸ This text provides the following description: "And he [Yaldabaoth] placed seven kings—corresponding to the firmaments of heaven—over the seven heavens and five over the depth of the abyss, that they may reign" (II, I.11.5). However, this cosmic structure is not unique to Gnosticism. Seven firmaments are also found in the Testament of Levi (according to some readings) and also in Slavonic Enoch. One of the homiletical midrashim *Pesikta Derav Kahana*⁴⁹ describes the Divine Presence ascending and descending through the seven heavens.⁵⁰ The Midrash on Psalms indicates that

⁴⁶This is stated in the first heaven. "And I asked the angel who lead me, and I said to him: 'To whom is this praise directed?' And he said to me, 'To the praise of [the One who sits in] the seventh heaven, the One who rests in the holy world, and to his Beloved, from where I was sent to you. To there it is directed.'" (Chapter VII. 16–17).

⁴⁷The *Ascension of Isaiah* VIII. 24.

⁴⁸Andrew K. Helmbold, "Gnostic Elements in the 'Ascension of Isaiah'", *New Testament Studies* 18 (1972) 225.

⁴⁹Hermann L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Atheneum, 1978) 210–11; and see now the extensive revision by G. Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, 1982) 270ff.; and cf. George F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), I:168; and see the revision by G. Vermes and F. Millar of E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973), I:96f.

⁵⁰*Pesikta Derav Kahana*, I:1; Bernard Mandelbaum ed., *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), I:2. Cf. W. Braude and I. Kapstein trans., *Pesikta-de-Rab-Kahana* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication

there may have been a progressive development in the sages' understanding concerning the celestial regions. It says that "our teachers" taught that there are two heavens on the basis of the verse in Psalms 68:33 (34 in Hebrew), "To him that rideth upon the heaven of heavens" (KJV). The *darshan* continues that others maintained that there are three heavens, as it was said, "the heaven and heaven of heavens" (I Kings 8:27), but Rabbi Eleazar taught that there are seven heavens and then he names each one.⁵¹ This idea was apparently well known for Rabbi Meir lists the seven firmaments in *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* and they also appear in other rabbinic texts.⁵² To support the theory that a conceptual development occurred, it should be noted that the Apostle Paul and an early recension of the Testament of Levi mention only three heavens.⁵³ The *Ascension of Isaiah's* seven celestial spheres is acceptable to a Jewish and to a Gnostic understanding of

Society, 1975) 5–6. On the number of heavens, see also the important discussion of Tabor, *Things Unutterable*, 116ff.

⁵¹The Midrash on Psalms, on Psalm 114:2, S. Buber, *Midrash Tehilim* (Israel, reprint 1977) 236a. Cf. W. Braude, trans; *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 2:215. In a parallel passage to this text, the tradition is attributed to R. Jeremiah b. Eleazar which is probably due to scribal confusion (Yalkut Shimeoni, vol. 1, remez 855). The conception of seven heavens also appears in other midrashic texts: Yalkut Machiri on Ps 114:5 (parallel to Midrash on Psalms; also attributed to R. Eleazar) and on Ps 24:22 (Resh Lakish); Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:32 (Rav [probably a scribal error] says there are two heavens while R. Eleazar names seven); Leviticus Rabbah 29:11 (anonymous, cf. M. Margulies' excellent critical Hebrew edition, 3:680); cf. also Numbers Rabbah 12:17 (the amoraim R. Huna and R. Abin are mentioned in the context); Song of Songs Rabbah 6:4,2; Esther Rabbah 1:12 (see the English translations in H. Freedman, ed. *Midrash Rabbah* [Soncino, 1951]). In b. Chagigah 12b R. Judah (bar Ilai, one of Akiva's disciples?) says that there are two firmaments but the Amora from a later period, Resh Lakish claims that there are seven. See also following note.

⁵²*Avot Derabbi Natan*, Recension A, Chapter 37, Solomon Schechter ed., *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan* (Israel, reprint, 1980) 55b. Cf. Judah Goldin trans., *The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956) chapter 37. Cf. some other Rabbinic passages that present a similar cosmology or are parallel to the above references: Pesikta Rabbati, 5 (Friedmann's edition, 18b); and see Friedmann's notes there. The Midrash on Psalms, Ps 92:2 (Buber's edition 201b); and see also the preceding note. Cf. P. Alexander, "3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch," J. Charlesworth, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:239f.

