

HEAVENLY ASCENTS OF ENOCH AND PAUL

by

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(Under the Direction of Wayne M. Coppins)

ABSTRACT

This thesis will examine the accounts of heavenly ascents in *The Book of Watchers* and *2 Enoch* as examples of Jewish *Merkabah* mysticism and explore the light they shed on the nature of both Paul's Damascus Road Experience and his "visions and revelations of the Lord" of which he speaks in 2 Corinthians 12. Taken as a continuation of Paul's own *Merkabah* praxis, these events contributed significantly to Paul's understanding about God's plan of salvation and his own role in it.

INDEX WORDS: Paul and *Merkabah*, Damascus Road Experience, Paul's visions and revelations, Pauline soteriology

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my wife, Jane Foster McGown, and my two sons, Todd Foster McGown Elihu, and Evan Hewitt McGown.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A great deal of work has been done in the last 30 years or so by scholars on the possible connections between Jewish texts produced in the period c. 300 BCE to c. 200 CE.¹ and emergent Christianity. This represents an almost tectonic shift in focus upon this material. Among this literature are accounts of Jewish *Merkabah* mysticism that have been probed for foundational ideas of early Christology.² Alan Segal has explored connections with the life and writings of Paul and shown how Paul's Christology, soteriology, and eschatology were influenced.³ This paper attempts to confirm his Damascus Road Experience as an instance of *Merkabah* mystical experience. Additionally, when Paul's "visions and revelations of the Lord," of which he writes in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10,⁴ are seen as continuous with the heavenly ascents recorded in the Pseudepigrapha, especially the Enochic literature, one is afforded an understanding of the nature and significance of these experiences. This paper purports to demonstrate the appropriateness and results of analyzing Paul's mystical experiences in light of Jewish *Merkabah* mysticism in Ezekiel, the Targumim, and in the Enochic accounts of heavenly ascent found in the Pseudepigrapha.

Let us turn first to my employment of some terms.

¹ Various names have been used for this period including "Second Temple Judaism," "the intertestamental period," and "Middle Judaism." See Boccaccini 1991, 7-25, for a discussion.

² See Eskola 2001, 7-25 for a survey of the work on Christology.

³ Segal 1998 and 2004.

⁴ All Biblical references and quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

What is Jewish *Merkabah* mysticism? *Merkabah*, Hebrew for “throne-chariot,”⁵ mysticism originates in the book of the prophet Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible (Ezek. 1-3). Ezekiel reports that “the heavens opened, and I saw visions of God.” (Ezek. 1:1) This is followed by a fantastic vision of a throne-chariot upon which is seated “something that seemed like a human form,” “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.” (Ezek. 1:26 and 28) That Ezekiel sees God on a throne reflects one of the most central of Hebrew metaphors—the glorious enthronement of God the King.⁶ His vision includes an audition, his own commissioning by God himself to prophesy:

Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel...and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord God.” Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them. (Ezek. 2:3-5)

Related texts are found in Isaiah (6:1-13) and Daniel (7:9-14). The Isaiah passage begins straightforwardly, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne.” (Isa. 6:1) The fantastic chariot of Ezekiel is missing from Isaiah and, though Isa. 6:2-12 elaborates the prophet’s vision some what, there are many fewer details about the creatures in attendance upon God—and differences as well. Still, the Lord is sitting upon a throne “high and lofty” with seraphim in attendance and praising him. The prophet’s lips are purified, and Isaiah volunteers to be commissioned by the Lord:

⁵Though the word for “chariot” does not appear in the text of Ezekiel, the descriptor “throne-chariot” has been used to describe the vision.

⁶ Eskola 2001, 44ff.

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” And he said, “Go and say to this people...” (Isa. 6:8-9)

Daniel also reports a vision of an “Ancient One” whose “throne was fiery flames and its wheels were burning fire.” (Dan. 7:9-14) This echoes strikingly Ezekiel’s vision. He introduces in his vision a court (of unspecified composition) that sits in judgment. And he sees “one like a human being” who was presented before the Ancient One and to whom “was given dominion and glory and kingship...that shall not pass away.” By so doing, he links *Merkabah* mysticism with eschatology. This linkage between Jewish mysticism and eschatology has resulted in some confusion for it became combined into the term “apocalypse.” Collins offers the following definition of the genre of apocalypse (from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις meaning “revelation”):

[A] genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world.⁷

This definition, while helpful perhaps in cataloging which works should be considered together in studying apocalyptic literature, did a disservice to the study of mysticism, including *Merkabah* mysticism. DeConick puts her finger on the cause of the confusion:

⁷ Collins 1998, 5.

[W]hen the early Jews and Christians describe their mystical experiences in a single word, they do so most often by employing the term *apokalypsis*, an “apocalypse” or “revelation.” In the Jewish and Christian period-literature, these religious experiences are described *emically* as waking visions, dreams, trances, and auditions that can involve spirit possession and ascent journeys. Usually these experiences are garnered after certain preparations are made or rituals performed, although they can also be the result of rapture. The culmination of the experience is transformative in the sense that the Jewish and Christian mystics thought they could be invested with heavenly knowledge, join the choir of angels in worship before the throne, or be glorified in body.⁸

Apokalypsis, the *emic* word used for a wide variety of mystical experiences with many different contents, came to be considered only for the eschatological element they contained.⁹ To avoid slighting the purely mystical elements which some ἀποκαλύψεις, i.e., revelations, contained, DeConick prefers to use the word “mysticism,” defined broadly as follows:

In *etic* terms, it identifies a tradition within early Judaism and Christianity centered on the belief that *a person directly, immediately, and before death can experience the divine, either as a rapture experience or as one solicited by a particular praxis.*¹⁰

⁸ De Conick 2006a, 2.

⁹ De Conick 2006a, 18.

¹⁰ De Conick 2006a, 2.

I accept DeConick's definition of mysticism. So though we will deal with reports of mystical experiences that contained eschatological elements, we will bear in mind that the chief concern of mysticism was the experience of the divine, whether or not it also involved knowledge of the end times.

The Ezekiel, Isaiah and Daniel texts clearly qualify as mystical experiences by this definition. They all constitute *Merkabah* mysticism because they all involve seeing the throne of God that in Ezekiel is a throne-chariot. The eschatological element of Daniel's vision would become terribly important in Middle Judaism, spawning a collection of works each of which modern scholarship would categorize as an apocalypse.

Let us now see how I will employ the term Pseudepigrapha. Instead of a definition of the term, a nearly impossible task due to the variety of works covered by the term, Charlesworth simply offers a description of the works he included in his 1983 edition of *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*:

Those writings 1) that, with the exception of Ahiqar, are Jewish or Christian; 2) that are often attributed to ideal figures in Israel's past; 3) that customarily claim to contain God's word or message; 4) that frequently build upon ideas and narratives present in the Old Testament; 5) and that almost always were composed either during the period 200 B.C. to A.D. 200 or, though later, apparently preserve, albeit in an edited form, Jewish traditions that date from that period.¹¹

¹¹ Charlesworth 1983, xxv.

This is as close, perhaps, as one can come to establishing criteria by which a work should be included among the Pseudepigrapha. Many of the works are named for men of reputation who did not, in fact, write them and hence their designation as Pseudepigrapha from the Greek *ψευδεπίγραφα* meaning “falsely ascribed.” All are works that rabbinic Judaism did not ultimately include in its canon of inspired Scriptures. Some Christian authorities, however, did consider some books as inspired and thus part of the Christian canon. They classified them under the title Apocrypha from the Greek *ἀπόκρυφα* meaning “hidden.”¹² Both *1 Enoch* and *2 Enoch*, texts that we will examine, are now classified by all Christendom (except for the Ethiopian Church which considers *1 Enoch* canonical¹³) as Pseudepigrapha. There is some basis to believe, however, that *1 Enoch* may have been considered as inspired in early Christian circles. I will say more about this when introducing the books below.

Let me now treat briefly my methodology. I will use the chosen Pseudepigraphic texts that come under consideration as both reports of the mystical experiences of the authors who lived in the period—though attributed to someone else—and expressions of the beliefs, thought and practices leading up to and during the time in which Paul lived (c. 1 – 65 CE¹⁴). This will shed light on the scriptural texts concerning Paul that we will examine. This is historical-critical analysis. The rationale is quite simply put by Macrae in his forward to the Charlesworth collection of the Pseudepigrapha:

To study the Bible by this method (historical-critical) involves knowing as much as one can about the biblical world in all its facets. And this of

¹² For a listing see Anderson, Metzger and Murphy 1994, xxv-xxvi.

¹³ Charlesworth 1983, xxiv.

¹⁴ Paul’s birth year is conjecture; however, the year of his death likely took place during the reign of Nero. See Horrell 2000, 40.

course includes knowing the Jewish and Christian religious literature that ultimately did not become part of the Bible.¹⁵

The “of course” in Macrae’s statement testifies to the increased acceptance of the historical-critical method of study due, in part, by the light which examination of the texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi corpus has shed upon developments within middle Judaism and early Christianity.¹⁶ The very publication of Charlesworth’s collection of the Pseudepigrapha in 1983, the only former one in English being by Charles in 1913, is testimony to a freshly perceived need for examining the experiences, belief systems, thought patterns and praxes—as reflected in the period literature—in which rabbinic Judaism and Christianity both took form.

While we will apply the historical-critical method in comparing Lukan and Pauline texts describing Paul’s Damascus Road Experience (DRE) and Paul’s description of his “visions and revelations of the Lord” in 2 Corinthians 12 with the Ezekiel, Enochic, and Targumim texts, we will only be able to do so in a limited way. This is because Luke and Paul give relatively little description about these experiences with which comparison can be made. However, if we can link the descriptions in Acts and Paul’s letters—as sparse as they are—with the descriptions of heavenly ascents in the *Merkabah* accounts, we will establish the possibility that other features of the *Merkabah* accounts may elaborate Paul’s mystical experiences for us.

In making these comparisons, I have borne in mind Sandmel’s caution about “parallelomania.”¹⁷ Parallelomania refers to a mechanical matching of words and/or

¹⁵ Charlesworth 1983, ix-x.

¹⁶ Boccaccini 1991, 7-25.

¹⁷ Sandmel 1962, 1

phrases which are then extravagantly used to “prove” a connection between texts. Such matching may constitute a starting point, but, even if a great many similar terms and phrases are identified, the underlying ideas and their use in the overall context must be determined before texts can be said to be related. Just how the relationship can be traced historically or literarily may be indeterminable though the historical religious, social and political context may provide a framework for understanding. In those cases where fundamental concepts of cosmology, *Weltanschauung*, philosophy, theology, etc. and narratives, motifs, symbols, archetypes, stereotypes, literary devices, etc. are shared, some connection between texts can be posited.

Once a connection between two works is determined, prior dating of one work would seem to be critical if we want to claim it influenced the other. Thus, for example, some authorities (Nickelsburg, for one¹⁸) puts the composition of “*The Similitudes*,” chapters 37-71 of *1 Enoch*, in the second century BCE, while others (Milik, for one¹⁹) date it to the third century CE or later. Chapter 71 of “*The Similitudes*” relates that Enoch is enthroned as “the Son of Man” in heaven. If the early dating is accepted, it is possible that the early Christians appropriated this Jewish phrase and applied it to Jesus. The later dating, on the other hand, would tend to invalidate that possibility. It cannot be completely ruled out, however, for who can say definitively that an oral tradition concerning Enoch’s enthronement as the Son of Man did not circulate among Jews in the first century, some of whom became Christians and applied the title to Jesus? This new version of Jesus enthroned as the Son of Man could have been transmitted to later generations of Christians when it was finally committed to writing in the third century or

¹⁸ Nickelsburg 2005, 254.

¹⁹ Walck 1999, 20.

later. Of course, it remains true that the texts are all we have, and we must deal as much as we can in probabilities rather than mere possibilities. That being said, we are sometimes forced to deal in possibilities when there are discontinuities in the record. Thus, for example, though we do not know for certain what nascent rabbinic Judaism may have “looked like” in the first century CE, we can and do project backwards from the later Rabbinic literature what some of its features may likely have been. To do so consciously and transparently is not irresponsible but can be a valuable tool in constructing hypotheses.

