

TEMPLE ASCENT IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES AND RELATED TEXTS:
KNOWLEDGE AND UNION.
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This is an overview of a vast area of temple tradition: heavenly ascent.

First, it is important to emphasise that belief in heavenly ascent and the practice of heavenly ascent did not originate in the Jerusalem temple, nor did it disappear when the actual temple was destroyed in 70 CE.

Try to think of it as a river: various streams flowed into the main watercourse and later that watercourse split into several streams to form a delta. Because Temple Theology is focused on the temple in Jerusalem, and in particular on the first temple, we shall treat that as our main watercourse, and I shall offer a brief overview as it is known from the Jerusalem temple.

We begin with the temple building itself, where beliefs were expressed in the shape of the building. The floor plan was a square for the holy of holies, and then a double square for the great hall. These areas represented the whole creation - visible and invisible - and they were separated by a curtain known as the veil of the temple. Each day of creation described in Genesis 1 corresponded to a part of the temple, and so going into the temple was moving back through the days of creation to its origin in the holy of holies. The square on the floor plan indicates the golden cube-shaped room that represented the uncreated light of the glory of God.

The laver for purifying the priests, which stood outside in the court of the temple, represented the creation of human beings on the 6th day; the altar of sacrifice, also in the court of the temple, represented the birds and animals made on the 5-6th days; the seven lamps of the menorah, within the temple, represented the lights of heaven made on the 4th day; the table for cereal offerings, within the temple, represented the dry land and plants made on the 3rd day. The veil that marked the boundary of the material, visible world represented the firmament made on the 2nd day, to conceal the mysteries of the non-material, invisible world; and this invisible world was the holy of holies, the golden cube beyond the veil, which was Day One. The material creation existed in time; the hidden creation was beyond time. In Hebrew, the words for hidden and eternal are from the same root, *'lm*.

The firmament represented by the veil of the temple separated the upper waters from the lower waters, according to Genesis 1.6. It is not easy to know exactly how they imagined this, but the waters of the holy of holies were an important element in temple ascents, as we shall see, and they described the throne of God set amidst the heavenly waters.

The hidden state was Day One, not 'the first day'.¹ It was beyond any temporal sequence because it was outside time, and Day One was the state of unity underlying and beyond the visible and temporal creation. The imagery in the ascent texts from the Jerusalem temple shows that the person ascending to heaven was entering the holy of holies, Day One. The mystic was entering the origin of all things.

¹ Thus both the MT and the LXX.

Many explanations were given for the term Day One, but of particular interest is that of Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, the great teacher during the latter years of the first century CE. Day One, he taught, was the state when the Holy One was One with everything.² This is an important element in temple ascent, because those who entered Day One became One. Unity was a key element in temple ascent.

Day One was the presence of God, and those who entered Day One became themselves divine. Everyone who entered the holy of holies became a holy one. There were many ways of describing the holy ones, the most familiar being the term ‘sons of God’, that is, the angels. In temple discourse, ‘holy’ means that a person or object has acquired holiness, but holy of holies, sometimes translated ‘most holy’, means that a person or object imparts holiness. The holy of holies imparted holiness to any person who entered that state.

The angels had many roles; one was to be a messenger from God. The Hebrew word angel is the same as the word messenger, *mal’ākh*. The angels brought heavenly knowledge or wisdom. Since the holy of holies was One, all knowledge was One, and the angels showed how all things joined together. ‘Discovery’ is essentially recognizing how things join together, hence our word ‘inspiration’ – something given by the Spirit. The angels revealed and indeed were the glory of God in the created world. This was another role, perceived by human minds as their second role but in fact an aspect of the angelic unity.

One of the controversies surrounding Day One was whether the angels were part of Day One or whether they were made later, on the second or even on the fifth day. This was an important debate, because if the angels were in Day One, then human minds could perceive the divine Unity of Day One through the presence of the manifold angels who, though understood as many by the limited human mind, were in fact the One. This underlies the later debates about the Unity of God and the Trinity.

