

**Temple ascent in earliest Christianity**  
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The notion of the temple runs all through the Jewish and the Christian scriptures. The work of our leader Margaret has been to show how traditions about the original temple in Jerusalem – not the Herodian temple familiar to Jesus but the one that was destroyed in 586 BCE – were carried over into early Christianity and inspired the development of the new movement. Although I have not previously been involved with the Temple Studies Group, I have read with interest about the previous Symposia. On the tenth anniversary, it seems we have come full circle, as with our Lord and other dignitaries we ascend to heaven and see things as they really are.

I am glad that we are considering Egyptian and Islamic evidence today. This is ample demonstration that the topic is not peripheral, but very near the heart of the religious understanding which brought much ancient religion to birth - despite the fact that mysticism is often marginalized by religious commentators who have failed to see that, in many cases, it prepares the way for the expression of theological convictions and so is a necessary priority for writing and thought.

**The heavenly world in earliest Christianity**

One preliminary question: How did the first Christians view the heavenly world? Clearly, they drew on the cosmology of earlier Judaism. Although the Jewish world-view was not uniform, we can summarize it briefly without being too wide of the mark. The biblical world knew of three different spaces: first floor, ground floor and basement, if I can put it like that. On the ground floor stand you and I. It's the human world – temporally limited and spatially determined. Human beings are born and die. When they die, at least according to the Hebrew Bible, they take the elevator downstairs – to the shady region known as Sheol, the place of the dead. This has its counterpart in the Underworld of Greek and Roman mythology. Thus Psalm 89.48 says, mournfully yet truthfully, “Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol?”

Even the good guys go down to Sheol. This includes the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The human hope was to enjoy long life and to raise a family. This is what happened to Job after his trials: “After this Job lived for one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children’s children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days” (Job 42.16-7).

On the first floor dwelt God and the angels. God is conceived in the Bible as a royal figure, seated on a throne and surrounded by angels as his courtiers. The people who completed the Pentateuch, naughty people that they were, offer a very restricted account of events in heaven. Genesis 1 does not mention the angels, despite asserting that “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1.1). We must turn to the prophets to find the older and more complete view. An early example is the vision of Micaiah-ben-Imlah in 1 Kings 22.19: “I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him”. Micaiah’s experience is matched by that of the prophet Isaiah: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew” (Isaiah 6.1-2).

We know that this type of view is not peripheral because it is found also in the Qumran literature and throughout the New Testament, as well as more selectively in the rabbinic literature. The Qumran *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* abound in angelic vocabulary: the angels' function is to serve in the heavenly sanctuary and to perform the liturgy there. John the Divine's picture of the heavenly world in the Book of Revelation speaks of elders and creatures surrounding the throne of God, heaven in that context supplying the real meaning of events on earth; while the early Christian mystical text called the *Ascension of Isaiah* mentions innumerable angels in the seventh heaven to which the seer gains privileged access (*Ascen. Isa.* 9.6).

Margaret has written widely about why the rabbis might have found problems with the angels. She mentioned Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai this morning. My purpose here is to deal with the early Christian evidence. In both the Qumran literature and the New Testament, the angels celebrate the heavenly liturgy. Information about this was regarded as an important item of theological knowledge. God in the first century was an enthroned deity; angels were his courtiers who sang his praises and magnified him just as officials in ancient courtrooms revered the king. While this function may be analogical, Jewish and Christian writers in the early Common Era were profoundly interested in the heavenly world. Both mystical perception and temple ascension had significant parts to play in this type of knowledge.

### **The temple in earliest Christianity**

A related question is how the temple in Jerusalem was viewed in the early Common Era. The temple was not just any old religious building, nor even a very important religious building. It was, very graphically, seen as the point of intersection between heaven and earth. This was the place, to perpetuate my analogy, where the lift was housed which permitted privileged upwards ascent for certain people. At the centre of the temple stood the Holy of Holies. In the second temple, this was empty. The Babylonian Talmud (*Horayoth* 12a) tells us that the furnishings of the first temple were hidden away in the time of King Josiah. Another Jewish writing called *Numbers Rabbah* (15.10) anticipates that these will be restored with the coming of the Messiah. Solomon's Holy of Holies housed the cherub throne, the throne of the divine presence which stood at the heart of the cult.