Ironically, acknowledging the limitation of having only texts as testimony, we are not so interested in literary connections between Paul’s and Luke’s writings and Jewish *Merkabah* texts as we are in a connection between the underlying experiences that all the accounts describe. DeConick makes this same point:

As a historian, I am not concerned whether these ancient people “actually” experienced God. I can never know this. But this does not make its study pointless. As Bernard McGinn has aptly remarked, “Experience as such is not a part of the historical record. The only thing directly available to the historian...is the evidence, largely in the form of written records.” What I wish to understand and map is their belief that God had been and still could—even should—be reached, that the boundaries between earth and heaven could be crossed by engaging in certain religious activities and behaviors reflected in the stories of their primordial ancestors and great heroes.²⁰

²⁰ De Conick 2006a, 6.

S. Sanders sounds a cautionary note when he observes:

The relation between literary form and religious experience may be the single most vexed question in the study of early Jewish and apocalyptic literature.²¹

The issue is trying to determine where on a continuum these texts lie between, on the one hand, divinely-induced, pure transformational experience which is then transcribed by the author through automatic writing and, on the other hand, self-conscious, deliberate invention by the author using his literary craft to promote his own agenda. Different texts will lie on different points on this continuum, and determination of just where will always be problematic. One is tempted to regard older texts, such as Ezekiel's, as occupying a point far on the experiential side and later texts such as *2 Enoch* as occupying a point far on the literary end, yet this may be completely invalid. Of great interest is the suggestion of Gibbons based on Ricoeur's work on human understanding. Gibbons suggests that accounts of visionary experience make use of a preconscious, precritical, and prelinguistic framework that operates during the experience itself and confers on the resultant text narrativity and readability. Gibbons tested this theory on the life and writing of a seventeenth-century English visionary thusly:

When Trapnel's utterances were recorded by a witness of the event, an examination of the text reveals a presence of biblical language and phraseology. Such biblical language will be taken as indicative of the precritical language reservoir already furnished in Trapnel's cognitive apparatus and engaged on a preconscious level in the process of

²¹ De Conick 2006b, 59.

comprehension. Thus, the presence of biblical language in the text resulting from Trapnel's vision is in no way due to conscious authorial inclusion.

When combined with the capacity for and high value placed on memorization in the ancient world, Gibbons suggests that, in the case of *Revelation* for example, the author John may have had such powers of recall that he was "capable of retaining, ordering, and retrieving experiences, so that when he had his visionary experience, he could later write it down into the text."²² In other words, the literary residue of an author's experience may well masquerade as a literary composition due to his particular precritical framework. To impose historical criticism alone to such a text is not enough. The underlying experience must be confronted on its own terms as emanating from outside the author's self-conscious manipulation.

Rowland discusses the use of an exegetical technique that does not rely on rational analysis of the text but rather on a re-experience of the experience described in the text. He elaborates:

Mysticism and apocalypticism are words we use as interpretative categories by which we seek to make sense for ourselves of a variety of particular characteristics within texts and in religious practice. Both relate to the understanding of and approach to the divine, which does not usually depend solely or even in the first instance on the exercise of rational modes of interpretation of sacred texts, in which the interpreter by a series of formal rites or customary practices seeks to give meaning to texts. The

²² De Conick 2006a, 44-46.

discovery of meaning may entail practices of relating to them in such a way that the reader or interpreter ceases to be a detached observer or expositor of the texts but is instead actively involved in a performance that allows one to be a participant and to share in that to which the text itself bears witness.²³

This seems to me to characterize Paul's DRE and provides the reason for Paul's qualification of "whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows" when he speaks of his "visions and revelations." Paul was a Pharisee and, as such I contend, was trained in this exegetical technique. Since Paul's references to both his DRE and his visions and revelations are autobiographical, there is little doubt that Paul is speaking of his own experience.²⁴ In the case of his DRE, Luke corroborates this, twice putting the description of Paul's DRE in the mouth of Paul himself.

What about the Pseudepigraphic accounts? We can only say that the internal evidence of the text makes the claim that they are descriptions of visions of the heavenly realm and a great deal more. Rowland, however, commenting on the Pseudepigraphic attribution of the texts, suggests that it may be due to such a complete absorption into experiencing the *Merkabah* text by the author that he believes himself to be Enoch or another mythical hero.²⁵

Tabor discusses the point of whether or not the Pseudepigraphic authors were relating their own experiences or not:

²³ De Conick 2006a, 48.

²⁴ Despite Paul's use of both the first and third person in 2 Corinthians 12. See discussion in chapter 4 below.

²⁵ De Conick 2006a, 52.

In the case of our vast number of Jewish and Christian texts from Second Temple times, the evidence that various reports of visions and revelations are grounded in the experiences of the authors and/or preservers seems indisputable. The many references to dreams, to preparations such as fasting, special diet or drink, to special times, and to body posture, indicate familiarity with mystical techniques.²⁶

The later *Hekhalot* literature contains both accounts of theurgic practices used to induce visions as well as reports of those who witnessed people experiencing heavenly ascent.²⁷ By projecting backwards in time, this also suggests that the reports produced earlier, i.e., between 300 BCE and 200 CE, were tied to direct experience. Bowker states—and Scholem and Neusner concur—that “some certain highly respected rabbis had practiced *Merkabah* contemplation” in the first century CE.²⁸

One further point is to be made. Scholars have begun to apply the results of modern neuroscientific research on Religiously Altered States of Consciousness (RASCs),²⁹ the modern descriptor for the mystical phenomena that resulted in the texts we will examine. Another descriptor which modern science uses is Religiously Interpreted States of Consciousness (RISCs).³⁰ This acknowledges the fact that we have already discussed, namely, that peoples’ direct experiences are always mediated by their oral or written reports of them. As with these ancient texts, the issues of factuality and

²⁶ Tabor 1986, 96.

²⁷ Morray-Jones 1993, 181.

²⁸ Bowker 1971, 157; Scholem 1954, 42-43; Neusner 1970, 135ff.

²⁹ See Segal 2004, 322-350.

³⁰ Segal 2004, 322-350

manipulation in such reports obtain. Beyond this caveat, I am unequipped to comment on neuroscientific findings while acknowledging, at the same time, the usefulness of this scientific line of inquiry.

CHAPTER 2

ASCENTS OF ENOCH

Since the religious, social and political situation in Palestine during middle Judaism may provide the grist for what the authors of the texts of interest were processing when they experienced their dream-visions, I will provide now an overview of the history of the period.

The Hellenistic Period in Palestine

The young Macedonian, Alexander, conquered and established his rule over a vast empire stretching from Egypt in the west to the border of India in the east, including all of the Mesopotamian basin, from Macedonia in the north to the northern Arabian Peninsula in the south.³¹ Alexander's conquest installed a new *lingua franca* throughout the Middle East. The translation of the Torah into Greek in Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemy II (283-246 BCE) demonstrates the importance of the Greek language, in this case, for Jews in Egypt. Historians call the period after the death of Alexander (at age 33) "Hellenistic" because of this hegemony of Greek culture.

It was a period of great instability for Palestinian Jews. A brief review of the history of Palestinian Jews from the death of Alexander in 323 BCE to the Second Revolt against the Romans in 132 CE reveals that the cherished institutions of the Jewish religion were challenged from without and from within.³²

³¹ See map May 1984, 82-83.

³² The review of Jewish history which follows is based upon VanderKam 2001, 1-49.

Upon Alexander's death at age thirty-three, a power struggle between a second tier of leaders commenced. Soon Jews in Palestine were caught in the crossfire of fighting between the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria, both of whom sought control of the land that lay between their domains. The Ptolemies maintained rule over Palestine from 312 to 200 BCE, at which time the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus III the Great, defeated the Ptolemaic forces at Panion, in the region of the headwaters of the Jordan River. He took Jerusalem two years later, and the Seleucids maintained control of the area until the Hasmonean family and their allies under the command of Judas Maccabeus retook the Temple from Antiochus IV Epiphanies. The catalyst for the uprising was the horror of the Hasmoneans at the desecration of the Temple and their resistance to Antiochus' attempt to force them to both abandon their own religious laws and take up Greek religious observances. The purification and rededication of the Temple followed its recapture (in either 165 or 164 BCE), an event still celebrated on Chislev 25 every year as Hannukah (Hebrew for "dedication"). The Hasmoneans, however, did not enjoy anything like complete rule in Jerusalem or Judea. The office of the high priest was still held by Seleucid appointees until 159 and was then, apparently, left vacant for seven years. As part of his eventually successful campaign to become the Seleucid king, one Alexander Balas in 152 appointed Jonathan, the then-leader of the Hasmoneans, as high priest, a post that he accepted and kept for ten years. Clearly, he gained this post because of his military prowess and not because of priestly qualifications, an issue that posed a great challenge for some pious Jews.

From 140 to 63 BCE, the Hasmonean leaders maintained more or less an independent Jewish state. A struggle for power between the Hasmonean heirs, Hyrcanus

II and Aristobulus II, was put to an end by the Roman general Pompey who, upon appeal from both sides, took it upon himself to adjudicate the dispute. Rome had had an alliance with the Hasmoneans since the time of Judas Maccabeus which legitimated Pompey's intervention. Aristobulus II, however, incurred Pompey's anger by returning to Judea before Pompey came to a decision. With the help of Hyrcanus II, Pompey pursued him and eventually took Jerusalem and appointed Hyrcanus as high priest. Aristobulus and his son, Alexander, however, escaped from their prison in Rome and returned to Palestine to try to seize power. Because Aristobulus was an opponent of Pompey's, he was backed by Julius Caesar and even given command of two legions to defeat Pompey. In the end, however, he was poisoned, and his son, Alexander, was beheaded.

Antipater, a wealthy Idumean (non-Jewish), had been a longtime supporter of Hyrcanus II against Aristobulus. He was a supporter of Julius Caesar who eventually bested Pompey in their contest for rule over the Empire. He was allowed to appoint his own sons to high positions: Phasael became governor of Jerusalem and the territories surrounding it, and Herod (the Great) was given rule over Galilee at age fifteen in 47 BCE. Leading citizens persuaded Hyrcanus, the high priest, to bring Herod to trial before the Jerusalem Sanhedrin for executing some bandits without a trial. Though Herod heeded the summons, he brought his troops with him and left before any verdict was passed down.

Another son of Aristobulus II, Antigonus, recruited a group of followers and with the help of the Parthians forced Herod and his family to seek refuge in the desert fortress of Masada. Phasael and Hyrcanus, however, were captured. Antigonus cut off Hyrcanus' ears knowing that he could never again serve as high priest with such a

deformity. Herod sailed to Rome with the intention of having his wife's brother Aristobulus III, another son of Aristobulus II, as king. However, it suited Roman interests to elevate an enemy of the Parthians, namely Herod himself, to take that post. So with the support of Mark Anthony and Octavian, Herod was appointed king of Palestine by the Roman Senate in 40 BCE. Three years later, Herod with both Jewish and Roman forces laid siege to Jerusalem and took it. The defenders suffered losses, Antigonus was taken captive and beheaded by Mark Antony, whom Herod bribed to do so. Hyrcanus was released by the Parthians. Herod appointed an undistinguished Babylonian priest, Hananel, as high priest in his place.

Herod was an unpopular ruler. Though his wife, Mariamne, was a Hasmonean, Herod himself was from a non-royal line and became increasingly paranoid. He had Hyrcanus executed in 31 BCE, his brother Joseph and his wife in 29, and his mother-in-law in 28. Herod relished building, which earned him his title "the Great." He built the city of Caesarea; the fortresses of Herodium and Masada; and a theatre, amphitheater, and palace in Jerusalem. His greatest undertaking was the expansion and improvement of the Jewish Temple, which he began in 20 BCE. Work on this continued until 64 CE, just a few years before it was destroyed.

Herod remained loyal to the Romans. He switched his allegiance from Mark Antony to Octavian (Augustus) after the latter defeated Antony at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE. He had three of his sons, who were in the line of succession but who lost his favor, executed. He appointed instead his son Archelaus as his heir, son Antipas ruler of Galilee and Perea, and son Philip as head of other areas of his kingdom. He died in 4 BCE from illness.