⁵³2 Cor 12:1–4; Paul says that he encountered Paradise in the third heaven. While this does not necessarily prove that according to Paul there were only three firmaments and no more, it seems that this indeed is Paul's cosmology. Moreover Charles suggested that the earlier version of the *Testament of Levi* contained three heavens and was later expanded to seven heavens (*The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, 2:304). In 1 Enoch 14:8–18 one discovers a vision in which Enoch rises: 1) from the earth into the heavens; 2) through a wall of fire into a "house;" and finally 3) into a second house wherein is located the divine throne. While Enoch was not primarily interested in describing heavenly geography, it must be observed that its description fits the three firmament conception quite well. While it seems reasonable that a system of a smaller number of heavens was later expanded, this is not absolutely

the heavenlies and cannot be said to be distinct from the ancient world's view of the regions beyond.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, the *Ascension of Isaiah* has some remarkable affinities to the Gnostic scheme. The thrones in the five lower heavens are occupied by the most glorious angel of that particular sphere. It seems that he leads the praise of the other angels and that he also determines who enters and who exits his celestial realm. This can be paralleled to the kings who reign in the seven heavens in the *Apocryphon of John*. The marked difference between the two schemes is that the seven celestial realms in *Ascensio Isaiae* seem to be in harmony with the Beloved, and He who is enthroned in the seventh heaven. While it is true that the power or influence of the seventh heaven decreases with each degree that is lower than the seventh heaven, the spiritual struggle is located in the earthly realm where the angels of Satan are in conflict and are said to be "envying one another."⁵⁵ This great disharmony is found in the lower terrestrial region. Indeed it is called the "alien world."⁵⁶ The lower firmament is viewed as having hostilities between the angelic beings.⁵⁷ In contrast to the *Ascension of Isaiah*, the *Apocryphon of John* views these seven cosmic regents to be united with Yaldabaoth in their rebellion against the highest deity.

Another important element presented in Isaiah's vision is its concept of the trinity. Isaiah's vision shows the primitive stage of an emerging trinitarian formulation. The text's expression of the trinity may be summed up in the words of Isaiah: "And I rejoiced very much that those who love the Most High and his Beloved will at their end go up there through the angel of the Holy Spirit."⁵⁸ In the sixth heaven Isaiah exclaims, "and there they all named the primal Father

certain and more research is needed. For instance, though not directly connected, one may compare the ancient Egyptian belief in the dangerous journey of the soul passing from life into death through the numerous gates which involved dealing with the different gatekeepers (see Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 25-31, 112-25 [especially 123]; H. Goedicke, "The Egyptian Idea of Passing from Life to Death," *Orientalia* 24 [1955] 225-39; cf. J. Bonomi and S. Sharpe, *The Alabaster Sarcophagus of Oimeneptah I* (London, 1864); A. de Buck and A. H. Gardiner, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts* [University of Chicago, 1935] and cf. also n. 13 above concerning the Greek view of death).

⁵⁴Bousset, 234, saw Iranian influence reflected in this cosmology.

⁵⁵*The Ascension of Isaiah* VII.9.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, VI.9.

⁵⁷J. Daniélou has pointed out the background of this belief, "Besides Satan and his angels there are the lower demons, the πνεύματα. *I Enoch* saw them as the souls of the giants who had been born of the union of the Watchers and the daughters of men, and Justin accepted this explanation (*II Apol.* v, 2-6) as did Athenagoras (*Suppl.* 1,24). It occurs in the *Clementine Homilies* (VIII.18). Whatever origin is ascribed to them, however, these demons live in the atmosphere surrounding the earth," *idem*, 190-91.

⁵⁸*The Ascension of Isaiah* VII.23.

and His Beloved, 'the Christ' and the Holy Spirit all with one voice."⁵⁹ The Beloved is identified as Christ and the Most High is the Father. Perhaps the most interesting element in the formulation is the understanding of the Spirit as an angel. One of the functions assigned to the angel of the Holy Spirit is to guide the righteous through the heavens.⁶⁰ All three are worshipped.⁶¹

Helmbold has tried to show some of the "Gnostic elements" that are found in the *Ascension of Isaiah*. In his article, he points to similar trinitarian doctrines in the Nag Hammadi literature. One of his examples is from the *Apocryphon of John* (II, 1.2.13f):

You are not unfamiliar with this likeness are you? That is to say, be not timid. I am the one who [is with you (pl.)] for ever. I [am the Father], I am the Mother, I am the Son. I am the unpolluted and incorruptible one.

A similar passage is found in the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (III,2:41,9):

Three powers come forth from him; they are the Father, the Mother (and) the Son, from the living silence, what come forth from the incorruptible Father. These [came forth] from the silence of the unknown Father.

These texts provide the normal trinitarian formulation from the Nag Hammadi literature, namely the Father, the Mother, and the Son.⁶² The Mother replaces the Holy Spirit. This development is of course a radical deviation from the texts in *Ascensio Isaiae* where the formulation appears to be based upon some early Christian tradition (cf. Didache 7:1) or perhaps even upon the one widespread reading from the gospel of Matthew where this well-known baptismal formula is stated, "... baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."⁶³

However, it is of great interest that the Gospel of the Hebrews contains a passage that links the Holy Spirit to the mother of Jesus.

⁵⁹Ibid., VIII.18.

⁶⁰Ibid., VII.23.

⁶¹Ibid., IX.27-36.