In a universe where God himself was omnipresent, the temple represented the meeting-point of the human and the divine. Psalm 11.4 proclaims that "The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord's throne is in heaven." On this view, God reigned supreme in heaven – but also in the temple. His earthly presence among his people was embodied in the king, whom Psalm 2.7 famously describes as the divine Son. Not without conviction does the Chronicler observe that "Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king instead of David his father" (1 Chron. 29.23). The human figure on the temple throne was the earthly counterpart of the deity who occupied the heavenly throne. This view stands at the heart of temple theology and of the theology of temple ascents which we are considering today.

The key figure in this context, apart from the king, was the High Priest. In view of his cultic functions, notably activity on the Day of Atonement, the key feature of the High Priest's role was to mediate between heaven and earth. The third century BCE Greek writer Hecataeus observed that:

“The High Priest is an angel [to the Jews] of God’s commandments”. The last writing prophet, Malachi, commented: “For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the *malak* of the LORD of hosts”. The word *malak* is often translated “messenger”; but it also means “angel”, and that translation seems implied in this context. Yet again, Zechariah 3 describes the robing of the High Priest Joshua in the heavenly sanctuary. Once Joshua had fended off Satan’s efforts as prosecuting counsel, he is invested with the robe and turban as symbols of his office. Then he is told by the angel of the Lord: “If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here” (Zech. 3.7).

This material conveys the suspicion that, in Israel’s oldest traditions, priests were regarded as angels, and the High Priest was an angel of very high rank – possibly if not probably the Angel of the Presence who is mentioned in a number of apocalyptic writings. Once a year this high angelic figure entered the truly numinous place – the Holy of Holies – and mediated the contrition of his people to the deity. We need to be clear what is going on here. Given that the Holy of Holies was the meeting-place of heaven and earth, the High Priest’s annual entrance into the earthly sanctuary was, at one and the same time, his appearance in the *heavenly* sanctuary. Not without reason did the pre-Christian writer Philo (*On Dreams*, 2.189, 231) say that the High Priest is “not a *man* when he enters the holy place to make atonement.” And of course Jesus, in his role as Melchizedek, entered the heavenly sanctuary when he suffered death upon the cross in the thought-world of the writer to the Hebrews. We shall now see how this strand of Judaism affected the growth of early Christianity, which it did in quite a direct way.

### **The Ascension of Isaiah**

Four people ascended to heaven in the writings of early Christianity: Jesus, Paul, John the Divine and Isaiah (five if you include traditions about James the Just, the brother of Jesus). One of them didn’t make it all the way: and it wasn’t Isaiah, despite his strange return from Old Testament times. That distinction rests with Paul; on whom, more later. The question that I start with is: why was Isaiah such a significant figure for the writers of early Christianity? He is cited more often in the New Testament than any other prophet – and not in fact just because Isaiah 53 was seen as a prophecy of the suffering of Jesus. John 12.41 comes closer to the mark when the narrator reports that Isaiah “saw his glory, and spoke about him”. The allusion is to Isaiah’s call-vision I mentioned a moment ago, interpreted as a vision of Christ. Isaiah was celebrated in early Christianity as a witness of the heavenly mysteries whose experience foreshadowed that of Jesus and helped to define its religious perspective.

One neglected strand of evidence shows how Isaiah’s mysticism and its background were understood in early Christianity. That strand is the text I mentioned a moment ago: the work called the *Ascension of Isaiah*. It comes in its present form from the early second century but it includes earlier elements. The second half is widely agreed to come from the first century CE. This part describes how Isaiah made a mystical ascension to the seventh heaven, in which his body became inert on the ground while in imagination he ascended to this sublime region where he saw the three divine beings and witnessed the saving events concerning Jesus: The Saviour’s descent to the earth in disguised form and his death and resurrection.