Herod's will was disputed. Archelaus, Antipas, and other members of the Herodian family who favored direct Roman rule all went to Rome to plead their cases. Meanwhile in Palestine, outbreaks of violence were quelled by the Roman administrators. Augustus eventually declared Archelaus not king, but ethnarch, over most of his father's territory; Antipas and Philip were made tetrarchs of lesser territories named in Herod's will. A delegation of Jewish and Samaritan nobles complained to Augustus about Archelaus' despotic reign, and the emperor banished him to Gaul. In 6 CE direct Roman rule over Judea was established. It was joined administratively to the province of Syria. Until 41 CE, it was ruled by prefects, the most famous of which is Pontius Pilate. A Herodian, Agrippa I, reigned as king for three years, but from 44 – 66 CE Roman procurators again administered the area. The record of the prefects and procurators in general is one of iron-fisted rule with little respect for Jewish religious sensibilities. Pontius Pilate, for example, was eventually removed for cruelty in disbanding a non-threatening crowd in Samaria. The last two procurators were Albinus and Gessius Florus, the former a taker of bribes and the latter a plunderer of entire cities. Jewish patience wore thin. The Zealots, who favored rebellion, grew in power as did the radical Sicarii who murdered even Jewish sympathizers of Roman rule. The catalyst for rebellion came when Florus removed a large amount of money from the Temple treasury, was abused by a crowd, and who then in retaliation sacked parts of Jerusalem. Full-fledged rebellion broke out, the entire city was taken by the rebels, and a detachment of Roman soldiers was massacred.

Cestius Gallus, the governor of Syria, was unable to retake the temple mount in Jerusalem and was attacked when he withdrew to Antioch. The rebel forces took a large

stash of war materiel. This feat emboldened the Jewish forces. In 67 CE, however, the Emperor Nero put the campaign against the rebellion in the hands of Vespasian and his son, Titus. By the end of 67, they controlled the entire region north of Jerusalem. In early 68, Vespasian brought the rest of Judea under his control. But the death of Nero delayed a siege on Jerusalem. In July 69, Vespasian's legions declared him emperor. This further delayed concentration on Jerusalem. However, Titus laid siege to Jerusalem in 70, broke through the walls, and waged a fierce battle in the temple compound with the result that the Temple was burned. A great victory celebration took place in Rome. Roman forces continued the fighting in Judea taking the fortresses of Herodium and Macherus quickly. The fortress at Masada, however, held out until 73.

A second revolt took place from 132 to 135 CE during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian. It seems to have been triggered by his attempt to outlaw the practice of circumcision (but not for Jews alone) and his plans to build a temple to Jupiter on the site of the former Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. It was led by Simon Bar Kosiba, dubbed Bar Kokhba, "son of the star," allegedly by the leading rabbi, Rabbi Akiba. Jerusalem was thereafter known as Aelia Capitolina and, in fact, a temple to Jupiter was built on the Second Temple site.

This brief review of Jewish history during the Hellenistic era shows the contingency of Jewish life upon the rulers of the greater political powers of the eastern Mediterranean basin. At one time or another, their fundamental religious practices of observing circumcision, making sacrifices in the Temple, and maintaining a properly qualified high priest were interfered with or outlawed. These troubles gave rise to various responses, some of which coalesced into sects within Palestine in the first century

BCE: Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and the aforementioned Zealots. Mystical practice and apocalypticism were strongest among the Essenes but could also be found among the Pharisees and their followers, who shared power with the Sadducees.³³ The Sadducees were, in general, hierocratic and the Zealots were activist restorationists of an independent nation. The Maccabean revolt against the offensive demands of Antiochus IV Epiphanies and the two revolts against the obnoxious Romans demonstrate how intolerable life became for Palestinian Jews.

It is not hard to imagine, in the light of their oppression, that one particular shift in thought which occurred during Hellenistic times had a special appeal to some Palestinian Jews. During the Homeric or Classical age, the accepted cosmology consisted in a tripartite order: the earth was the proper place for human beings to live, the underworld was the place where the dead were confined, and heaven was the domicile of the gods. This paralleled the cosmology of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible. During Hellenistic times, men and women came to be seen as exiled on earth from their proper dwelling place in heaven with the gods. Whereas earth had been considered the proper place for men and women, they were now misfits on earth. Heaven, formerly the dwelling place exclusively of the gods, was now seen as the true home of men and women.³⁴ To use the phrase of E. R. Dodds, there occurred in this period a “progressive devaluation of life in the material world.”³⁵ It represented the “greatest revolution in human thought” up to that time.³⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith characterizes it this way, “Rather

³³ For a discussion of apocalyptic thought in post-exilic times and early middle Judaism, see Boccaccini 1991, 7-24.

³⁴ Tabor 1986, 63.

³⁵ Dodds 1968, 37.

³⁶ Stendahl 1965, 112-113.

than a celebration of the order of the cosmos, one often encounters a sense of alienation from the created world.”³⁷

This shift created great interest in heavenly existence. There arose the possibility of journeys by mortals to heaven. This became a common theme of mystical literature among many Hellenistic religions and Palestinian Jewish religion.

In *Unutterable Things*, Tabor gives examples of non-Jewish works which illustrate this new, Hellenistic cosmology: Aristophanes’ *Peace* and the “Golden Plates,” Plato’s “Myth of Er” in *Republic* 10.613D-21D, Cicero’s “Dream of Scipio,” and works of Plutarch based upon the latter. *Peace* dates to 421 BCE, and in it Aristophanes greets the apparition of a new star as being the Pythagorean poet Ion of Chios, who had recently died. The “Golden Plates” were found in the 4th century BCE tombs in Crete, Thessaly, and Italy and were apparently placed in the hands of the dead inscribed with words that would assure them a blessed state when confronted by the chthonic powers of the underworld. The inscriptions include the phrase, “I am a child of Earth and starry Heaven; But my race is of Heaven alone,” emphasizing the cosmological shift described above. In the “Myth of Er,” the soldier, Er, reports on his journey through the cosmos upon returning to his body twelve days after being slain on the battlefield. On his journey he saw, he reports, the fate of souls after death. In Cicero’s “Dream of Scipio,” Scipio sees and experiences what is expected to happen at the final ascent of the soul at death. Moreover, Scipio experiences a sense of detachment from all that is earthly and mortal and is urged to concentrate on the heavenly world when he returns to earthly life. Plutarch too uses Plato’s “Myth of Er” as a basis for his “On the Delays of Divine

³⁷ Smith 2005, 749-51.

Vengeance,” and “On the Sign of Socrates,” in which he is shown a way of escaping the underworld and ascending to heaven.

There are Greco-Roman examples too. At Augustus’ funeral as related by Dio, Tiberius compared his father to the god Herakles and said, “It is fitting that we should not mourn for him, but while now giving his body back to nature should forever glorify his soul as a god.” Numericus Atticus was said to have sworn that he had seen the soul of the emperor ascending to heaven while the emperor’s body was being consumed on the pyre.³⁸

But are mortals allowed to glimpse heaven before death? (Tabor labels such a heavenly ascent “proleptic.”) Plato’s “Myth of Er” and the other works based upon it briefly described above are all examples of this type of proleptic ascent. This hunger for knowledge of heaven is well documented in the Hellenistic Jewish works that follow.

Examination of Selected Works

What intertestamental Pseudepigraphic works might Paul have been familiar with? Little doubt has been expressed about Paul’s own testimony that he was a Pharisee. (Phil. 3:5) In his speech before the Roman tribune, Claudius Lysias, reported by Luke in Acts, Paul says that he “was brought up” in Jerusalem “at the feet of” Rabbi Gamaliel I (grandfather of Gamaliel II who appears in chapter 4 of *Acts*). (Acts 22:3) From Paul’s quotations of the Bible, we know Paul was familiar with the Greek Septuagint. Thus Paul knew those sections of the Bible from which *Merkabah* sprang. It is at least possible, if not probable, that he would have been conversant with discussions,

³⁸ Tabor 1986, passim.

writings, and the practice of *Merkabah* within Pharisaic groups in Jerusalem. Scholem states:

We know that in the period of the Second Temple an esoteric doctrine was already taught in Pharisaic circles. The first chapter of Genesis, the story of Creation (*Maaseh Bereshith*), and the first chapter of Ezekiel, the vision of God's throne-chariot (the "Merkabah"), were the favorite subjects of discussion and interpretation which it was apparently considered inadvisable to make public. Originally these discussions were restricted to the elucidation and exposition of the respective Biblical passages. Thus St. Jerome in one of his letters mentions a Jewish tradition that forbids the study of the beginning and the end of the Book of Ezekiel before the completion of the thirtieth year...[O]ne fact remains certain: the main subjects of the later Merkabah mysticism already occupy a central position in this oldest esoteric literature, best represented by the book of Enoch.³⁹

Neusner says of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, the chief architect of post-70 CE rabbinism, that he was trained in the *Merkabah* and trained favored students in it as well.⁴⁰ Might not Paul have been in such a favored circle under the auspices of Gamaliel I? Paul says of himself in Philippians that he was zealous to the point of persecuting the church and "as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Phil. 3:6) and in Galatians, "I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors." (Gal. 1:13) And Luke has him say in his defense before Claudius Lysias that he was "educated strictly according to our ancestral

³⁹ Scholem 1954, 42-43.

⁴⁰ Neusner 1970, 135ff.

law, being zealous for God.” (Acts 22:3) And when he defended himself before Agrippa, he claimed that his accusers knew that he had “belonged to the strictest sect of our religion and lived as a Pharisee.” (Acts 26:5)

Paul, then, was a model Pharisee, obviously an insider among the Pharisees in Jerusalem since he persecuted the church there and was commissioned by them to do the same in Damascus. (Acts 26:12) He must have been considered mature in the faith. He would then have been considered to be among those with whom the esoteric doctrine of the *Merkabah* could be shared. Whether Paul was exposed as a young student or when approaching thirty years of age or having attained the age of thirty, he would likely have been conversant with this mystic dimension of Pharisaism.

It is interesting to note that, in his defense before Agrippa, he uses the descriptor “from heaven” in conjunction with his DRE: “I saw a light from heaven...” (Acts 26:13) In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul clearly speaks of heavenly ascent. Tabor points out that among the Pseudepigraphic literature, ascents to heaven by Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and Isaiah are all found.⁴¹ However, the premier ascender to heaven is the enigmatic Biblical figure of Enoch for he has inspired more text than any of the others. The earliest text relating Enoch’s ascent to heaven is *I Enoch*. We know that all but one section, namely *The Similitudes* (chapters 37-71), of *I Enoch* was produced some time in the second or first century BCE or earlier.⁴² Black quotes Käsemann about apocalyptic in general and speaks of *I Enoch* in particular:

Ernst Käsemann maintained that “Apocalyptic...was the mother of all Christian theology;” he meant primitive Christian apocalyptic, but to this

⁴¹ Tabor 1986, 83

⁴² Nickelsburg 2005, 44ff.

I Enoch was a chief contributor. It is not surprising to find the Book of Enoch cited as scripture by the author of the Epistle of Jude (vs. 14-15). As a source of background evidence for the study of the emerging Christian church and its literature, the Book of Enoch is a star witness.⁴³

I Enoch is divided into five sections, each with its own provenance: *The Book of Watchers* (chapters 1 – 36), *The Parables (or Similitudes) of Enoch* (chapters 37-71), *The Book of the Luminaries* (chapters 72-82), *The Animal Vision* (chapters 83-90), and *The Epistle of Enoch* (chapters 92-105). The first two books deal with Enoch's ascent to heaven. It is interesting to note that chapters 6-16 may antedate the final redaction of Genesis 6:1-4⁴⁴ and of importance to note its reception by both Second Temple Jews and the early Church. It was used by the Jewish authors of other pseudepigraphic books, and its earliest portions are probably proto-Essene.⁴⁵ All of *I Enoch* except for the so-called *Similitudes* (chapters 37-71) has been found among the Qumran scrolls, possibly attesting to the importance of this text to that community (probably Essene⁴⁶) which continued in existence until the revolt against Rome (66-70 CE). Some modern Ethiopian Jews accept *I Enoch* as canonical.⁴⁷ Without citing evidence, Barnstone maintains that the pseudepigraphic literature was favorite reading of the early Christians.⁴⁸ As Black pointed out, it is quoted by the author of Jude, a letter included in the Christian canon. (Jude 1:14f. quotes 1 Enoch 1:9.) It enjoyed the favor of the early Church Fathers, especially Tertullian, and only passed out of favor due to negative reviews by Augustine,

⁴³ Black 1985, 1.