⁶²Helmbold, 224.

⁶³Matt 28:19 (ASV). The original reading of this text probably did not contain this formula, see the critical apparatus in the 25th edition of K. Aland's Greek text and his *Synopsis Quatuor Evangeliorum*. As David Flusser suggested, the better text and earlier reading was, "... teaching all nations in my name" (according to the readings of Eusebius before the Council of Ancyra—cf. Flusser, "The Conclusion of Matthew," *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 5 [1967] 110-20). For no apparent reason, this text has been deleted from the 26th edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament!

Origen and Jerome both quote this narrative a number of times in their commentaries, "Even so did my [the Savior's] mother, the Holy Spirit, take me by one of the hairs of my head and carry me away to the great mountain Tabor."⁶⁴ Perhaps the designation of the Holy Spirit as the mother developed from speculation surrounding the incarnation of Jesus or even because the grammatical gender of the word spirit in Hebrew is usually feminine. The *Apocryphon of John* calls the Holy Spirit the "mother of the living." This passage describes how the Sophia of the Epinoia created "the likeness of himself" without the consent of the Spirit. Afterwards:

... she surrounded it with a luminous cloud, and she placed a throne in the middle of the cloud that no one might see it except the Holy Spirit who is called the mother of the living. And she called his name Yaltabaoth.⁶⁵

The notion of the Holy Spirit being an angel can also be paralleled in the Jewish Christian sect of the Elkesaites. Hippolytus provides the account that a huge angel some ninety six miles high had reportedly revealed a book to Elchasai. This male angel was accompanied by a female angel. He writes, "The male is the son of God but the female is called the Holy Spirit."⁶⁶ Here, the Elkesaites not only view the Holy Spirit as an angel, but as a feminine angel as well. The identification of the Holy Spirit with an angel or with a female figure such as the mother of Jesus seems to be connected in some way to an early Jewish Christian theology.⁶⁷

The last item to be observed about the ascension is Isaiah's transformation. Isaiah's form undergoes a change as he ascends to each sphere. Isaiah exclaimed to his angelic guide, "And I said to the angel who (was with me), for the glory of my face was being transformed as I went up from heaven to heaven, 'Nothing of the vanity of that world is named here'" (*Ascensio Isaiae* VII.25). The leader of the praise in the sixth heaven restrains Isaiah from entering the seventh heaven because of his garment. Once he has received the proper

⁶⁴P. Vielhauer, "Jewish-Christian Gospels," in E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:160 and also especially p. 164 where the passage is quoted. Vielhauer cites the following references: Origen, *Com. on Jn.* II.12; *Hom. on Jer.* XV.4; Jerome, *Com. on Micah* 7:6; *Com. on Isa.* 40:9; *Com. on Ez.* 16.13.

⁶⁵*The Apocryphon of John* (II, 1, 10.9f.), *NHL*, 104.

⁶⁶Hippolytus, *refutatio omn. haer.*, Prol. IX, 13.1-3; Epiphanius *Pan.* 19.4,1 and 53.1,9; and see F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973) 56, 114, 115, 158, 159, 196, 197; cf. Daniélou, 65.

⁶⁷Here, it should also be noted that Origen and Jerome quote what has been named the "Gospel of the Hebrews" as identifying the Holy Spirit with the Savior's mother. Furthermore, the Elkesaites viewed the Holy Spirit as a feminine angel in the

garment from the Beloved, he enters. Again he undergoes transformations to join in the angels' praise.⁶⁸ Likewise, when the Beloved descends, he also undergoes transformation. The idea of Christ's physical metamorphosis is already alluded to in the so-called Christological hymns. Thus in Phil 2:6-9a one reads,

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him ...⁶⁹

Here the word *μορφή* is very significant. Christ was transformed "taking on the form of a servant." Moreover in *Ascensio Isaiae* his descent is hidden from the five lower heavens and also from the terrestrial realm. This seems to go back to an early Christian tradition which teaches that Christ's identity was concealed from the god of this world.⁷⁰ This teaching may be reflected in Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians, "... none of the rulers of this age has understood;

passage quoted above. The quotations from the Nag Hammadi texts omit the Holy Spirit in their trinitarian formulations. Instead, "the Mother" appears. Thus one discovers a connection between the Gnostic texts and the so-called "Jewish-Christian" Gospel of the Hebrews and the Elkesaites. Nevertheless the early Christian traditions concerning the birth of Jesus could possibly have caused similar independent interpretations by different sects. Various approaches can be found among scholars when they try to define Jewish Christianity. Of course the sources compiled by A. Klijn and G. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects*, have greatly contributed to research; and cf. Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Jewish Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969) 9ff.; Daniélou, 7ff.; Jakob Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979) 146ff.; the important study by S. Pines, *The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity according to a New Source* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1966); and the unpublished doctoral dissertation by R. Pritz, "The Jewish Christian Sect of the Nazarenes" (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1981; a revised version is currently being prepared by Magnes Press). For more bibliography, see P. Vielhauer, "Jewish Christian Gospels," E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:117.