The setting and content of this ascension bear closer examination. I believe that, set against more opaque material in Ephesians and 1 Peter, the *Ascension of Isaiah* offers an explicit account of how the Christians understood the rite of *baptism* and its theological and social importance in the very earliest period. How and why this might be so should be explained. The first observation is that the *Ascension of Isaiah* is designedly liturgical in character. In chapter 6, the prophets come from isolated locations to a convention in the royal court. Isaiah enters a mystical trance where the other prophets surround him as he falls inert on the ground. The routine is similar to what we know about Jewish mystical ascensions or the so-called “descents to the *merkabah*” from the rabbinic literature. This is not an isolated trance but one that is witnessed by a select group of initiates. The narrative that follows in chapters 7-11 is a unique and apparently first-hand account of what happened in this event.

Though Isaiah’s body is inert, his mind is very much alive and active. Isaiah notices the details of the ascension and recounts them coherently to others. The universe through which he ascends has seven heavens, each transcending its inferior in splendour to the extent that Isaiah observes to the angel accompanying him: “No mention is made of that vain world here?”. He is told that “nothing that is done there passes unnoticed here.” The middle heavens have a distinctive arrangement, each containing a throne with a seated angel surrounded by other angels to right and to left. This reflects the hierarchy of the three divine beings which Isaiah sees when he enters the seventh heaven in chapter 9.

There is an important difference in this from most Jewish apocalypses. Texts such as *2 Enoch* are very much a Cook’s Tour of the Universe, no detail being spared in these texts about the heavenly phenomena including physical phenomena as well as theodicy. The ascension in the *Ascension of Isaiah* is not a panoramic journey of this kind but a restricted narrative whose purpose is expound the transcendence of the heavenly world and the means of human access there. This is the real purpose of Isaiah’s journey. It is not a Cook’s Tour at all, but a performative experience in which mystical transformation facilitates the ascension and shows us what it is about.

Such transformation is evident throughout the text. When Isaiah ascends into the third heaven (7:25), he notices that “the glory of my face (S/L2: my spirit) was being transformed as I ascended from heaven to heaven.” This is when he observes that the human world has completely been left behind. Similarly, when on the threshold of the seventh heaven in chapter 9, Isaiah is initially refused entrance by the angelic gatekeeper until the Beloved One – the work’s name for the heavenly Christ – steps forward to provide him with a robe. When he enters the seventh heaven, Isaiah sees “the holy Abel and all the righteous; there too I saw Enoch and all who were with him (E text only). They had been stripped of their garments of the flesh. I saw them in their heavenly robes. They were like angels who stand there in great glory (S/L2: they stood there in great glory)” (9.8-9).

The fact that these are antediluvian heroes is not incidental. These people represent the original dispensation of Judaism, taken over by earliest Christianity – the dispensation that the Deuteronomists suppressed and which allowed for more than divine being in the heavenly world. It is made clear that these are indeed the spiritual ancestors of the Christians, for in 9.26 the angel tells Isaiah: “There are many from that world who will receive these robes through believing in the voice of that one who will be called as I have told you; and who will keep them and trust in him and in his

cross. These robes are placed ready for them.”

This is a clear indication that the Christians rank with the patriarchs. Like the patriarchs, they are people who belong to the seventh heaven and who have been inaugurated into this type of understanding through the mystical vision granted to Isaiah. They have experienced, through the telling of the story, what it means to leave earth behind and to don the heavenly robe, sharing the beatific vision and seeing what even the angels cannot see. If there was a reservation of mysteries in earliest Christianity, as both Joachim Jeremias and Margaret remind us that there was, the veil has been drawn aside in this apocalypse to give the Christians a clear insight into their destiny and new religious status. They are people who belong to the seventh heaven and who know that the people around them are controlled by the inferior angels in the firmament. For this reason, I suggest that the *Ascension of Isaiah* represents perhaps the most complete example of so-called “saving knowledge” that we possess from the literature of earliest Christianity.

