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B. Rabbinic and Medieval Judaism

The early rabbinic writings produced in Roman Palestine during the 2nd to 5th centuries CE (i.e., Mishnah, Tosefta, Palestinian Talmud, and early midrashim) evince little interest in the theme of heavenly ascent. Unlike earlier apocalyptic and liturgical writings of Second Temple Judaism, these sources do not treat human ascent to heaven, reception of heavenly knowledge, or participation in the angelic liturgy as vital components of Jewish piety or literary imagination. This displacement of the literature and discourse of heavenly ascent seems to have been a deliberate act of suppression that went hand-in-hand with the rabbinic valorization of Torah-study and the practice of Jewish law (*halakhah*) as the primary paths to knowledge of and proximity to God (Reed: 136–49). While the rabbis do show interest in the descriptions of God and his entourage contained in Scripture (e.g., Isa 6; Ezek 1, 10; Dan 7), they apparently developed this esoteric tradition as a strictly exegetical – rather than ritual or experiential – discipline (Halperin 1980).

By contrast, rabbinic literature produced in both the Sasanian east and the Roman-Byzantine west from approximately the 5th century onwards exhibits an increasing interest in the theme of heavenly ascent. Thus, several late Palestinian midrashic works explore the process of heavenly ascent, most notably through narrative accounts of Moses’ ascent to receive the Torah (Halperin 1988: 289–358). In this same period, the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud incorporated such Palestinian ascent narratives into their monumental literary project (e.g., *bShab* 88a–89a) as well as motifs specific to the early Jewish mystical tradition (e.g., *bHag* 14b; Schäfer 1988). Nevertheless, the Babylonian sages remained wary of practices aimed at achieving direct access to the heavenly sphere, and often domesticated ascent and other related traditions by assimilating them to the norms of rabbinic culture (Schäfer 2005).

It is equally clear, however, that numerous late antique and early medieval Jews – likely some rabbis among them – viewed the notion of heavenly ascent as a significant and perhaps central component of Jewish culture and practice. The renewed interest in heavenly ascent characteristic of the rabbinic writings from the second half of the 1st millennium CE coincides with the emergence of Hekhalot literature as a distinct class of texts (Boustán). The term “hekhalot” comes from the Hebrew word for the celestial “palaces” within which God is said to sit enthroned and through

which the visionary ascends. The religious discourse and practice contained in this literature is often referred to as “Merkavah mysticism” because of its general preoccupation with Ezekiel’s vision of the divine chariot-throne (*merkavah*). The conception of heavenly ascent in Hekhalot literature differs from the passive model of “rapture” characteristic of the apocalyptic genre; here, instead, heavenly ascent is achieved through the performance of ritual speech and action (Himmelfarb). Hekhalot literature and its powerful image of God’s chariot-throne had a lasting impact on the religious imagination of European Jewry in the High Middle Ages, in particular on the subsequent development of the Jewish mystical tradition (Wolfson: 188–269).

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III. New Testament

“Ascension” can include (1) short-term visits to and through heaven (“heavenly journeys”); (2) someone being taken permanently to heaven while still alive (“rapture,” *Entrückung*); and (3) the dead being likewise taken to heaven in vindication (“assumption”). The ascension of Jesus, subsequent to his being raised from the dead, at least according to Acts 1:9, should probably be regarded as *sui generis*.

1. Heavenly Journey. The most notable examples in the NT are 2 Cor 12:2–4 and the revelations granted to John the seer, author of Revelation.

In the former, Paul speaks of “someone in Christ” who, 14 years earlier, had been “caught up (*ἄρπαγέντα*) into the third heaven,” “into Paradise,” where he heard “inexpressible words which no one is permitted to utter.” There is general agreement that the person in view is Paul himself; he speaks of being granted many such visions and revelations (12:1, 7), and it is possible that Paul had been a practitioner of merkavah mysticism. He evidently discounted such experiences, boasting more in the weakness through which God’s power comes to its fullest expression (12:7–10).

It is less clear whether the seer of Revelation was taken up to heaven, or simply saw visions of what was happening in heaven (Rev 4:1; 5:1, 2, 6,