⁶⁸*The Ascension of Isaiah* IX.30.

⁶⁹Flusser suggested that the transformation of the Beloved in the descent is already alluded to in the so-called Christological hymns whose sources are probably pre-Pauline. The same idea is expressed in the *Epistula Apostolorum* 14 which is remarkably similar to *Ascensio Isaiae*. (See H. Duensing, "Epistula Apostolorum," E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:197-98). The idea of transformation in both texts was noted by Duensing, *ibid.*, 190 and see also M. Hornschuh, *Studien zur Epistula Apostolorum* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965) 2ff.

⁷⁰*The Ascension of Isaiah* X. 10ff.

for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord."⁷¹

The infrastructure of ideas, the concept of the world, and some basic elements in Isaiah's vision could be easily transferred into a fully developed Gnostic framework. However a Gnostic believer would feel that the author of *Ascensio Isaiae* was not fully enlightened. The text could quite possibly have been used by Jewish Christian orders, Christian groups, or semi-Gnostic sects.⁷²

THE APOCALYPSE OF PAUL

The intriguing Nag Hammadi tractate, *The Apocalypse of Paul*, describes Paul's heavenly journey to the tenth heaven. He is directed through the cosmic regions by the spirit who acts as his celestial guide and helps him pass the gatekeeper in the seventh heaven.⁷³ The gatekeeper is called the old man and he tries to prevent Paul from completing his journey and returning to his fellow spirits in the tenth heavenly domain. The other twelve apostles are mentioned, but it seems that Paul is given priority over them.⁷⁴ A preference for Paul

⁷¹1 Cor 2:8 (ASV). The position that "the rulers of this age" refers to demonic powers has recently been challenged by G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 103-4, and see especially n. 22.

⁷²The semi-Christian groups are those who could accept a Docetic view of Christ (*The Ascension of Isaiah* XI). Gnostic groups may have used the text, but the point here is that the *Ascension of Isaiah* itself is not a Gnostic text. The Gnostic would sense that the author did not know some essential facts, e.g., the division of the deity (cf. R. McL. Wilson, "Jewish Christianity and Gnosticism," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 60 (1972) 263f. and Hans Jonas' discussion in J. P. Hyatt, *The Bible in Modern Scholarship* [London: Kingsgate Press, 1966] 286ff.). While not all Jews were very knowledgeable about their religious traditions, it seems quite probable that the text was compiled by a Jewish Christian. One can observe that the text is set in the atmosphere of Jewish apocalyptic. The cosmology, the angelology, the throne room, the angelic guide, and other elements all have antecedents in Jewish literature. This does not mean that they are uniquely Jewish. Yet, the culminative impression given by the text is inescapable. Also, the identification of the Holy Spirit with an angel is not without its significance (cf. Box, p. xxv). At this point, the author can only concur with Box's suggestion, "... the 'Vision' (vi-xi) was, at the earliest, composed at the latter end of the first century A.D., and probably by a Jewish Christian" (Box, p. xxlv). The reasons for an early date for the sources of the ascension have been noted above (n. 43). Daniélou views the text as coming from the first century (the period between Nero's death and 80 or 90) and postulates Jewish Christian authorship. Other scholars hold to the view that the vision was a Christian composition (Charles, p. viii; Charlesworth, 125-26; J. Flemming and H. Duensing, 643).

⁷³*The Apocalypse of Paul* V,2:18,20; *Ibid.*, V,2:23, 2-30.

⁷⁴This point is debatable. For instance, the other apostles arrive in the tenth heaven ahead of Paul. However, the whole narrative revolves around Paul's experience. It is Paul who successfully leads the conflict with the old man figure. Is it possible that

may be identified as a Valentinian feature.⁷⁵ The narrative is concerned with Paul's ascent and transformation into a spiritual being. The translators have noted three different episodes in the text: 1) an epiphany scene, 2) a judgment scene, and 3) the ascension motif.⁷⁶

In the epiphany scene Paul meets a small child on the mountain of Jericho, as he is traveling to Jerusalem.⁷⁷ Apparently, the small child symbolizes Christ. This view is proposed by the translators who point to other similar texts that parallel this thought, where a child represents Christ (*Apocryphon of John* BG 2 20, 19–21,4; *Acts of John* 88).⁷⁸

The narrative of the epiphany scene appears to echo Paul's Epistle to the Galatians.⁷⁹ In this letter, Paul explains that he received the gospel through the revelation of Jesus Christ (ἀποκαλύψεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).⁸⁰ The title of this codex, the *Apocalypse of Paul*, therefore reflects Paul's term *apocalypsis* in Galatians. The city of Jerusalem also appears in both narratives. As the passage in Galatians continues, Paul did not go up to Jerusalem immediately, in order to have his message approved by the other apostles; only later did he make his way to Jerusalem and meet with Peter and James. Another point of contact between Galatians and the *Apocalypse of Paul* is Paul's conversation with the young child. The child designates Paul as the one who was blessed from his mother's womb.⁸¹ This expression from the epiphany scene apparently comes directly from Paul's

his confrontation with the old man enables the others to ascend (*The Apocalypse of Paul* V, 2:23, 30–24,2)? At one point during the journey, Paul passes the other apostles who were before him (ibid. 22, 14–16). In short, it seems that Paul is given prominence over the other apostles (cf. William Murdock and George MacRae, "The Apocalypse of Paul," James Robinson ed., *Nag Hammadi Codices* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979) 48–49 (noted ahead as *NHC*).