⁴⁴ Brown 1990, 1057.

⁴⁵ Charlesworth 1983, 8.

⁴⁶ VanderKam 2001, 161ff.

⁴⁷ Charlesworth 1983, xxiv.

⁴⁸ Barnstone 1984, 486.

Hilary and Jerome in the fourth century CE.⁴⁹ So much influence did it have that Isaac writes in the introduction to his translation, “[F]ew other apocryphal books so indelibly marked the religious history and thought of the time of Jesus.”⁵⁰ If Paul was aware of heavenly ascent at all, he would in all likelihood have been familiar with as highly valued a work as *1 Enoch*. *1 Enoch* may well be, then, representative of the language and concepts that constituted that preconscious, precritical reservoir in Paul that helped filter his experience of heavenly ascent when he wrote about it in the manner discussed in Rowland above.⁵¹

The second book of *1 Enoch*, *The Parables*, contains an account of the transformation of Enoch into the “Son of man,” a highly significant title applied to Jesus. It has, therefore, been studied in great detail because of its possible importance to early Christology. However, its dating may be later, and so it may have been subject to Christian recension. Though scholarly consensus seems to be forming that it is a Jewish work completed by the end of the first century CE⁵², we will choose instead *The Book of Watchers* as our example of a Jewish heavenly ascent in the *Merkabah* tradition.

2 Enoch or *Slavonic Enoch* elaborates on Enoch’s ascent considerably. The description of the ascent takes up almost the whole book except for a much shorter closing section devoted to Enoch’s sons’ history. As to the dating of its authorship, Andersen says:

⁴⁹ Brown, Fitzmyer and Murphy 1990, 1057.

⁵⁰ Charlesworth 1983, 8.

⁵¹ See page 10.

⁵² See, for example, Nickelsburg 2005, 254-255.

In every respect 2 Enoch remains an enigma...The present writer is inclined to place the book—or at least its original nucleus—early rather than late; and in a Jewish rather than a Christian community.⁵³

Nickelsburg cites Scholem's assertion that it dates to the first century CE, that it draws upon *1 Enoch*, and that it was produced in Egypt though it refers to animal sacrifice in the Temple.⁵⁴

Given the widespread familiarity with *1 Enoch* and the authority it enjoyed, the examination of a work that is so clearly related is of interest as well. Paul's letters exhibit such an active mind in their author that it is easy to imagine that he would have investigated reports of visionary experiences circulating in Jerusalem. We will analyze *2 Enoch* open to the possibility that this record of another author's heavenly ascent may also possibly suggest aspects of Paul's mystical experiences.

When quoting these works, I will use the translation of Nickelsburg and VanderKam for *1 Enoch*⁵⁵ and F. I. Andersen's translation of *2 Enoch* in its longer recension (J) in the compilation edited by R. H. Charlesworth.⁵⁶ While I am more interested in identifying in these two works their most essential and noteworthy elements, I will quote some passages at length in order to show the extraordinary nature of the described experiences.

"The Book of Watchers" (1 Enoch 1-36)

The Book of Watchers can be broken down into the following sections: chapters 1-5 relate an apocalyptic vision by Enoch, chapters 6-16 deal with the origin of sin

⁵³ Charlesworth 1985, 97.

⁵⁴ Nickelsburg 2005, 225.

⁵⁵ Nickelsburg and VanderKam 2004, 170.

⁵⁶ Charlesworth 1983, 91ff.

(expanding upon Genesis 6:1-4) and contain Enoch's heavenly ascent (playing on Genesis 5:24), and chapters 17-36 give an account of Enoch's tours. I will draw out and summarize those motifs in each section that are most relevant to our discussion.

Chapters 1-5

Four motifs are elaborated in the first section containing Enoch's apocalyptic vision:

- (1) Enoch becomes privy to what will happen in the end times,
- (2) God will come with power and judge,
- (3) the righteous will be rewarded with peace and prosperity, and
- (4) the wicked will be destroyed.

Enoch, the man in Genesis 5:24 who "walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him," has revealed to him in this section the "big picture" of salvation history. The section comprises a brief apocalypse containing the themes of eschatology, judgment, the duality of good and evil, and reward and punishment. Theodicy is also upheld: God is in control of history, and he ensures that justice finally prevails. These apocalyptic themes are all found in Daniel's visions in chapters 7 and 12 cited above and result from Daniel's contemplation of Ezekiel 37 and Isaiah 66.⁵⁷ Segal maintains that the figure in Daniel 7:8, "the little horn speaking great things," is actually Antiochus IV Epiphanies, and the period specified in 8:9, "a time, two times, and half a time of the little horn," refers to his reign. As we know from our history review above, it was this Seleucid ruler who desecrated the Temple and required Jews to break the Torah. Specifically, he decreed that everyone including Jews must eat meat sacrificed to pagan

⁵⁷ Segal 2004, 262-263

gods. This latter demand was disobeyed by some who were then put to death, thus becoming martyrs of the Jewish faith. Daniel's vision rewards these martyrs and punishes the persecutors:

There shall be a time of great anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time, your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. (Dan. 12:1-3)

Here we see the double theme of God's intervention at the end time combined with reward for personal righteousness, which is revealed to Enoch in this first section and reemphasized in the last section of *Watchers*.

Chapters 6-16

In the second section, we find within Enoch's continuing vision a startling account of the origin of sin/evil on earth, what God does to remedy the horrific resulting conditions, and Enoch's commissioning.

Some of the "Watchers" (angels called "the sons of God" in Genesis 6:2,4) leave heaven, the place God had ordained for them, to come down to earth. We see clearly the Hellenistic cosmology: the angels' God-ordained location is heaven, but they have been beguiled by the comeliness of women on earth, and leave their rightful place to live on earth. This contravention of God's order leads to an unnatural mutation—the women give birth to giants (the "Nephilim" of Genesis 6:4) who devour all the food on earth and turn

into cannibals. Moreover, these fallen Watchers teach men and women arts, such as metallurgy and cosmetics, which lead them into sin. The faithful Watchers—Michael, Surafel and Gabriel—on the other hand, seeing all this, plead to God to rectify the terrible state of humankind. God decides, apparently, to intervene by way of The Deluge, though he orders that Noah be forewarned and directs the fallen Watchers to be bound until the final judgment when they will be destroyed. After that, the righteous will be planted on the earth and prosper.

This section assaults modern, scientific theories of the existence of evil in the world though modern men and women, too, are hard put to explain the grip of evil on human affairs. As with Daniel's prophecy about the resurrection of the martyrs, one can see the historical plight of Palestinian Jewry in play in Enoch's vision. What Nickelsburg says in general about the Pseudepigrapha is particularly true here:

One important factor that holds together the largest part of this corpus of literature is its common setting in hard times: persecution, oppression, other kinds of disaster, the loneliness and pressures of a minority living out its convictions in an alien environment. Within this context we can read and appreciate these writings as a sometimes powerful expression of the depths and the heights of our humanity and of human religiousness and religious experience. In them we may see ourselves as we have been or are or might be: the desperate puzzlement of Enoch's decimated humanity; the anguish and then the ecstasy of a Tobit; the courage of a Susanna or a Judith; the defiant tenacity of the Maccabean martyrs; the

desolate abandonment of an Asenath; and the persistent questioning of an Ezra.⁵⁸

The theory of the origin of evil advanced here may have resulted from meditation upon the cause for The Deluge given in Genesis. Any reader—ancient or modern—of the account of The Deluge (Flood) in the canonical Bible struggles to understand how mankind had become so evil that God regretted that he had ever created human beings. (Gen. 6:6) Given the stature that Jews ascribed to angels, Enoch’s vision offers an extreme explanation for an extreme rupture of God’s good order. The highest of all creatures, Watchers, had destroyed the proper order of creation resulting in the unnatural, bestial giants who harassed humankind and whose evil spirits persisted in inducing men and women to sin. This dream-vision may reflect the feeling of the helplessness of Palestinian Jews to overcome the evil powers that were oppressing them during the time the author of *1 Enoch* lived. But God’s warning and care of Noah is a sign that that portion of humankind striving for righteousness should have hope of deliverance, and that the binding of the fallen Watchers and their eventual destruction will restore the proper order of things—theodicy will be upheld. Perhaps, too, deflecting the cause of evil on to someone other than mankind made their suffering the results of sin more bearable.

Enoch is requested by the fallen Watchers to intercede on their behalf with God. While petitioning God on their behalf he falls asleep and has a dream-vision in which he learns that his intercession fails but learns that “the Great One” has “created and destined me to reprimand the watchers, the sons of heaven.” (1 En. 14:2-3) The powerlessness of

⁵⁸ Nickelsburg 2005, 4.

blazed with fire.

And I went into that house—hot as fire and cold as snow,

and no delight of life was in it.

Fear enveloped me, and trembling seized me,

and I was quaking and trembling, and I fell upon my

face.

And I saw in my vision,

And look, another open door before me:

and a house greater than the former one,

and it was all built of tongues of fire.

All of it so excelled in glory and splendor and majesty

that I am unable to describe for you its glory and

majesty.

Its floor was of fire,

and its upper part was flashes of lightning and shooting

stars,

and its ceiling was a flaming fire.

And I was looking and I saw a lofty throne;

and its appearance was like ice,

and its wheels were like the shining sun,

and the voice (*or* sound) of the cherubim,

and from beneath the throne issued rivers of flaming fire.

And I was unable to see.

The Great Glory sat upon it;

his apparel was like the appearance of the sun
and whiter than much snow.

No angel could enter into this house and look at his face

because of the splendor and glory,
and no human could look at him.

Flaming fire encircled him and a great fire stood by him,

and none of those about him approached him.

Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him,

but he needed no counselor; his every word was deed.

And the holy ones of the watchers who approached him did

not depart by night,
nor by day did they leave him.

Until now I had been on my face, prostrate and trembling.

And the Lord called me with his mouth and said to me,

“Come here, Enoch, and hear my word(s).”

(1 Enoch 14:8-24)

Both similarities—wind, clouds, lightning, fire, angels, fear, throne, commissioning—and differences—four human-like creatures, wheels with eyes, two houses, cherubim, details of the appearance of the enthroned one—are many between Enoch’s ascent and Ezekiel’s. Both accounts strain language to express the ineffable, engender exhilaration and fear, and magnify the majesty and potency of God. Both transport the ascender to a transcendent realm unexperienced by the common man.

God again commissions Enoch to reprimand the fallen Watchers and tell them that evil spirits will come out of the bodies of their giant children. These evil spirits will corrupt men and women until the “day of the consummation of the great judgment” (1 En. 16:1), and they will have no peace.