The temple ascent was an ancient practice. We know this because Deuteronomy said it was not necessary. The Deuteronomists represented a puritanical strain in Israel’s faith traditions, emphasizing strict observance of the Law of Moses and denying or dismissing as irrelevant much that had formerly been accepted. For example, they denied that the elders had seen the God of Israel on Sinai, even though an earlier account says they did: ‘Seventy of the elders of Israel went up and they saw the God of Israel’ (Exod.24.9-10). The Deuteronomists simply denied this: ‘The Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.’ (Deut.4.12). If the Deuteronomists could change something as important as the story of Sinai, they clearly had a strong agenda. They wanted to move away from the older tradition of going up the mountain and *seeing* God. This was ascent and vision in its earliest form.

Later they compared the simplicity of the Law of Moses to other revelations that Israel had received:

² Genesis Rabbah III.8.

For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' (Deut.30.11-13).

From this we conclude that the Deuteronomists knew of teachers who had gone up to heaven to bring them teaching, and those teachers had passed over a sea to receive that teaching. These were the people who ascended to heaven and crossed the waters in heaven in order to learn the knowledge of the holy of holies.

Since the scribes who transmitted and collected the Scriptures were most often disciples and descendants of the Deuteronomists, it is easy to see how texts describing the older ascent traditions were not always carefully preserved and in some cases, we suspect, were even deliberately damaged.

Here is one example. Proverbs 30 is a collection of sayings where the first verse is now unreadable. In the Hebrew text the sayings are attributed to a man who is otherwise unknown, but in the Greek they are the words of the king. Verse 3 is of special interest.

The Hebrew is:

I have not learned Wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the holy ones

The Greek is:

God has taught me Wisdom and I have learned the knowledge of the holy ones.

By exchanging two Hebrew letters, the word 'God' becomes the word 'not', and so the source of this wisdom is both obscured and denied. The passage was originally about the king who ascended to heaven where God taught him the knowledge of the holy ones. The king who ascended became as wise as an angel, This is precisely what Deuteronomy claimed was not necessary for those who had received the Law of Moses, and so one wonders whether the Hebrew text was deliberately changed.

We are therefore dealing not with a stream that flowed unimpeded through the temple tradition of ancient Jerusalem, but rather with a stream that was deliberately diverted or even stopped. Its waters went elsewhere, and so we find evidence for heavenly ascent only in a few very old Hebrew texts. These are often obscure because their context is unfamiliar or because they have been damaged. We find most of the evidence for heavenly ascent in texts with ancient roots that were not included in the Hebrew Bible.

The wise woman of Tekoa who spoke to King David said: 'My Lord the king is like the angel of God to discern good and evil... My Lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth...' (1 Sam.14.17, 20). She may have been flattering the king, but her words show how the king expected to be seen: as an angel or messenger of God, and so as one who had ascended into heaven to learn what the angels knew.

This explains why the Greek and Hebrew texts of Isaiah 9.6 are so different: the Hebrew text gives the four throne names of the new king: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, but the Greek sums them up in one title: Angel of Great Counsel. The Greek translation, which was made in Egypt, shows that that community remembered the real significance of the king's throne names.

The Book of Isaiah preserves many glimpses of temple ascent. The book is a collection of material from the Isaiah and his disciples, but the original Isaiah, who lived in Jerusalem in the eighth century BCE, did himself experience the ascent and his disciples followed him. Traditions about them can be found in a text used by the first Christians - *The Ascension of Isaiah* - and the characteristic of Isaiah's disciples was that they believed in the ascension into heaven (Asc. Isa. 2.9).

The Book of Isaiah is not usually read as an ascent text, but an enigmatic account of the history of Israel preserved in *I Enoch* shows that some people understood it in that way. Maybe we could say 'they still understood it in that way'. The problem with any ancient text is that we cannot know whose beliefs it represented, and how widely those beliefs were known and accepted. The enigmatic history is the *Apocalypse of Weeks* which describes each period of Israel's history as a 'week'. There are ten weeks, and the climax of the first part, at the end of the fifth week, is building the temple. Then, in the sixth week, the priests of the temple become corrupt, they lose their spiritual sight and forget wisdom, and the temple is destroyed. During that sixth week, 'a man ascends'. The text does not name the man, but he seems to be Isaiah, since his throne vision in Isaiah 6 also concerns corruption and the loss of wisdom.