⁷⁵*NHC*, 49; George MacRae and William Murdock, "The Apocalypse of Paul," *NHL*, 239.

⁷⁶*NHC*, 48. Cf. Klauck, "Die Himmelfahrt des Paulus (2 Kor 12,2–4) in der koptischen Paulusapokalypse aus Nag Hammadi (*NHC* V/2)," 167.

⁷⁷*The Apocalypse of Paul* V,2:18, 5–16; 19,12; cf. with translators note on V,2:18.5. The significance of Jericho is unclear. The writer of the apocalypse is acquainted with the route from Jericho to Jerusalem. Whether he was indeed familiar with the geography of Palestine cannot be ascertained from this evidence because he could have known this travel route from other sources (for example Luke 10:29–37). For the significance of Jerusalem, cf. Klauck, "Die Himmelfahrt des Paulus (2 Kor 12,2–4) in der koptischen Paulusapokalypse aus Nag Hammadi (*NHC* V/2)," 185–86.

⁷⁸*NHC*, 48; *NHL*, 239. Compare also Epiphanius, *Pan.*, 30.3,6 (F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects*, 178–79) where some of the members of Jewish-Christian sects are said to have believed that the Spirit who is Christ had come upon the boy Jesus.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Gal 1:12.

⁸¹*The Apocalypse of Paul* V,2:18, 12–14.

Galatian letter, "But He who had set me apart, *even* from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace was pleased to reveal His Son in me" (Gal 1:15-16a ASV).

In the epiphany episode, not only does the young child serve as a figure of Christ, but he also has another important significance in the text: he identifies himself as the Spirit. Functioning as a leader or as a semi-divine guide, the Spirit accompanies Paul during his revelation and during his ascent through the heavens. This spirit is also referred to as the Holy Spirit.⁸²

The writer of the *Apocalypse of Paul* does not give an extensive description of the heavenlies. In this respect, the *Ascension of Isaiah* provides a much fuller picture of each celestial realm. Here, the text skips the first three heavens entirely and takes Paul to the fourth heaven. It is difficult to determine if this is an actual journey or only a revelation. Unfortunately, the first part of the text has not been recovered or it might have alleviated this difficulty. Nor is it possible to know exactly when the journey occurs. Nevertheless, it may be cautiously presumed that this is an interpretation of Paul's experience which he describes in his second epistle to the Corinthian congregation. Even though this is true, in the Corinthian passage, Paul reports that he was lifted up into the third heaven, which is contrary to the Nag Hammadi document where he passes through the seventh heaven to Ogdoad and continues rising on to the tenth celestial realm. It may be conjectured that the author did not consider the evil domain of the old man in his mathematical formulation and only started counting the heavens at the point in which Paul was liberated at Ogdoad.

The judgment and punishment motif has been gleaned from Jewish apocalyptic and seems to be dependent upon the *Testament of Abraham*.⁸³ The *Testament of Abraham* presents several textual and redactional problems,⁸⁴ but the core material of the book seems to go back to a Jewish provenance and is probably based on Semitic sources.⁸⁵ The present form of the text has been re-edited and redacted, as is indicated from the two recensions. Christian influences

⁸²Ibid., 18, 20; 19, 20-26.

⁸³One other example besides the *Testament of Abraham* (chapter 10) can be found in I Enoch 56. 1-3.

⁸⁴M. R. James, *The Testament of Abraham* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Krauss Reprint Limited, 1967) 54-55. See now G. Nickelsburg, *Studies in the Testament of Abraham* (Missoula, Montana: Society of Biblical Literature, 1976).