Chapters 17-36

The last section of the *The Book of Watchers* is filled with two guided tours that Enoch takes. It is narrated by Enoch in the first person, and his guides are various angels. Some sites imply different aspects of what will happen in the end times, some are historical, some wondrous, and some perhaps symbolic. I summarize them in the order in which they appear in the text:

A place with neither heaven above nor earth below where, Uriel explains, stars which have transgressed the commandments of God are bound for ten millions years;

Another place that frightens and pains Enoch where, Ura’el explains, the angels are detained forever;

A mountain inside which, Rufael explains, the souls of the dead will be gathered until the day of judgment, where Abel’s spirit sues for Cain’s seed to be exterminated from earth, and where the righteous are kept separated from sinners;

A place to the extreme west of the earth and there a burning fire “that ran and did not rest” which, Raguel explains, pursues the luminaries of heaven;

A mountain of fire on earth and beyond that seven mountains of precious stone which resembled the seat of a throne surrounded by fragrant trees among which was one especially finely flowered and fruited and fragrant like no other; this place, Michael, the

chief of the angels, explains is the throne of “the Great Holy One, the Lord of glory, the King of eternity” and the tree is reserved for the righteous until the great judgment;

Mountains and valleys at which Enoch “marveled exceedingly;”

An accursed valley where, Uriel explains, the accursed will be judged and remain forever;

A mountain in a desert from the top of which a stream gushed and cascaded down;

Another mountain in the dessert where there was a tree which smelled like rubbish;

To the east a valley of endless water with a tree fragrant like mastic and a cinnamon tree;

Further to the east other mountains with trees bearing nectar and over these another mountain with aloe and almond trees;

To the northeast seven mountains of excellent nard, fragrant trees, cinnamon trees and pepper, then over the summits of these trees far towards the east, over the Erythraean Sea, over the head of the angel Zutu’el—

A garden with fragrant, large trees among which was the tree of wisdom which, Raphael explains, is the tree from which “your father of old and your mother of old” ate, became wise, realized they were naked, and were expelled;

The extreme ends of the earth where there were huge beasts and assorted birds and to the east the ultimate ends of the earth which rests on the heavens, the gates of which were open so Enoch could see how the stars make their exit (with the help of Uriel

he wrote the exits for each one down, “according to their number and their names, according to their conjunction and their position and their time and their months”);

To the extreme north, a great and glorious seat and three gates through which blow cold, hail, frost, snow, dew and rain; the winds through one gate blows good things; winds through the other two blow violence and sorrow upon the earth;

To the extreme west ends of the earth were three gates which resembled those in the east with respect to the number of exits;

To the extreme south ends of the earth there were three gates through which blew the south wind, dew and rain;

To the extreme ends of the heavens where he saw open gates of heaven and small gates above them, through one of which the stars in the east passed the stars which travel west.

Enoch ends the tour with a blessing:

And when I saw I blessed—and I shall always bless—the Lord of glory, who has wrought great and glorious wonders, to show his great deeds to his angels, and to the spirits of human beings, so that they might see the work of his might and glorify the deeds of his hands and bless him forever. (1 Enoch 34:4)

One is struck by the grand sweep of Enoch’s tour. He travels with different angels from a vantage point above the entire creation and moves over mountains, deserts, and rivers from one end of the earth to the other. Perhaps such panoramic description is less compelling to modern readers who are familiar with aerial filming at both lower and higher altitudes, but the account is nonetheless exhilarating to the imagination. Enoch’s

flight is filled with both “great and glorious wonders” that move him to bless the Creator of them.

The entire account is shot through with the apocalyptic themes we noted in the first sections of the book. We encounter the dualism of good and evil throughout. The boundary between moral good and evil is blurred with physical “goodness” and “badness.” On the one hand, we are presented, for example, with transgressing stars, sinners, winds which blow sorrow and violence on the earth, and trees which smell like rubbish to, on the other, the righteous, good winds, and flowering, fragrant, fruit-filled trees. There is no sense of a morally neutral natural order; all flows from good or evil. Next, Enoch is shown many places that will have a role in reward or punishment: a place where the transgressing stars are bound for ten million years, a place where the (fallen) angels are detained, a mountain where the souls of the dead will be held until “the day of judgment” and where the righteous are kept separated from sinners, a mountain on which is both God’s throne and a tree whose fruit is reserved for the righteous until the “great judgment,” and an accursed valley where the accursed will be judged and remain forever.

We notice that characters, features and stories of Genesis are corroborated during the tour: the goodness of God’s creation, Adam and Eve and the tree of wisdom (or the knowledge of good and evil), their eating of its fruit, their recognition of their nakedness, their expulsion from the garden, and Cain’s murder of Abel. This is significant in light of the fact that the creation account of Genesis was the other great object of *Merkabah* meditation.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Scholem 1954, 42.

Enoch also learns about the paths of the stars and visits the places where cold, hail, frost, snow, dew and rain and winds originate.

What shines through this entire *Book of the Watchers* is a two-fold concern: to know what God's dwelling place in heaven is like and reassurance that the righteous will join God there. This is the knowledge sought by meditation upon the *Merkabah* passages.

2 Enoch (The Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch)

The second work we will examine is also drawn from the Enochic literature. The only texts that exist are in Slavonic. There are essentially two recensions of the text. The issue of whether the longer is a later expansion of the shorter or the shorter a condensation of the longer cannot be definitively determined.⁶⁰ Like *1 Enoch* it is organized around the motifs of heavenly ascent and revelations of the structure of the cosmos and the apocalyptic end times. We will examine the longer recension (J).

The book can be divided into three sections: chapters 1 – 38 contain Enoch's heavenly ascent and return to earth; chapters 39 – 67 set out Enoch's teaching and ethical exhortations to his sons; and chapters 68 – 73 recount the stories of his sons Methusalam, Nir, Noe and Melkisedek. We will be most interested in the first 38 chapters, less so in chapters 39 – 67 and will ignore chapters 68 – 73 (though they are interesting for different reasons).

⁶⁰ Nickelsburg 2005, 221; Charlesworth 1985, 93-94.

Chapters 1-38

In contrast with *1 Enoch*, *2 Enoch* begins with the account of Enoch's ascent to heaven. It starts:

There was a wise man and a great artisan whom the Lord took away. And he loved him so that he might see the highest realms; and of the most wise and great and inconceivable and unchanging kingdom of God almighty, and of the most marvelous and glorious and shining and many-eyed station of the Lord's servants, and of the Lord's immovable throne.⁶¹

As we did for Enoch's tour in *1 Enoch*, we will outline the storyline. Two huge men appear to Enoch in a dream; when he awakes they are present to him in actuality and announce to him that he will ascend to heaven. They take him to the first heaven on their wings and place him on the clouds where he sees an ocean more vast than the earth's.

They enter the second heaven, which is a waystation for disobedient angels who are hanging [sic], waiting for the "measureless" judgment. They ask Enoch to pray for them but he replies, "Who am I, a mortal man, that I should pray for angels?"

The third heaven contains both Paradise and a place of torment. Paradise is "inconceivably pleasant," a place in which God sometimes takes his rest, and, Enoch's guide explains, is the place prepared for the righteous who suffer in life. The place of torment is for those who do not glorify the Lord and sin.

The fourth heaven contains the solar and lunar tracks, and Enoch learns many details about the angels' roles in regulating them and their number.

⁶¹ Charlesworth 1983, 102ff.

In the fifth heaven are the Grigori, the fallen angels who have followed the ways of their prince Satanail, who appear dejected. Three of them have descended to earth and taken human wives and have given birth to giants. Enoch tells them of how his prayers for their earthly brothers have been rejected. He urges them to perform their liturgy before the face of the Lord, and they do, raising their voices “piteously and touchingly.”

Enoch enters the sixth heaven and sees there the archangels “who are over the angels; and they harmonize all existence, heavenly and earthly;who record all human souls, and all their deeds, and their lives before the face of the Lord.” In their midst are seven phoenixes and seven cherubim and seven six-winged beings singing in unison “And their song is not to be reported.”

In the seventh heaven, Enoch sees the Lord sitting on his throne in the tenth heaven. His guides leave him and he becomes terrified. The Lord sends Gabriel who says to him, “Be brave, Enoch! Don’t be frightened! Stand up, and come with me and stand in front of the Lord forever.” Gabriel carries him up to the tenth heaven, and, as he goes, he sees the eighth heaven where the changer of the seasons stays and the ninth heaven where the nine zodiacs reside.

Enoch is joined by Michael in the tenth heaven and stands before the face of the Lord:

Thus even I saw the face of the Lord. But the face of the Lord is not to be talked about, it is so very marvelous and supremely awesome and supremely frightening. And who am I to give an account of the incomprehensible being of the Lord, and of his face, so extremely strange and indescribable? And how many are his commands, and his multiple

voice, and the Lord's throne, supremely great and not made by hands, and the choir stalls all around him, the cherubim and the seraphim armies, and their never-silent singing. Who can give an account of his beautiful appearance, never changing and indescribable, and his great glory? And I fell down flat and did obeisance to the Lord. And the Lord, with his own mouth, said to me, "Be brave, Enoch! Don't be frightened! Stand up, and stand in front of my face forever."

Then the Lord bids Michael to strip Enoch of his earthly clothes, anoint him with delightful oil, and put him in the clothes of the Lord's glory; and Enoch declares, "And I looked at myself and I had become like one of his glorious ones..."

The Lord has Vrevoil to bring Enoch supplies for speed writing and has Vrevoil to instruct Enoch of what to write such that he fills 366 books: "And he was telling me all the things of heaven and earth and sea and all the elements..." God Himself then shares with Enoch secrets not even shared with his angels about the origins and creation of everything including man in His image to be a "second angel...a king to reign on earth and have my wisdom." God called the man Adam, gave him free will, and pointed out to him only two ways: light and darkness. He also created Eve from Adam's rib taken while he slept.

God commands Enoch to reveal to his sons and future generations everything in the 366 books which he wrote. God predicts the flood and the sparing of Noah. Enoch is given thirty days to do that, and he is then taken back up to heaven.

Chapters 39-67

The next section emphasizes Enoch's ethical instruction and exhortation to his

children but also contains some interesting aspects of Enoch's heavenly ascent and certain apocalyptic details.⁶²

Enoch begins his instruction to his children, "I have been sent today to you from the lips of the Lord, to speak to you whatever has been and whatever is now and whatever will be until the day of judgment." He reports that, though he is "a human being created just like yourselves," he has seen the face of the Lord, gazed into the eyes of the Lord, and seen the right hand of the Lord. Of the experience, he says that if it is frightening to stand before an earthly king who has the power of life and death over you, "how much more terrifying it is to stand before the face of the King of earthly kings and of the heavenly armies."

Enoch then declares to them, "I know everything; for either from the lips of the Lord or else my eyes have seen from the beginning even to the end, and from the end to the recommencement." Moreover, in his books, he says, he has written down the "height from the earth to the seventh heaven, and the depth to the lowermost hell, and the place of condemnation" and "how the prisoners were in pain, looking forward to endless punishment; and I recorded all those who have been condemned by the judge, and all their sentences and all their corresponding deeds."

He tells also about his visit to paradise where rest is prepared for the righteous and where, "after the last one arrives," he will bring out Adam and the ancestors so that they may be filled with joy, comparing it to joyful anticipation of dinner in a palace with a friend.

He then reveals the basis of ethics: "The Lord with his own two hands created

⁶² Charlesworth 1983, 162ff.

mankind; in a facsimile of his own face, both small and great, the Lord created. And whoever insults a person's face, insults the face of a king and treats the face of the Lord with repugnance." He goes on with the teaching: do not take vengeance on those who do evil to you, for "the Lord is the one who takes vengeance, and he will be the avenger for you on the day of the great judgment."

When his son Methusalah offers Enoch food, Enoch replies, "Listen, child! Since the time when the Lord anointed me with the ointment of his glory, food has not come into me, and earthly pleasure my soul does not remember; nor do I desire anything earthly."

Enoch caps off his ethical teaching by emphasizing that "there is no repentance after death."

As his sons anticipate Enoch's re-ascension into heaven, they say:

O our father, Enoch! May you be blessed by the Lord, the eternal king!
 And now, bless your sons and all the people, so that we may be glorified in front of your face today. For you will be glorified in front of the face of the Lord for eternity, because you are the one whom the Lord chose in preference to all the people upon the earth, and he appointed you to be the one who makes a written record of all his creation, visible and invisible, and the one who carried away the sin of mankind..."⁶³

The story continues that at the end of Enoch's instruction and exhortation, it became dark, "and the angels hurried and grasped Enoch and carried him up to the highest heaven, where the Lord received him and made him stand in front of his face for

⁶³ Charlesworth 1983, 190.

eternity.”

Comparison of the Two Books

Whereas *The Book of Watchers* begins with Enoch’s apocalyptic vision that is amplified by his tour in the last section, *2 Enoch* begins immediately with his heavenly ascent, and it is during his ascent through ten heavens that he learns the apocalyptic truth. The second section of *2 Enoch* is devoted to ethical teaching which is absent from *1 Enoch*. Let us first look for apocalyptic themes in *2 Enoch*.

In the second heaven, Enoch meets disobedient angels who are awaiting “the measureless judgment.” In the third heaven he sees both Paradise and a place of torment. In the sixth heaven he learns that the angels are tracking all human souls and their deeds. Thus the apocalyptic theme of reward and punishment is made known to Enoch.