Read as an ascent text, Isaiah 6 puts the ascent experience at the very heart of the ancient royal cult in Jerusalem: Isaiah saw the throne and heard the voices of the burning ones, the seraphim with six wings who called out 'Holy, Holy, Holy'. He was conscious of his own impurity, and that he and his people had adopted false teaching. They were a people of unclean lips. 'Woe is me... I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people on unclean lips' (Isa.6.5). Isaiah was sent with a message for his erring people: that they would lose (or had already lost) their spiritual perception: their ears were heavy, their eyes were shut. This too is like the *Apocalypse of Weeks*, where the people lost their spiritual sight and abandoned wisdom just before a man ascended.

This ascent text in Isaiah is similar to material in *I Enoch*, where Enoch stands before the throne and hears the same heavenly song (1 En.39.12); and in the Book of Revelation, where St John stands before the throne and hears the heavenly beings with six wings as they sing 'Holy holy holy'. From this ascent setting, the song of the seraphim passed into Christian liturgy, and 'Holy Holy Holy' is still part of the Eucharistic prayer, either as the preface or as the response.

There are many other ascent texts in Isaiah. The four Servant Songs, for example, were important texts for the first Christians. 'Servant Songs' is the name given by fairly recent scholarship to four poems, almost certainly from the original Isaiah, that were reused by one of his later disciples. The best known of them is the fourth Song (Isa.52.13-53.12), recognised by the Christians as a prophecy of the suffering and death of Jesus: 'despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief'. This too is an ascent text, and the Hebrew is damaged. The Qumran Isaiah scroll shows that in the time of Jesus, a different text was known, which was clearly an ascent text.. Further, this different text was the one used by Jesus, who, according to Luke, explained to his disciples on the

road to Emmaus that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and enter the glory: ‘Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ Luke 24.23). . He must have been using the Qumran version of Isaiah, an ascent text.

Reading this Qumran text in the light of the Greek translation, we find that the Servant was anointed and transfigured and no longer looked like a human being. He was raised up and acquired understanding. He suffered, and this purified him³. After his suffering he saw the light and was filled with knowledge. This knowledge enabled him to set things right. In other words, the Servant was purified, ascended into heaven and there learned the wisdom that enabled him to understand and so to uphold the creation.

The disciple of Isaiah who re-used the Servant Songs was reminded in his own call vision that he had ascended to the holy of holies and looked out from there to see all history before him. He had seen the divine plan: ‘Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? (Isa.40.21). He had seen the people of the earth like grasshoppers, and great princes and rulers brought low. He saw the future of his own people. This was an ascent experience.

All the prophets’ accounts of standing before the throne are ascent texts, from Amos in the 8th century who declared : ‘Surely the Lord does nothing without revealing his secrets to his servants the prophets’ (Amos 3.7); to Habakkuk who stood in the tower - the holy of holies was often called a tower - to look out and see what the Lord would show him (Hab.2.1); to St John who was summoned into heaven: ‘Come up hither and I will show you what must take place after this’ (Rev.4.1).

Jesus knew the ascent experience. When St Luke described the temptations in the desert- an account which must have come from Jesus himself since he was alone at the time – he wrote: ‘The devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time’ (Luke 4.5). He saw all history before him. Jesus said he saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven (Luke 10.18), suggesting that he had seen the vision recorded in Revelation 12, where Satan, the deceiver of the whole world, was thrown down from heaven (Rev.12.9). Most of Revelation is set in the holy of holies and so is an ascent vision. St John knew of Jesus’ experiences: the preface to Revelation says that the book is ‘the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave *to him* to show his servants what must soon take place... ‘ John the Baptist also knew of Jesus’ ascent experiences, and told his disciples: ‘He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony... (John 3.31b-32).

Jesus prayed after the Last supper: ‘Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence, with the glory that I had with thee before the world was made’ (John 17.5). Jesus had come forth from the glory and divine unity of Day One, the origin of all creation, and he was returning to the state whence he had come. This is what the disciples glimpsed at the Transfiguration, and what St John described in the prologue to his gospel: ‘the true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world’.

³ Thus the Lxx.