⁸⁵G. H. Box, *The Testament of Abraham* (London: SPCK, 1927), p. xv. Stone has made a new translation based on James' Greek text cited above (n. 65). Michael Stone, *The Testament of Abraham* (Missoula, Montana: The Society of Biblical Literature, 1972). Now the theory of a Semitic original for the Testament of Abraham has been seriously questioned, E. P. Sanders, "Testament of Abraham," J. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1:873-74.

have been introduced into the text.⁸⁶ The motif as it appears in the *Apocalypse of Paul* is more similar to the longer recension of the *Testament of Abraham*, which James and Box consider to be, generally speaking, less original than the shorter recension.⁸⁷ The translators of the *Apocalypse of Paul* noted that the judgment section in the Coptic version of the *Testament of Abraham* is even more similar to the *Apocalypse's* version.⁸⁸

Paul's ascent begins with the young child asking Paul to let his mind awaken.⁸⁹ During the ascent, Paul is instructed to view his likeness upon the earth.⁹⁰ Apparently, this is to answer the exegetical question that arises from Paul's account of his ascension experience in the Corinthian letter. Paul wrote that he was uncertain whether he had remained in his body or whether he had arisen out of his body.⁹¹ At the beginning of the *Apocalypse* narrative, the twelve apostles are above or ahead of Paul; however, in the sixth heaven Paul passes them.⁹² Because he passes the twelve, the text appears to exalt Paul above the other apostles, although they arrive at the tenth heaven ahead of him. However, Paul is the one who contends with the old man in the seventh sphere and this may be what allows the twelve to go on before him. This indicates that Paul still occupies a prominent position in relation to the remaining apostles. Moreover, the entire narrative centers around Paul and the twelve are of secondary importance to him.⁹³

Naturally, the most important aspect of the text is Paul's transformation into a spiritual being. The old man of the seventh heaven appears to be connected to the evil God of Israel who is enthroned on high in Jewish literature.⁹⁴ Here he is the Demiurge figure who tries to prevent Paul from completing his journey.⁹⁵ He asked Paul where he is going. Paul answers with the phrase, "I am going to the place from which I came."⁹⁶ This, of course, is an important element in the

⁸⁶James, 50–55.

⁸⁷Box, *The Testament of Abraham*, p. xii; James, 49.

⁸⁸*NHC*, 48. Unfortunately, the Coptic version of the *Testament of Abraham* was unavailable to this author, but when the text was discussed with George MacRae, he reiterated the point. Namely, the Coptic Version of the short recension of the *Testament of Abraham* (Chapter 10) forms the basis for the Nag Hammadi codex. It should also be noted that such a judgment motif is not unusual in Jewish apocalyptic (e.g., *Enoch* 56:1–3).

⁸⁹*The Apocalypse of Paul* V,2:18,22; 19, 10.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 19, 26–32.

⁹¹2 Cor 12:3.

⁹²*The Apocalypse of Paul* V,2:22, 14–16.

⁹³See nn. 74, 75 above.

⁹⁴Isa 6:1ff.; 1 *Enoch* 14:17ff.

⁹⁵*NHC*, 48–49.

⁹⁶*The Apocalypse of Paul* V,2:23, 8–10.

Gnostic religion; the divine spark has to make its ascent back to the highest deity.⁹⁷ After Paul passes through Ogdoad, the eighth sphere, and the ninth celestial region, he enters the tenth heaven where he is greeted by the now transformed apostles, his fellow spirits.⁹⁸ Thus, Paul and the apostles have undergone transformation into spiritual beings.

One fascinating but bold question remains to be asked about this text: What is the author's motive? Of course, the question of motive or intention is not answered satisfactorily or with a great amount of confidence. One suggestion is that the author had an exegetical motive in mind. His interest to enlarge or to interpret an unclear or an obscure passage of the New Testament has been observed in his treatment of the Pauline epistles. He wants to fill in the missing details. The second suggestion is that the author wrote from a polemical concern.⁹⁹ This theme is seen in his conflict with the old man who best represents the God of Israel. Indeed, the Father who rules the seventh heaven in *Ascensio Isaiae* has been transformed into a Demiurge figure. Of course, other possibilities exist. The author develops various themes around his exegetical interests, but the polemical interest is quite prominent.

THE ASCENSION OF ISAIAH AND THE APOCALYPSE OF PAUL

A cosmological structure, a conceptual frame of reference and literary connections clearly exist between the *Apocalypse of Paul* and *Ascensio Isaiae*. The cosmic structure of the universe in both texts is very similar. The *Ascension of Isaiah* has seven heavens while the *Apocalypse of Paul* has ten. By way of comparison, both texts have a region that is hostile to the supreme deity. By way of contrast, the *Apocalypse of Paul* has seven realms dominated by a Demiurge figure which is counter to the *Ascension of Isaiah* which lacks a fully developed Demiurge character. The *Ascension of Isaiah* exhibits only the terrestrial realm as being involved in a spiritual struggle contrary to the Father and the Beloved in the seventh heaven. This realm contains demons with a hierarchy of powers. In addition, the judgment and punishment motif distinguishes the *Apocalypse of Paul* from Isaiah's vision. Instead of angels punishing a soul, the angels in the *Ascension of Isaiah* praise the One enthroned in the seventh heaven. This is the primary theme in Isaiah's celestial regions. In spite

⁹⁷See the discussions e.g., H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963) 35; Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, 7-8; and Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 171ff.

⁹⁸*The Apocalypse of Paul* V, 2:23,30; 24, 1-8.