At the conclusion of the vision, Isaiah is told: “You have seen what no child of flesh has observed. You will return to your body until your days are complete. Then you will come here” (11.34-35). This is the conclusion of the experience and the fulfilment of what Isaiah is promised in 7.22 where the angel tells him: “above all the heavens and their angels your throne stands (ready), and also your robe and your crown, as you will see.” Isaiah thus ascends in imagination from his inert body on the ground through the entire universe until he is temporarily transformed into a being of the seventh heaven, only to return to earth to wake up and narrate the vision to others, whereupon in the work’s fictitious setting it is written down and preserved for posterity – no doubt to be read very often in a liturgical context.

The question arises of what setting nurtured this mystical ascension. We find here the description of the *heavenly temple* to which a privileged seer makes the journey with appropriate transformation. Isaiah is a well-known prophet - the archetypal Christian who shows the younger prophets how to live and what makes them people of faith. His journey exemplifies what they must and can experience. There is a formal clue in 6.5: “so that he could place his hand upon them, and they could prophesy, and he could hear their prophecy. All of them stood before Isaiah.” This suggests a gathering of Christians on a formal occasion where a religious experience takes place which involves ascension to the seventh heaven and transformation into a heavenly being. That is followed by a return to earth and a natural lifespan, but with the promise that the Christian departed will pass to this heavenly state which they have experienced already.

There is one obvious setting where this ascension makes sense, and that is in the early Christian rite of baptism. I suggest that baptism lies at the heart of the *Ascension of Isaiah*, and that this text lets us see, much more clearly than the New Testament literature, how baptism was understood in the earliest Christian experience we can recover. My reconstruction runs along the following lines.

Baptism was a notable yet infrequent event, with careful preplanning and where Christian initiates gathered together potentially from several different communities. Baptism was administered by a senior figure – possibly one who had himself made the mystical journey and could guide initiates along the way. The key to the ceremony was what it was believed took place there. This was, both theologically and experientially, a journey from the earthly to the heavenly sanctuary guided by a figure who represented the High Priest. Christian initiates were encouraged to make the mystical

journey for themselves by hearing the narrative – such hearing possibly passing over into actual mysticism, though we lack the first-hand evidence to determine this point precisely.

In making the journey, Christian initiates entered the resurrection life for themselves, journeying from their present location to the place of their final destiny. They entered the resurrection life through heavenly robing, as Isaiah does in chapter 9. This was symbolized by the robing after baptism on earth when they left the water. This is how new Christians were initiated into their eschatological destiny. The earthly event was the outward form of a heavenly reality, that reality being entered upon at baptism with the proviso that the remaining life must be lived out on earth before the final transformation. The text stands at the cusp of two axes – spatial and temporal. Temporally, the final destiny has begun already through the spatial revelation that Christian initiates can perceive the mysteries of heaven and receive their heavenly robe.

The importance of the *Ascension of Isaiah* is that it very likely sheds light on how baptism was understood in much first century Christianity. It is likely that this temple ascension involved a priestly initiation as well as entrance into the resurrection life. Thus 1 Peter, which also has baptismal affinities, speaks of the entire church as a “royal priesthood”, as if the Christian community stands as the spiritual successor of the original temple priesthood. Baptism and resurrection were simultaneous events involving a mystical journey and the proleptic experience of resurrection which determined the Christian perspective on earth.