For details about the ascent tradition in Jerusalem, it is necessary to use books that are outside the Hebrew Bible. There are two reasons for this:

- first, because those who defined what books should be in the Hebrew Bible were wary of the ascent tradition. The wars against Rome had brought destruction to Jerusalem, and apocalypses, which were a form of ascent texts, had fueled the rebellion. It became forbidden to enquire about or to teach the ascent traditions associated with the holy of holies: these were Day One, the description of the throne chariot in Ezekiel 1, and the four things: what is above, what is below, what as before and what will come in the future.⁴
- second, these teachings had been the preserve of the high priests, and were not generally revealed. Bishop Ignatius of Antioch, however, writing about 100 CE, said ‘To Jesus alone as our high priest were the secret things of God committed’⁵. The heavenly knowledge and the belief in union with God were at the heart of the ascent experience, and they were also at the heart of the teaching of Jesus, as can be seen throughout the fourth gospel.

The largest collection of ascent material is found in *1 Enoch*, which was used as Scripture by the first Christians. Enoch was a high priest figure. His name means ‘the dedicated one’. The world of *1 Enoch* is the world of Isaiah; in fact, Isaiah has more in common with Enoch than he does with Moses. Both Isaiah and Enoch ascended to stand before the throne in heaven, but in *1 Enoch* there is far more detail. Enoch was carried up to heaven by winds and lightning⁶ and entered first the outer house and then the inner house - the temple and the holy of holies. These were places of fire, and in the inner house he saw the great throne and the Great Glory seated there. He was sent with a message of warning to the fallen angels.

All this is very similar to Isaiah’s call vision, since the fallen angels in Enoch’s account are a thinly veiled reference to the corrupted priests, those whom Isaiah called the people of unclean lips, and those whom the *Apocalypse of Weeks* called the people who had lost their spiritual sight. The sins of the fallen angels – idolatry, soothsaying, making weapons – were the sins listed by Isaiah as the corruptions of his own people (Isa.2.6-8), and so the vivid pictures of the heavenly world that we find in *1 Enoch* would almost certainly have been familiar to Isaiah.

When Enoch was summoned into the divine presence, he was shown all the secrets of heaven and earth. The angels instructed him in what must have been the knowledge of the holy ones, the phrase we found in that corrupted ascent text in Proverbs 30. Enoch learned the names and roles of the various angels, knowledge that was still treasured by the Essenes. Josephus described this sect in the time of Jesus and said that they revealed none of their secrets to others, and that they preserved the ancient books of their group and the names of the angels.⁷

The second section of *1 Enoch* comprises three detailed accounts of his ascent to the holy of holies and what Enoch saw and learned there. First he was carried up into heaven by a whirlwind and stood among the angels. He saw flowing water which he said was righteousness, he heard the angels singing ‘Holy Holy Holy’ and then the angel of peace who was his heavenly guide, showed him all

⁴ Mishnah Hagigah 2.1

⁵ Letter to the Philadelphians 9.

⁶ 1 Enoch 14.8

⁷ Josephus *War* II.142.

the secrets of the heavens and how the kingdom was divided. In other words, he saw how the divine unity separated out into the plurality of the angels and then of the material creation.⁸ All was bound together by a great cosmic covenant or oath.⁹ He also saw how the deeds of human beings were weighed in the balances and judged, and how the angels brought them punishment.

The most remarkable of these visionary texts in *1 Enoch* describes how Enoch was transformed into an angel himself, how he became part of the divine unity. So startling is this text that when the great British scholar R H Charles first worked on it, he assumed the text must have been corrupted. He suggested that part of it had been lost. More recent scholarship has confirmed what R H Charles had feared: that Enoch was transformed into a figure called the Son of Man: 'I fell on my face, my whole body melted, and my spirit was transformed.'¹⁰ An important element in Christianity had been part of the Enochic ascent tradition of the ancient high priests. .

This experience is described in another Enoch text, *2 Enoch 22*, where Enoch is taken up to stand among the beings with six wings that surround the throne. The Lord summons him and commands Michael to anoint him and clothe him in garments of divine glory. Enoch then looks at himself and sees that he has become one of the glorious ones. He has become an angel.

Exactly the same experience is described in an early Christian hymn:

(The Spirit) brought me forth before the face of the Lord

And although I was a man, I was named the Light, the Son of God...