⁹⁹The author is grateful to have had the opportunity to discuss this text with George MacRae and for his helpful insights.

of the differences, the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Apocalypse of Paul* are constructed upon the same basic cosmology.

The texts also seem to be closely related conceptually. The concept of ascent and transformation is strong in both narratives. Paul ascends to be changed into a spiritual being. Isaiah, on the other hand, ascends to see the unknown heavenly world and to view the hidden descent of the Beloved. Isaiah returns to share the vision with the prophets, but Paul is absorbed into spiritual reality. Isaiah is transformed as he enters each new level of the firmaments, but Paul's transformation occurs as he enters the regions beyond the old man's domain. An anti-Jewish polemic apparently underlies the old man figure in the *Apocalypse of Paul*. Likewise, an anti-Jewish tendency surfaces in *Ascensio Isaiae*. For instance, Isaiah instructs that the vision cannot be entrusted to the people of Israel.¹⁰⁰ Another passage describes how Satan aroused the people of Israel to have the Beloved crucified because they did not know his true identity.¹⁰¹ This primitive anti-Jewish propaganda is unfortunate indeed, but it is still far removed from the notion that the God of Israel should be identified with a Demiurge figure.

Other mutual literary connections attest to the relationship between the two narratives. The *Ascension of Isaiah* teaches that the angel of the Holy Spirit will lead the righteous (those who love the Beloved) through the heavenlies.¹⁰² Notably, Paul's ascension guide is called the Holy Spirit.¹⁰³ Another connection is that Isaiah's mind was taken from his body at the beginning of his vision.¹⁰⁴ This is parallel to the instruction that Paul received to allow his mind (*νοῦς*) to awaken.¹⁰⁵ In 2 Corinthians Paul also speaks about being "out of the body." Here both the *Apocalypse of Paul* and the *Ascension of Isaiah* relate the mind to the experience of ascent. As Paul is restrained at the entrance to Ogdoad, so also is Isaiah delayed at the threshold of the seventh heaven.¹⁰⁶ Paul looks to his guiding spirit who tells him to give the signal to the old man and then he enters Ogdoad.¹⁰⁷ This sign functions as some kind of password that forces the old man to open the gate. Isaiah, on the other hand, is given the proper garment and then his entrance is allowed. His angelic guide explains that the leader of praise in the sixth heaven delayed Isaiah until he received the proper garment. Along this same line, it is remembered that Paul

¹⁰⁰ *The Ascension of Isaiah* XI. 39.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, XI. 19.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, VII. 23.

¹⁰³ *The Apocalypse of Paul* V,2:18, 20; 19, 20-26.

¹⁰⁴ *The Ascension of Isaiah* VI. 10-11.

¹⁰⁵ *The Apocalypse of Paul* V,2:18,22; 19, 10.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 24, 1-30; *The Ascension of Isaiah* IX. 1-5.

¹⁰⁷ *The Apocalypse of Paul* V,2:23, 20-26.

orders the toll collector to open the gate of the sixth heaven.¹⁰⁸ As noted above, Paul was required to give the special signal to cross into Ogdoad. Similarly, in reverse fashion, the Beloved gives the proper watchword to enter the three lower celestial realms during his descent to earth.¹⁰⁹ The purpose here, is not to suggest a literary dependence of one of these texts on the other. However the connections between these texts suggest that they developed in a similar religious climate. It is reasonable to assume that the *Ascension of Isaiah* represents an earlier stage of religious thought than that presented in the *Apocalypse of Paul*.¹¹⁰

Ascensio Isaiae betrays earlier Jewish sources which have been employed in a Christian work. First, it should be remembered that the *Ascension of Isaiah* is an expansion of an early Jewish text no longer independently extant concerning Isaiah's tragic fate. Second, the entire cosmological system of the text can be paralleled in Jewish apocalyptic literature. Third, the concept of the Holy Spirit being an angel can also be seen in Jewish Christian sects. Daniélou and Box have suggested that *Ascensio Isaiae* was written by a Jewish Christian and as already noted this approach has much to commend itself.¹¹¹ Even though this theory concerning the authorship of *Ascensio Isaiae* is sound, it is not absolutely certain. These issues could conceivably have captured a non-Jewish writer's imagination who could have obtained Jewish sources for his work. In some ways the work resembles a targumic expansion or a free midrash loosely based upon Isaiah and it addresses matters which are related to Jewish Christian theological concerns. While admittedly these issues would also have interested some non-Jewish Christians, the combination of all these elements suggests that the final compiler of *Ascensio Isaiae* was indeed a Jewish Christian.¹¹²

The *Apocalypse of Paul* seems to have shared a common religious background with the *Ascension of Isaiah*. The *Apocalypse of Paul* has a structure that can be paralleled in Jewish Apocalyptic. The author is acquainted with some form of the *Testament of Abraham*. The mention of three witnesses in the judgment scene can be found in Jewish sources.¹¹³ But all of these elements could have come into the text second hand, through Christian influence. If one would accept

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 22, 18-22.