In the second section devoted to ethical instruction, apocalyptic dualism is perhaps most clearly expressed when Enoch is told by God that He had instructed Adam that there were two ways: light and darkness. This parallels the dualism of good and evil, though the choice of words may reflect a different emphasis on the underlying cause of evil. In *2 Enoch*, Enoch encounters in the fifth heaven the Grigori, the fallen angels (the fallen Watchers of *1 Enoch*). Only three of them have descended to earth to lay with women and have fathered giants. So evil acts seem somewhat de-emphasized by comparison to *1 Enoch*. Also, the large amount of material on ethical instruction in *2 Enoch* may imply that the vision highlights ignorance rather than bad will to be at the root of evil.

2 Enoch is at pains to show the completeness of Enoch’s knowledge, including events of the end time. Does Enoch learn that God will come in power to judge? Though

this motif appears in the text, it is not so explicitly nor as forcefully stated as in *1 Enoch*. The text refers to “the day of judgment,” and Enoch comes to know of heaven and the “lowermost hell” and “the place of condemnation.” He also encounters prisoners who anticipate “endless punishment.” On the reward side, he envisions a scene after the last righteous one has arrived when Adam and the ancestors shall join them, and they shall all experience joy, joy akin to the anticipation of dinner in a palace with a friend. These are all intimations of a last-days scenario, though set in the context of the ethical practice that will bring reward or the sin that will reap punishment. Another passage speaks of the last days while emphasizing theodicy. It is Enoch’s teaching on vengeance. He teaches to leave vengeance to the Lord, for “he will be the avenger for you on the day of the great judgment.”

So we find all the apocalyptic themes: reward and punishment, dualism, eschatology and theodicy. However, unlike in *1 Enoch*, they play a subsidiary role in the context of both the heavenly journey and ethical instruction. More noticeable and significant is *2 Enoch’s* soteriology and its elevation of Enoch to a messiah-like status.

Upon gaining admittance to the tenth heaven where God is enthroned, Enoch is joined by Michael, and God commands Enoch to be stripped of his earthly clothing, anointed, and clothed “in the clothes of the Lord’s glory.” Enoch had become “like one of his glorious ones.” This transformative step is missing from *1 Enoch* and adds an important soteriological element to Enoch’s heavenly journey. The sons’ prayer carries the connotation that Enoch occupies even a redemptive role: “[Y]ou are the one whom the Lord chose in preference to all the people upon the earth, and he appointed you to be the one who makes a written record of all his creation, visible and invisible, and the one

who carried away the sin of mankind.” Coupled with his anointing, this implies even a messianic status.

2 Enoch also adds another dimension of personal soteriology, namely, that Enoch is meant to return to heaven “to stand in front of his face for eternity.” Enoch’s journey has been, it turns out, proleptic—an experience of the heavenly life to come experienced in a vision during one’s earthly life.

The concern about the origins and persistence of evil, as has been said, is much attenuated in *2 Enoch*. The lengthy and vivid elaboration of the evil done by the giants is missing in *2 Enoch*, whereas it occupies a central place in *The Book of Watchers*, taking up almost the whole of the ten chapters of the second section. The origin of evil spirits coming out of the bodies of the giants which will corrupt men and women until the “day of the great conclusion” is missing from *2 Enoch*. The space given to Enoch’s ethical instruction to his children in *2 Enoch* renders the mention of these fallen angels a distant second to the space given to the responsibility of men and women to lead upright lives and worship the Creator God.

The status afforded Enoch has interesting similarities and differences in *The Book of Watchers* and *2 Enoch*. Both visions agree that Enoch does not have the power to intercede successfully on behalf of the fallen angels. In *Watchers*, the commissioning of Enoch to report to the fallen angels their sentence by God is emphasized. It seems almost a footnote during Enoch’s heavenly journey in *2 Enoch*. The important commissioning in *2 Enoch* is to provide his children and successors with the ethical instruction and exhortation that will make them righteous. In *Watchers*, there is an implied inferiority of human beings to the Watchers, since the latter are successful in interceding with God to

alleviate the suffering of humankind, whereas Enoch is unsuccessful in interceding on behalf of the fallen Watchers. In *2 Enoch*, Enoch seems to acknowledge this same inferiority when he demurs from interceding for the fallen angels. Yet in *2 Enoch*, Enoch achieves the status of Michael, one of God's great ones. There is even the implication that Enoch enjoys a more privileged status for he is told secrets denied to the angels. In addition, the intercession by the faithful Watchers in *Watchers* is missing from *2 Enoch*, but Enoch is elevated in *2 Enoch* to a redemptive or messianic role.

The description of the actual *Merkabah* vision of God on his throne is much more elaborated in *2 Enoch* (chapters 20 – 22) than in *The Book of Watchers* (*1 Enoch* 14:8 – 15:1), but both try to give expression as best they can to the dazzling magnificence of the throne. In *Watchers*, Enoch is summoned to heaven by natural forces that also serve as the means of his ascent, and no guide accompanies him. The description of his vision uses metaphors of architecture, materials, fire, and ice. Upon entering a first house, great fear seizes him, he trembles and falls down and experiences a vision within the vision of a second, even more dazzling house. Within this house he sees a throne with the “Great Glory” upon it. He hears the voice of the cherubim but none of the angels or no one “of the flesh” among the tens of millions that stood before him was able to come and see the face of “the Excellent and Glorious One.” The Lord “with his own mouth” bids Enoch to come near.

By contrast, Enoch's heavenly ascent in *2 Enoch* is up through ten heavens. He is accompanied by two huge, extraordinary men who serve as Enoch's guides until he enters the seventh heaven. He is then guided by Gabriel through the eighth and ninth heavens and by Michael who takes him to see the face of God in the tenth heaven which

“is not to be talked about,” “supremely awesome,” and “supremely frightening.” *2 Enoch* is concerned with the details of the entire structure of ten heavens, their astronomical features and enumerations, and most especially the hierarchy of the angels that do God’s bidding and regulate the workings of God’s Creation. While *Watchers* separates Enoch’s heavenly ascent from his far flung journey of mostly earthly geography which contains sites revealing features of the end times, *2 Enoch* rolls many of these into the landscapes of the ten heavens.

Also, God’s words to Enoch fill fifteen chapters in *2 Enoch* (23–37) whereas it takes up only two in *The Book of Watchers* (15–16). God’s speech to Enoch in *Watchers* recapitulates and confirms what the reader has already learned about the fallen angels—their punishment and Enoch’s failed intervention on their behalf. His speech in *2 Enoch* contains secrets that not even the angels know and a detailed account of the Creation. Will we find in God’s speech in *2 Enoch* the motifs that we found in the long third section of *Watchers*, Enoch’s tour of earth?

Firstly, are characters, features, and stories of the Hebrew Bible corroborated by *2 Enoch*? Yes, to an even greater degree than in *Watchers*. Chapters 24 to 32 are both a recapitulation and amplification of the creation account in Genesis by God Himself. Secondly, the angelology of *2 Enoch* is more highly developed than in *Watchers* and much more positive. As already mentioned, the fallen Watchers are only mentioned in passing in the fifth heaven, and no evil spirits coming out of the giants are cited in *2 Enoch*. Yet the numbers and importance of angels in the entire scheme of the cosmos is much more elaborately described in *2 Enoch*.

Thirdly, while The Flood is predicted in *2 Enoch*, the earth does not figure prominently into the apocalyptic end times as it does in *Watchers*. This segues into the fourth point, namely, that *2 Enoch's* rich and lengthy depiction of ten heavens may exemplify a continued development of the Hellenistic shift from earth as the proper place for human beings to a fascination with heaven as the true home of men and women in the afterlife.

Enoch's vision in *2 Enoch* is more elaborated than in *Watchers*. We have noted some amplifications already: the multiplicity of heavens, the more extensive angelology, the length and content of God's address to Enoch, and the revelation of secrets to Enoch unknown to the angels. *Watchers* certainly portrays God as Creator and upholds theodicy, but *2 Enoch* emphasizes both points in God's own portrayal of himself:

And now, Enoch, whatever I have told you, and whatever you have understood, and whatever you have seen in the heavens, and whatever you have seen on the earth, and whatever I have written in the books—by my supreme wisdom all these things I planned to accomplish...And there is no adviser and no successor to my creation. I am self-eternal and not made by hands. My thought is without change. My wisdom is my adviser and my deed is my word. And my eyes look at all things. If I look at all things, then they stand still and shake with terror; but, if I should turn my face away, then all things would perish.⁶⁴

One salient feature of *2 Enoch* is the recording of all knowledge in 366 books by Enoch at God's behest and God's command that they be distributed, "children to children

⁶⁴ Charlesworth 1983, 140.

and family to family and kinsfolk to kinsfolk.”⁶⁵ The Lord instructs the archangel Vrevoil, “swifter in wisdom than the other archangels, and who records all the Lord’s deeds”⁶⁶ to bring all of his (God’s) books from his storehouses, to outfit Enoch with a speed-writing pen, and to dictate to Enoch:

And he was telling me [Enoch] all the things of heaven and earth and sea and all the elements and the movements and their courses, and the living thunder, the sun and the moon and the stars, their courses and their changes, and seasons and years and days and hours, and the coming of the clouds and the blowing of the winds, and the number of the angels and the songs of the armed troops; and every kin of human thing, and every kind of language and singing, and human life and rules and instructions and sweet-voiced singing, and everything that it is appropriate to learn.”⁶⁷

As if this were not extraordinary enough, God himself instructs Enoch:

Listen, Enoch, and pay attention to these words of mine! For not even to my angels have I explained my secrets nor related to them their origin, nor my endlessness and inconceivableness, as I devise the creatures, as I am making known to you today.⁶⁸

This rivals if not surpasses the Biblical revelations of God to Moses on Sinai. Does it testify to the adequacy, even superiority, of God’s ethical revelation to mankind in the pre-Mosaic age? It, at least, opens a door to thinking that another besides Moses

⁶⁵ Charlesworth 1983, 140.

⁶⁶ Charlesworth 1983, 140.

⁶⁷ Charlesworth 1983, 140.

⁶⁸ Charlesworth 1983, 142.

was the recipient of supreme ethical revelation, astounding both in breadth and depth and perhaps even more complete.

In summary, then, we have in *The Book of Watchers* and *2 Enoch*, two accounts of *Merkabah* visions. Both texts give us, insofar as language can, notions of the vividness, transcendence of the throne and the elation and fear which the pseudepigraphic authors experienced during their journey to heaven. Both were commissioned by God himself; in the case of *The Book of Watchers*, to tell the fallen Watchers of God's sentencing; in *2 Enoch*, to instruct his children in the way of righteousness. Both suggest that humankind ranks below the angels, but in *2 Enoch*, Enoch is transformed into one of the great angels, is told secrets denied to the angels, and is ascribed a redemptive, even messianic role. In both accounts, the heavenly traveler also learns a great deal about the roles of angels, the courses of the heavenly bodies, and the end time which will be characterized by God's judgment, eternal rewards for the righteous and punishments for sinners, and thus the restoration of theodicy. In other words, they envision the apocalypse. In *2 Enoch*, the ascender is given knowledge of everything, commanded to commit it to writing and to share it with his descendents. Also in *2 Enoch*, the heavenly journeyer is summoned to return to heaven for eternity.

If we can link Paul's experience on the road to Damascus and/or his self-reported "visions and revelations" with the visions reported in *The Book of Watchers* and *2 Enoch*, we may then have some fuller idea of what Paul experienced.

CHAPTER 3

ASCENTS OF PAUL

“Visions and revelations of the Lord”

I have said that our focus is on the accounts of heavenly ascenders in the Jewish *Merkabah* tradition as illuminating the content of Paul’s experience as a heavenly ascender. Since Paul so clearly speaks of himself as a heavenly ascender in 2 Corinthians, let us consider first the light which the accounts of Jewish *Merkabah* we have examined shed on this experience.