He anointed me with his perfection, and I became one of those who are near him'¹¹

The ascent was part of early Christian experience; they could sing of being taken up and transformed into angels. .

We began with the creation and the temple. The golden cube of the holy of holies represented the fiery place at the origin of creation. The psalmist knew that the Lord was in his temple and that his throne was in heaven (Ps.11.4). In the temple heaven and earth were one. The priests were the angel messengers, which is why Malachi condemned the priests of his time because they were fallen; they had given false teaching and thus broken the covenant that held the creation in place (Mal.2.7).

Extraordinary memories of the ascent experience in the holy of holies appear in the hymns found at Qumran. The *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* describe the angels worshipping in heaven, but they are also the priests in the temple, as Crispin Fletcher Louis has shown¹². The hymns describe the holy of holies as a place of fiery light, a mingling of gold and white and scarlet, which is exactly how the interior of the golden cube would appear to those within, reflecting the scarlet of the temple veil but not the blue or the purple. These poems were written by someone who had been there. .

⁸ 1 Enoch 41.

⁹ 1 Enoch 69.16-25.

¹⁰ 1 Enoch 71.11.

¹¹ Odes of Solomon 36.3, 5.

¹² C Fletcher-Louis, *All the Glory of Adam*, Leiden: Brill, 2002.

The coloured veil of the temple separated the upper waters from the lower waters, and in the midst of the golden holy of holies was the throne of God. All these were the settings for the ascent texts. The waters around the throne were frozen into crystal, says the legend in the Life of Adam and Eve¹³, so that Adam could walk over when he left. Paradise. Ezekiel saw the waters as he looked up to the throne: a shining firmament of terrible ice (Ezek.1. 22). St John saw the throne set in a sea of glass (Rev.4.6), and saints in glory were standing by the sea of glass, praising the Lord on his throne (Rev.15.2-4). Isaiah saw the Lord in his majesty in a place of broad rivers and streams (Isa.33.21) - those streams that Enoch saw by the throne - and Ezekiel condemned the proud king who thought he was a god enthroned in the heart of the seas (Ezek.28.2).

What happened when the temple ascent stream divided into its delta and sent out its streams?

First, there were the *merkavah* mystics, the Jews who ascended to stand before the heavenly throne which they described as a golden chariot, a *merkavah*. In recent years scholars have shown a great interest in their writings, moving from the position that they represented a radical transformation in normative Judaism, to recognizing that their roots were ancient, possibly even older than 'normative' Judaism.

Second, there were schools of Neoplatonists in the same areas as the centres of *merkavah* mysticism, and a case can be made for the *merkavah* tradition influencing the thought of Iamblichus.¹⁴ There was a natural affinity between Platonism and temple tradition, since Pythagoras had been influenced by the teachings of the first temple.

Third, there is the work of St Dionysius, whose influence on Christian theology and liturgy has been huge and where the influence of the temple ascent tradition is very clear. Here are a few extracts :

This is the kind of divine enlightenment into which we have been initiated by the hidden tradition of our inspired teachers, a tradition at one with Scripture. *Divine Names* 592B.

In the divine realm, unities hold a higher place than differentiations. They have the first place and they remain united even after the One, while retaining its singularity, has turned outwards to differentiation. *Divine Names* 652A.

The divine Light grants to creatures the power to rise up, so far as they may, towards itself and it unifies them by way of its own simplified unity. *Celestial Hierarchy* 121B.

Keep these holy truths a secret in your hidden mind. Guard their unity safe from the multiplicity of what is profane. *Celestial Hierarchy* 145C.

We can reasonably say that purification, illumination and being made perfect are all three the reception of an understanding of the Godhead... *Celestial Hierarchy* 209C. .

The stream of temple ascent also flowed into Gnosticism and found its way into many other systems.

¹³ Life 29.

¹⁴ See J Vanderspoel 'Merkavah Mysticism and Chaldean Theurgy' in *Religion in the Ancient World*, ed. M Dillon, Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1996, pp.511-522.

None of the material I have assembled here is new. What I suggest is that by re arranging the patterns and questioning the received theories of origins and directions of influence, we can recover the ascent practices of the first temple in Jerusalem. Thus we can appreciate more fully the extent of its influence both in the ancient world and in the world of the Christians.