¹⁰⁹*The Ascension of Isaiah* X. 24-29. It should also be noted that the four sages are also put to the test, see n. 10 above.

¹¹⁰The similarities between the texts are greater than one might assume at the first examination of the texts.

¹¹¹Box, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, p. xxv; Daniélou, 12ff.

¹¹²See n. 72 above.

¹¹³*The Apocalypse of Paul* V,2:20,20-21,22; Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; 19:15; compare to. Sanhedrin 11:1 and parallels; Matt 18:16.

the difficult challenge to try to define this influence more narrowly, the outcome would probably point to some form of a Jewish Christian theology. At least, the latent sleeping Gnostic framework in the *Ascension of Isaiah* is awakened and fully developed in the *Apocalypse of Paul*. Could the beliefs of early Jewish Christian groups¹¹⁴ have played a role in blossoming Gnostic religious thought?¹¹⁵

MYSTICISM AND THE ASCENSION MOTIF

The study of the Ascension Motif in selected Jewish, Christian and Gnostic texts suggests certain stages of development. Paul's revelations, to a lesser extent in Acts but particularly his ascent to Paradise in the third heaven, present the personal testimony of mystical experience. Even though he hears words that cannot be uttered and receives a message so significant for his own work, there is no hint of an exclusivistic esotericism in his account or that he experienced great danger in his sublime encounter. In talmudic literature, the four rabbis also enter פָּרָדֵס and only Akiva returns unharmed. Isaiah, the Beloved, and Paul undergo transformation in *Ascensio Isaiae* and *Apocalypse of Paul*, whereas neither Paul nor the rabbis do in 2 Corinthians and talmudic literature.

Hence, *Ascensio Isaiae* introduces a new stage. Although an exegetical interest is prominent and the descent of the Beloved is of

¹¹⁴Whether Jewish Christianity actually provided the matrix for Gnosticism remains an open question. Nonetheless many of the ideas of "classical Gnosticism" preceded the rise of Christianity. W. W. Combs, "Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, & New Testament Interpretation" *GTJ* 8:2 (Fall 1987) 195–212. See for instance the difference between *Eugnostos the Blessed* and the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (NHL, 206–28). D. Parrot may be correct when he suggests that the version of *Eugnostos the Blessed* existed before the text was adapted to have the risen Christ teach his followers revelation in the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (NHL, 206). But is Parrot correct in saying that the *Eugnostos* is free from Christian influence? The question is discussed by R. McL. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 111–17. Whether the *Eugnostos the Blessed* is to be dated before the rise of Christianity or is free from Christian influence is debatable. Wilson observes, "At the very least, however, they [some seemingly Christian terms in the text] seem to demand a due measure of caution over against assertions that *Eugnostos* is entirely non-Christian or shows no sign of Christian influence. There is nonetheless a further possibility: is the Epistle of *Eugnostos* itself a Christianised version of an earlier document?" (*ibid.*, 116). See also the analytical discussion of E. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 104–7.

¹¹⁵Here it is worthwhile to quote Wilson who speaks about a possible environment that would have provided a seedbed for Gnostic thought, "At least, one could say that there existed a great variety of thought-forms and tendencies, which are generally classified in the quite vague category of Gnosis. The 'classical' gnosticism of the second century is a consequence of these currents. In an attempt to show that Gnosis had its *Sitz-im-Leben* in a Christian milieu, inspired by Jewish-Christian apocalyptic, Daniélou has rightly drawn our attention to the fact that Jewish Christianity was a factor in the development of the ideas from which a precise gnostic system was formed" (Wilson, 259).

prime importance, one discovers the motif of metaphysical transformation which is already alluded to in the Christological hymns.¹¹⁶ An angelic guide is required in order for Isaiah to make the ascent and of course such guides are well known in Jewish apocalyptic. However, in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, one enters a new phase where the mysteries and the dangers of the heavenly regions become patent. The Apostle Paul becomes involved in the conflict with the old man figure and it seems that a basic mystical experience has been used in a developing doctrine of esotericism and rebellion against the old man figure who seems to represent the God of Israel. The text emphasizes the special knowledge required to make the ascent through the hostile celestial spheres in order to join the fellow spirits. The one making the journey must know how to avoid being deceived by the Demiurge in the seventh heaven.

CONCLUSION

From this study of the heavenly ascent in mystical speculation, it is clear that the stages that make a distinction between a mystical experience and a sophisticated doctrine of esotericism can provide an instructive heuristic for further research. No doubt the exact relationship between merkabah mysticism and gnosticizing ideas in Jewish, Christian and Gnostic texts will continue to be a current issue in scholarly debate. In the very least, the present textual study suggests that the differences between these texts are of far greater significance than are the similarities.

¹¹⁶See n. 69 above.