Despite the dearth of facts about Paul’s life, it can be ascertained that the “visions and revelations” to which Paul refers in 2 Corinthians 12 are almost certainly not a reference to his Damascus Road Experience (DRE). Many scholars’ estimate for dating Second Corinthians (though in actuality it may be two separate letters that have been combined) is circa 55CE⁶⁹. The fourteen years earlier which Paul specifies would be circa 41CE, most certainly much later than Paul’s conversion, which Horrell puts as circa 33 CE.⁷⁰ It is possible, however, that Paul may be alluding to both his DRE and other experiences by using the plural, “visions and revelations.” My thesis, moreover, is that Paul was trained in *Merkabah* mysticism and thus had had “visions and revelations” even before his DRE. He does though single out “fourteen years ago” as a period in which he experienced presumably particularly memorable “visions and revelations” apart from his DRE.

⁶⁹ Horrell 2000, 39; Meeks and Fitzgerald 2007, 44.

⁷⁰ Horrell 2000, 37.

Some scholars have construed his parallel construction—“I know a person...And I know that such a person...”—as indicating two heavenly ascents while Tabor maintains that Paul is describing only one.⁷¹ For our purposes, it makes little difference. The important point is that it or they seem to have been as significant to Paul as his DRE, which has received much greater attention, it being considered the pivotal event in Paul’s life.

It cannot be denied, I think, that Paul is talking of a heavenly ascent in this passage in 2 Corinthians—“caught up to the third heaven” and “caught up into Paradise” make this clear. As we have seen, *1* and *2 Enoch* are also speaking of heavenly ascent. *The Book of Watchers*, which we have examined in detail, illustrates the pseudepigraphic author’s vision of heaven and God enthroned. *2 Enoch* contains an even lengthier description and is clearly proleptic, for God commands Enoch to return to earth for thirty days and then to rejoin him in heaven.

Though Paul gives a very brief account⁷² of the heavenly ascent, I believe we can establish links between the much longer Enochic accounts and Paul’s. Let us then examine Paul’s description at 2 Corinthians 12:1 – 10:

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be

⁷¹ Tabor 1986, 115.

⁷² See below the discussion of possible reasons for his reticence.

told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me; but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Due to the context of this passage (all of 2 Corinthians), it must necessarily be considered as part of Paul’s defense of his stature as an apostle. That said, I believe Tabor was correct at the time that he wrote (1986) in noting that the “visions and revelations,” to which Paul referred but did not elaborate, had not been considered for their own sake.⁷³ Rather, they are characterized as a charisma that Paul somewhat ambivalently proposed as a partial proof of his apostleship. Such a statement supposes, of course, that Paul is speaking of his own visions and revelations of the Lord. There are good reasons to suppose that he is. The chief argument is that the shift to the first person

⁷³ Tabor 1986, 1ff.

in verses 7b ff.—“Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, etc.”—would make no sense if Paul were not speaking of his own visions and revelations. The other rationale sees Paul as rhetorically “soft-peddling” that it is his own revelation. Why would he do so? We know that the rabbis were later very reticent about speaking about personal mystical experiences. This may have been true among first century Pharisees as well. Or Paul may be following the precedent of the Pseudepigraphic authors, i.e., he attributes his heavenly ascent to someone else out of modesty just as the authors of *1* and *2 Enoch* attributed their own visions to Enoch.

The most obvious point of contact between Paul’s visions and revelations and the accounts of the visions of Enoch in *The Book of Watchers* and *2 Enoch* is Paul’s characterization of them as having an “exceptional character” [τῆ ὑπερβολῆ τῶν ἀποκαλυψεων]. Recall the list of things that are revealed to Enoch in one or the other of these works:

- (1) God himself enthroned in majesty upon his throne-chariot (see passages quoted above),
- (2) knowledge of the end times including the destruction/punishment of the fallen Watchers and sinful human beings and the reward of the righteous,
- (3) the nature and locations of the places of punishment and reward,
- (4) ethical instruction of God for mankind in its entirety,
- (5) secrets of the Creation hidden from the angels,
- (6) God’s sending of the Flood and his binding of the fallen angels,
- (7) all the workings of the cosmos and their regulation by the angelic hosts.

Paul's words to describe his own vision would be apt to describe Enoch's. It is clear from his writings that Paul's interest lies in God's design of salvation. (See all of Romans, but particularly, Rom. 1:16ff, 8:19ff, 9-11, 13:11) His zeal for upholding the Law to the point of persecuting "the Way" (Gal. 1:13,14; Acts 22:3-5) testifies to the importance he attached to righteous behavior before he became an Apostle, and his letters are full of exhortation and ethical instruction throughout his mission. The principal content of Enochic visions is beatific vision, soteriology and eschatology, all aspects of salvation. Is it too much of a stretch to imagine that Paul's visions and revelations contained many such wonderful facets of knowledge as Enoch's?

A second feature in linking Paul's exceptional visions and revelations to the Enochic accounts is the audition by the Lord in the case of the former (2 Cor. 12:9) and by God in the latter. Whether Paul's Christology attributed divinity to his Lord is a much-debated subject, the resolution of which is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, Paul's understanding that Jesus was Messiah and shared in God's divine agency is quite certain.⁷⁴ Such an audition was another characteristic of *Merkabah* visions and adds to the likelihood of Paul's visions being of the same fabric as the Enochic visions.

Again, Paul's language establishes another link with the Enochic accounts. He says, that he "was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat" (2 Cor. 12:4). The reading given to this phrase by the translation in the New Revised Standard Version connotes a proscription from telling others about what the ascender has seen in his visions. Other translations connote the impossibility of telling these things, i.e., the ineffability of what has been seen. The

⁷⁴ See Dunn 1998, 252-260 and Bauckham 1998, 25-42 for a discussion of Paul's Christology

authors of *Watchers* and *2 Enoch* are self-conscious of the ineffability of the wonders of these visions. For example, in the twenty-second chapter of *2 Enoch* we read:

Thus even I saw the face of the Lord. But the face of the Lord is not to be talked about, it is so very marvelous and supremely awesome and supremely frightening. And who am I to give an account of the incomprehensible being of the Lord, and of his face, so extremely strange and indescribable? ...Who can give an account of his beautiful appearance, never changing and indescribable, and his great glory?⁷⁵

As imaginative and as flamboyant as the language is in the works, the reader has a sense that the descriptions fall short of the experience of the visions and revelations.

Supposing, however, that the NRSV connotation is correct, i.e., that Paul was proscribed from telling what he saw, is there material in the Enochic accounts that would explain this? In *2 Enoch*, we read:

And now therefore, my children, I know everything; for either from the lips of the Lord or else my eyes have seen from the beginning even to the end, and from the end to the recommencement. I know everything, and everything I have written down in books, the heavens and their boundaries and their contents. And all the armies and their movements I have measured.⁷⁶

Let us suppose that through his visions Paul became privy to the timing of the destruction of the Temple. Such knowledge could be dangerous, and Paul might have been forbidden to reveal it. In *2 Enoch*, God shares with Enoch secrets of his creation,

⁷⁵ Charlesworth 1983, 136.

⁷⁶ Charlesworth 1983, 164.

which even the angels do not know. Based on this, it is easy to imagine that some of what is revealed to Paul would be for him alone.

In addition to hearing God's words directly, in *2 Enoch* the heavenly ascender hears the heavenly liturgy. In chapter 17, Enoch saw in the fourth heaven "armed troops, worshipping the Lord with tympani and pipes and unceasing voices, and pleasant voices and pleasant and unceasing and various songs, which it is impossible to describe. And every mind would be quite astonished, so marvelous and wonderful is the singing of these angels. And I was delighted, listening to them."⁷⁷ In the nineteenth chapter, the archangels, phoenixes, cherubim, and six-winged beings all sing in unison and "their song is not to be reported."⁷⁸ In chapter 21, Enoch hears the cherubim and seraphim singing with gentle voice in front of the face of the Lord, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord Sabaoth, Heaven and Earth are full of his glory."⁷⁹ The rapture of the heavenly singing defied description for the author of *Enoch* and perhaps for Paul as well.

Another possible link—though not with the 2 Corinthians passage—is the proleptic aspect of *2 Enoch*. Enoch learns that he is to return to heaven to stand before the face of God through all eternity. Does Paul have such knowledge in mind when he writes to the Philippians?:

[D]ying is gain....my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better...I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil.1:21, 23; 3:14)

Is not his own return to heaven included when he says more generally?:

⁷⁷ Charlesworth 1983, 130.

⁷⁸ Charlesworth 1983, 134.

⁷⁹ Charlesworth 1983, 134.

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. (1 Cor. 15:51-53)

Another observation about the Enochic accounts needs to be made which sheds light upon Paul's experience. The two different structures of the heavens in *Watchers* and *2 Enoch* suggest that different adepts had different experiences of ascent. *Watchers* suggests that Enoch passed through two magnificent houses and came to God's throne. *2 Enoch* speaks of Enoch ascending to the seventh heaven from which he can see God on his throne and then actually coming before the face of the Lord in the tenth heaven. Gooder makes a great deal over the differences in these two works and the other accounts of heavenly ascent that she examines in order to support her interpretation that Paul is parodying his own visions and revelations, that his ascent to heaven was a "failed ascent" since he only reached the third heaven and not the seventh heaven.⁸⁰ This imputes to Paul, first, a rather exhaustive familiarity with the Pseudepigrapha. This could be true. If so, it imputes to Paul manipulation of these literary (or oral) traditions to describe his own experience. Is Paul playing "fast and loose" with the nature of his own vision even though he declares that were he to boast he would be telling the truth? And what could be made of his description of the visions and revelations as having an "exceptional character?" Finally, if the ascent was a failed one, why would there be a need for the thorn in the flesh to keep him from being too elated? I rather interpret Paul as truthfully

⁸⁰ Gooder 2006, passim.

describing his heavenly ascent and that, in his case, Paradise and the third heaven provided an exceptional and ineffable experience to him, so much so that God deemed a corrective necessary so that Paul would not think too highly of himself.

For what would someone who had been privileged to experience some or all of what is described in *Watchers* or *2 Enoch* have thought of himself, granted such experience? How would it make one feel to be in possession of what was believed to be a true vision of how salvation history was going to play out? This had to be important to Paul's self-understanding of having been commissioned to play a significant, in fact, a unique role in salvation history, reinforcing the sense of prophetic call given him in his DRE. Paul and Paul alone among the apostles had the special qualification of being trained as a Pharisee and being steeped in Jewish mystical tradition. His commission was given him in his DRE and confirmed in his other visions and revelations that he was to declare the good news that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah promised by the Scriptures to usher in the Day of the Lord. This is the self-understanding standing behind Paul's declaration to the Galatians (Gal. 1:15-16).

But there was another revelation, another insight, that Paul was to be the bearer of as well, which is the real significance of his discussion of his visions and revelations in 2 Corinthians. Such privileged experiences and so august a calling would indeed tend to puff one up and tempt one to think of oneself as extraordinary and superior. Paul, who in Philippians describes himself "as to righteousness under the law blameless," was not immune to such a temptation to pride. So God sees fit, in Paul's view, to give him a thorn in the flesh to remind him that he is a man like others, weak in the face of temptations to be haughty, to think himself wiser than he actually was. (See Rom. 12:16.)

The other revelation concerned the paradoxical nature of the revealed Messiah, a paradox that Paul would embody in his own life—that salvation came not through power but through weakness, that the Messiah was a suffering servant, reviled and rejected, one whose power—as revealed to Paul in his visions—was perfected in weakness. So it is that Paul writes to the Corinthians previously:

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong... (1 Cor. 1:27)

Indeed, this paradox is the scandal of the cross:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” (1 Cor. 1:27 – 2:2)

There are other points of connection between this passage in 2 Corinthians and *Merkabah* that should be noted. Is there significance that Paul uses the plural, i.e., “visions and revelations of the Lord?” One way that *Watchers* might help explain this is by recalling that Enoch had a vision within a vision, thus visions. In the very origin of *Merkabah*, the book of Ezekiel, the prophet records two visions of heaven (chapters 1 and 43) This suggests that heavenly ascents were not once-for-all experiences but could occur multiple times:

The vision that I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and like the vision that I had seen by the river Chebar; and I fell upon my face. (Ezek. 43:3)

Paul's knowledge of these two experiences of Ezekiel may also throw some light on Paul's somewhat mysterious uncertainty about whether he was in the body or out of the body. Ezekiel 1 records that Ezekiel was stationary while experiencing God enthroned. But Ezekiel 43 relates Ezekiel being taken bodily up to the gate then into the inner court where God was enthroned.⁸¹ Having both precedents in the tradition may have caused devotees, including Paul, to be unsure of the physical nature of their own experience. Or the explanation may rest simply in the often-noted vividness of dreams to such a degree that people report that they thought their dreams were real. A third possibility is that Paul was *in extremis* from hunger, thirst, loss of blood, exhaustion, etc. (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-28), acknowledged causes of religiously altered states of consciousness as reported, for example, in the book of Daniel 10.2-10.⁸² It does not matter whether the extreme state was induced unintentionally as is possible in Paul's case or intentionally as with Daniel who had fasted for three weeks in mourning.