### **Paul and his successors**

I said earlier that Paul – the best-known Christian of the first century - was one of those who did not make a successful ascension. This view depends on the interpretation of what Paul himself says in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul describes an ascension to the third heaven, evidently in a context where he is the subject of a third-person reference and where he claims to have entered “Paradise” and heard things no mortal may repeat. While this is clearly a mystical ascension, the reference to the third heaven is odd because it contrasts both with the single-heavened universe of the Book of Revelation and then with the seven-storied cosmology of the *Ascension of Isaiah*. Since Paul mentions three heavens, it is likely that he knew the full seven and that something other than baptismal transformation is envisaged in this passage. It therefore doesn’t really matter that he didn’t make it all the way – though this is probably an indication that he didn’t see himself as a High Priest!

This is not to say, however, that Paul was unmindful of baptismal transformation. Quite the opposite is true. In his early letter Galatians, Paul says that “as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” It is disputed whether this form of words comes from Paul himself or whether he adapted an existing formula. If the second half looks Pauline, the first is almost certainly traditional. The crucial point is that Paul’s equality principle depends on the earlier baptismal allusion to “clothing”. Paul’s view is that baptism and incorporation into Christ depend on this. While he does not elaborate this metaphor in any detail, the *Ascension of Isaiah* provides a plausible background for Paul’s view in its temple ascension

mythology and its insistence that the resurrection life begins at the moment of baptism.

If Galatians was as early as 48 CE, as some scholars think, we find here the earliest baptismal reference in the New Testament. Already the “clothing” metaphor is firmly established, suggesting that it goes back even earlier and represents the oldest Christian understanding of baptism we can recover. What was meant by “clothing” in Galatians is not spelled out; but, clearly, the term is used as a shorthand as if to communicate to readers a concept with which they were familiar already. My suggestion is that there was indeed a familiar baptismal ritual from an early point in the first century and that the temple ascension of the *Ascension of Isaiah* lets us see something of how it was conducted. This means that Paul is probably less rational than he is sometimes portrayed and the *Ascension of Isaiah* is by no means as eccentric as you might suppose!

One further passage from Paul. Romans 6.4: “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” Without being over-technical, the emphasis here is on the death of Jesus but also on the death of the Christians, both of which are said to have occurred already. Although the Christians have yet to conclude their lives on earth, the really significant death is that which has occurred through mystical transformation and which spans the gulf between earth and the heavens. In ritualized form, this yields the present status of resurrection which determines human life and precedes the human death. The Christians live the resurrection life *now* because they have *already* entered the heavenly sanctuary and donned the heavenly robe. This concept stands at the very heart of Pauline theology.

The Letter to the Ephesians was probably not written by Paul, but it stands in the Pauline tradition. The key feature of Ephesians is its link between the enlightened Christian understanding, transmitted through baptism, and an emerging Christian ethic which must sustain the church in the world until human life is done. The image of baptismal clothing undergirds Ephesians 4: “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Eph. 4.22-4). While again the language is elliptical, the notion of clothing is again baptismal, and this passage draws on the Pauline theme, found more extensively in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, to assert that the resurrection life has begun already.

Finally from the Pauline tradition, Hebrews. Hebrews supplies the christological narrative which undergirds this theology of baptism. Jesus for Hebrews is Melchizedek, the original High Priest who transcends his Aaronic counterpart. Heaven for Hebrews is a sanctuary: the cross of Jesus is the Holy of Holies. Twice in Hebrews, in chapters 6 and 10, it is said that, at the moment of his death on earth, Jesus appears as the High Priest in the *heavenly* sanctuary to accomplish his final atonement. This is his resurrection – his entrance into heaven and his reign at God’s right hand. What is true of the Saviour must become true of the Christians as well. They are initiated into a gospel where Jesus has bridged the gap between earth and heaven, and where the Christian hope is said to “enter the inner shrine behind the curtain.” (6.19). The result is that “we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh).” That entry is accomplished in baptism, resurrection faith of this kind sustaining the Christian community on the evidence of a number of first century authors besides the *Ascension*

of *Isaiah*.