All these resonances in Paul's terse phrases concerning his "visions and revelations" and the other passages cited taken together establish, in my opinion, (1) the validity of Segal's contention that Paul's experiences should be treated as a first-century instance of Jewish *Merkabah* mysticism⁸³ and (2) that the visions in Watchers and 2 Enoch may supplement our knowledge of what Paul experienced.

The Damascus Road Experience

As we have already suggested, there certainly exists the possibility and perhaps a probability that Paul himself was trained in contemplation of the *Merkabah* like some

⁸¹ Dean-Otting 1984, 260.

⁸² Segal 2004, 323-324.

⁸³ Segal 1990, 34ff.

avored students of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and had had episodes of *Merkabah* mystical experience even prior to his DRE and the “visions and revelations” he refers to in *2 Corinthians*. I base this upon (1) Neusner’s biography of R. Yohanan which contains examples of the Talmudic accounts of R. Yohanan’s *Merkabah* contemplation with his students,⁸⁴ (2) Paul’s own attestation of his zeal for Pharisaism (Phil. 3:5-6), and (3) Luke’s report (put in the mouth of Paul) of his training by Gamaliel I in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3) which would qualify him as someone mature in his faith development.

My thesis is that Paul’s Damascus Road Experience constituted a *Merkabah* mystical experience that Paul accepted as legitimate because he had been trained in the practice during his training in Jerusalem to be a leader among the Pharisees. If we ignore the differences among Luke’s three different accounts and pay attention to the general features of Luke’s portrayal, the parallels to Ezekiel’s vision and commission to prophecy (Ezek. 1:26-2:7) are evident. And the same elements appear in Enoch’s heavenly ascents in *Watchers* and *2 Enoch*. All contain the following elements:

<u>Element</u>	<u>In Ezekiel</u>	<u>In Acts</u>	<u>In Watchers</u>	<u>In 2 Enoch</u>
(1) Overpowering light or luminosity	X	X	X	X
(2) Fear, falling to the ground	X	X	X	X
(3) God’s voice giving instructions	X	X (Jesus’)	X	X
(4) God’s commissioning	X	X	X	X

Luke’s description compared to any of these three *Merkabah* texts is bare bones. However, it was not Luke’s purpose to establish a link between Paul’s experience and *Merkabah* visions. Also, Luke has often been characterized as a “God-fearer,” i.e., an

⁸⁴ Neusner 1970, 135ff.

admirer, perhaps even a proselyte, of Judaism, but not a Jew or a Pharisee. Since *Merkabah* was not much spoken of beyond the circle of initiates, Luke was in all likelihood unaware of *Merkabah* at all. Luke was dependant upon Paul, and we have already suggested that Paul, respecting Pharisaic practice, would not have elaborated on his DRE as a *Merkabah* experience. Still, key features are present in Luke's descriptions and constitute a basis for claiming commonality with *Merkabah*.

Paul points out the significance of the event in Galatians:

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me...(Gal. 1:15-17a)

Thus Paul expresses the private nature of the revelation and his complete confidence in it. I believe this indicates training in *Merkabah* which eliminated any skepticism in Paul that it was not proper or not God's doing.

At this point, let us examine the Talmudic reports of Rabbi Yohanan's and his students' contemplation of *Merkabah*. These reports were recorded much later and may be pseudepigraphic accounts by later authors. Or they may describe the actual experience based on oral or lost written reports. If they are, in fact, reports of actual experiences, then perhaps only a decade or two separates them from Paul's experience.

I depend here on the observations of Bowker, who examines four fragments of texts from the rabbinic literature, viz., Mekilta de R. Simeon b. Yohai, Tosefta Hag. ii. I, Jerushalmi. Hag. ii. I(77a) and Babli Hag. 14b. Points of similarity are: allocation to the

third heaven, occurrence while journeying, the light from heaven, falling to the ground, the heavenly voice speaking, and resultant ecstasy. Bowker concludes:

Yet if in fact Paul was, like the rabbis (in the passages he examines), reflecting “on the road” on the opening vision of Ezekiel, it gives a very coherent context for the sudden reversal of his beliefs: what may have happened is that Ezek. ii, in association with Ezek. i, took on a dramatically new meaning; and here it is of extreme importance to note that Ezek. ii. 1 and 3 is quoted, in part, in Acts xxvi.16...It seems entirely possible that Paul, in the perfectly ordinary process of *merkabah* contemplation, reflected on the voice of commission to Ezekiel in ch. ii...as well as on the “chariot” chapter...[T]here are sufficient points of contact between the J. [Jewish] and P. [Pauline] trads. [sic – traditions] to suggest that Saul practiced merkabah contemplation as an ordinary consequence of his highly extended Pharisaic training. There was nothing heterodox about it...[T]he argument advanced here at least suggests a basis on which the seeing of a vision of the resemblance of God’s majesty was far from being unusual...⁸⁵

Not much is known about Gamaliel I, whom Luke has Paul to claim was his teacher (Acts 22:3) and appears in Acts 6 as a cautious leader (Acts 6:34ff.). Might Gamaliel have done the same for Paul as Yohanan did for his advanced students?

A dimension of Paul’s visionary experience that jumps out in the chart above is that Jesus takes the place of God in Ezekiel’s and Enoch’s visions. Being familiar with

⁸⁵ Bowker 1971, 171-173.

the accounts of these other *Merkabah* visions, this “substitution” would no doubt have caused Paul to reflect on the status of Jesus vis-à-vis God himself. Much work has been done recently on the role that *Merkabah* accounts may have played in the development of early Christian Christology. It is not the purpose of this paper to explore how *Merkabah* influenced Paul’s thought so much as to consider how *Merkabah* may have affected Paul’s own self-understanding. Yet without the notion of Christ as the powerful, messianic agent of God ushering in the Day of the Lord, Paul would have no commission, for he would have no revelation to declare, no message to preach. So it is almost unavoidable to point out that, assuming Paul’s knowledge of *1 Enoch* and perhaps *2 Enoch*, coupled with his own *Merkabah* visions surely played a part in Paul’s understanding of the Lord whom he served. Along with this came Paul’s sense of apostleship.

Still it remains puzzling that if Paul was in fact defending his apostleship to his Corinthian opponents, he did not cite his DRE as proof of his status as an apostle. His first letter implies that he had shared this with them as he did with the Galatians (1 Cor. 1:1, 17; 9:1). Perhaps he felt that he had advanced that argument and that it had been ignored. Or perhaps his DRE, though pivotal, was not primary in Paul’s mystical experience. Perhaps it was the “visions and revelations” which he experienced years after his DRE and after the experience of “far more imprisonments,” “countless floggings,” “stoning,” “shipwreck,” “danger from rivers...bandits...his own people...Gentiles...in the city...in the wilderness...at sea...from false brothers and sisters,” “toil and hardship,” “many a sleepless night,” hunger, thirst, nakedness, and the daily pressure of the anxiety for all the churches (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-28) that

unlocked for him the paradoxical truth about being “a servant of Jesus Christ.” (Rom. 1:1) Though Paul would have known that he enjoyed a special status first as a young, zealous Pharisee sharing visions of the Glory of the Lord upon his chariot throne, then privileged in a vision on the road to Damascus to know Jesus as Lord and be commissioned to share his revelations regarding the salvation of the world, this ultimate revelation of God’s power through weakness was primary for Paul. Is it not of this hyperbolic revelation that Paul is speaking in 1 Corinthians:

But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him”—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit...And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. (1 Cor. 2:7-10a, 13)

Paul understood both the sublimity of mystical experience and the paradox of God’s preference for working through weakness because of his participation in *Merkabah* mysticism.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS

In his book, *My Brother Paul*, Rubinstein testifies that one of the “take-away” lessons from reading Paul was that Paul trusted his own experience.⁸⁶ What does he mean? Paul was grounded in Second Temple Pharisaism, and though the historical record of this sect at that time is scanty, so that only its outlines can be drawn, we do know that this sect was one of the groups that opposed the Jesus movement from very early in Jesus’ public life.⁸⁷ The fact that Paul, a zealous Pharisee, persecuted “the Way” makes perfectly good sense. What is puzzling is his about-face. His Damascus Road Experience, recounted three times in Acts, is supposed to satisfy us about how this could happen. Yet such a movement of the heart and mind in a person so committed to defending a certain outlook and way of life is difficult to understand. Rubinstein is impressed that Paul trusted his own revelation even at the peril of ostracism and persecution by his fellow Pharisees.

My thesis is that Paul’s Damascus Road Experience and his heavenly ascent some time later, both of which Paul refers to in his own writings, should be understood as two particularly preeminent instances of a life-long practice of Pharisaic *Merkabah* mysticism, a technique by which Paul sought to and did re-experience his own vision of the *Merkabah*. This thesis is hypothetical, yet it is suggested by connections between reports of *Merkabah* visions in the *Hebrew Bible*, *The Book of Watchers*, and *2 Enoch* on

⁸⁶ Rubenstein 1972, 6ff.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Mark 3:6.

the one hand, and Paul's and Luke's writings on the other. I have also cited historical, albeit sketchy, evidence for such a connection. My argument in summary can be stated thus: identified at an early age as "far more zealous for the traditions of [his] ancestors" (Gal. 1:14), he was initiated into *Merkabah* contemplation by his teachers in Pharisaism (Gamaliel I and his circle). He understood himself as one "advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age" (Gal. 1:14), in fact, "as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Phil.3:6). His early mystical experiences gave him knowledge of God's heavenly life among the angels, caused him to identify with Enoch, and convinced him that he was called to be a prophet. Like Ezekiel, he would find resistance to his proclamation. (See Ezek. 2:3ff.) Most importantly, it legitimized mystical experience as an appropriate praxis for someone as dedicated as he and gave him confidence in visions as a vehicle for communication between God and himself. Following the lead of his Jerusalem superiors who recognized his zeal, he opposed the new sect of messianists, the "Way," (Acts 9:2) arising out of Galilee to the point of persecuting them even to death by stoning. On his way to Damascus to curb the heresy of the "Way" there, he took up contemplation of the *Merkabah* as he had many times before. It resulted in a fearsome "revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:12) that left him on the ground, quaking and blind. Never doubting its validity, he became convicted after further instruction and contemplation that God had appointed him to be a prophet of a new type, a prophet to the Gentiles, "an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal.1:1) proclaiming the startling good news of the "Way" which he had scorned as heretical. This impelled him on a mission that would test him sorely. Yet the overpowering vision was reinforced and new

revelations given in the midst of this testing. Taken up again to paradise in the heavenly realm, he experienced the transcendent, ineffable splendor of God in which he might one day share through his Lord Jesus Christ and heard of things that would come to be which he must not tell. Yet more than all this, the greatest and paradoxical truth about God's saving power was revealed to him by his messianic Lord:

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

(2 Cor. 12: 8)

Only a person practiced in mysticism could trust such a revelation in the face of the hostility which he encountered. Paul's knowledge about and experience of the *Merkabah* both established his apostolic calling and sustained him in it. This is what stands behind what he writes to the Galatians:

Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ. For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, so that I might proclaim him among

the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me... (Gal. 1:10-17)

If my thesis is true, the implication is that early Christianity owes to Jewish *Merkabah* mysticism the shaping of the self-consciousness of its most zealous promoter who, quite literally, put Christianity on the map. If true, *Merkabah* is but one more strand of “the rich root of the olive tree” from which “the wild olive shoot” of Christianity sprang. (Rom. 11:17)

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