### John the Divine

The significance of Revelation lies both in its content and also in its author's identity. Eusebius tells us that John became "a priest wearing the *petalon*" – the ceremonial garment of the High Priest (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.31). The High Priest as we have seen was an angel who mediated the heavenly life. The purpose of Revelation was to make available the secrets of heaven for the benefit of Christians on earth. The rationale behind this is the belief that Christians are given such esoteric knowledge because they have entered the resurrection life already and have become citizens of a different realm altogether. The power of Revelation lies in commending the value of the temple ascension and of bringing its eschatological perspective to bear on the lives of a marginalized religious community on earth.

The highlight of Revelation is reached at the beginning, in the throne-vision of chapters 4-5 which sets the tone for what follows. Of crucial importance is Rev. 5.10. The Lamb is held worthy to open the seal because: "you have made [the ransomed] to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth." As in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, this temple ascent confers priestly status, the resurrection existence being angelomorphic in character. These Christians are the sealed figures of Revelation 7 who "have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them" (Rev. 7.14-15).

The social value of this priestly knowledge lies in its transformation of the self-understanding of the Christian community and its inculcation of a "special" status in which affinity to the heavenly realm is the key. These Johannine Christians understood heaven as a temple and believed their community was a priestly conventicle in alien territory, not unlike the self-understanding of the Essene community at Qumran. These were the joyful Christians who proclaimed, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever." (Rev. 11.15). That is precisely Peter Berger's category of "deviant knowledge": knowledge that overturns the dominant view and replaces it with completely the opposite on the authority of the heavenly world itself. Since, as Margaret reminds us, the Book of Revelation is central and not peripheral to the theology of first century Christianity, we do n well to read the entire New Testament in this type of light.

### Jesus

Last, but not least, Jesus himself. The question of what Jesus thought about himself is a vexed one, largely because we cannot penetrate the psychology of another person and because Jesus has not been around for some considerable time now. Even the earliest sources date from at least twenty years after his death.

My escape clause here is that I'm time-limited and that any discussion of Jesus demands a full



investigation where both the sources and the problems are considered. Nonetheless, I make one very basic point. The notion of baptism as clothing stems from the earliest Christianity we can recover, and the *Ascension of Isaiah* shows that it has a strong resurrection slant. Clearly, the idea must have come from somewhere. So where did it come, and what kind of changes occurred along the way?

Margaret's answer is that we are driven back to the baptism story as the most likely time that something distinctive "happened" in the mind and experience of Jesus. Though the evidence is ambiguous, the Synoptic Gospels indicate that Jesus's baptism was followed by a mystical experience in which his identification as the divine "Son" by a heavenly voice was the crucial factor. Indeed, it seems that the visionary experience was more significant than the baptism itself, although the opening verses of Genesis as interpreted by the rabbis linked the exposition of the creation story with visionary perception of heaven for those who have eyes to see the connection.

My own belief is that the hypothesis Jesus enjoyed mystical experience at his baptism is a plausible one, and that Margaret may well be correct to link his alleged identification with the divine Son on that occasion with royal and priestly traditions such as Psalm 2.7 so as to indicate that Jesus thereafter considered himself the High Priest. If so, the vision of the Transfiguration is definitely significant. Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus, then these two representatives of the Law and the Prophets disappear to leave Jesus – the High Priest in the order of Melchizedek – standing with his disciples at the head of the renewed priestly community.

It would be fascinating to explore these connections on another occasion. I hope, nonetheless, that today's Symposium has kindled your interest in the topic of heavenly ascents, and convinced you that we're not just Trekkies but that this strand of belief stood near the heart of much religion in the Ancient Near eastern world. So far as the Christian evidence is concerned, a neglected text has turned out to be significant. The *Ascension of Isaiah* looks back to earlier texts and makes their baptismal allusions more coherent. Paul, Hebrews and John all share the same basic theology that the resurrection life begins now and that a mystical perspective determines the Christian understanding on earth. I do indeed hope that colleagues will not shy away from mysticism in their researches, because it is a focal point on entrance into the world of earliest Christianity.