

christianisme, l'*Aksimāros*, nous offre une synthèse séduisante interprétant trop partialement les données scripturaires. Certes, cette synthèse est riche en symboles et relève plutôt du mythe. Mais les mythes temporalisent et humanisent, par la nécessité même de l'expression, ce qui échappe au temps et à l'existence humaine.

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## Where Angels Dwell

### Uranography in Jewish-Christian Antiquity<sup>1</sup>

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#### Introduction: space and angels

It is common when a discussion addresses angelological topics for at least one person in the audience to feel compelled to ridicule the topic by referring to the medieval question of how many angels can stand on the point of a pin.<sup>2</sup> By bringing up this almost paradigmatically pointless scholasticism, the speaker seeks to demonstrate just how irrelevant the discourse regarding angels was and still is. However, if the same person took a moment to listen to a lecture on quantum physics, he or she might accept the legitimacy of speculations concerning the superposition of states (in the same place, 'on the tip of a needle') or on the entanglement of distant entities ("geisterhafte Fernwirkung", as Einstein criticised it) as rational. This chapter will demonstrate that angelology has, since ancient times, been an important field for the discussion and consideration of questions concerning space, place, and distance.

My title begins with 'Where', a word that implies a fundamental distinction between an *entity* that is within a space and the *space* that contains it. We apply this distinction all the time into the world of our experience: things are found among other things somewhere in an encompassing space. Regardless of whether space is treated as existing in three dimensions outside the observer<sup>3</sup> or as an interior category by reference to which an observer structures his perception,<sup>4</sup> we almost always think of space as a container that is ultimately indifferent to its content. It was only with the development of the theory of relativity in the 1920s that space began to be understood by physics as sensitive to its content, with mass serving to curve spacetime. At roughly the same time, existential philosophy sought to distinguish the human being as an exceptional entity that is not in the world in the

<sup>1</sup> This article is a heavily revised version of Johann Hafner, "Die Himmel. Wege zur Vielfältigkeit von Welt im antiken Christentum," in: *Der Himmel als transkultureller und ethischer Raum*, Bernd Oberdorfer and Stefanie Waldow, eds., Munich: Fink 2016, 77-104.

<sup>2</sup> For the scholastic treatise, see Thomas Marschler, "Der Ort der Engel. Eine scholastische Standardfrage zwischen Theologie, Naturphilosophie und Metaphysik," in: *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 53 (2006), 39-72.

<sup>3</sup> Descartes distinguished between *res cogitans* (the observer) and *res extensae* (the things observed), clearly separating being-in-space from being-in-thought.

<sup>4</sup> Kant defined space ("Form der Anschauung äußerer Dinge") and time ("Form der Anschauung äußerer Dinge und innerer Vorgänge") as subjective categories which determine our empirical knowledge (without being empirical themselves).

same way as items such as trees and tables but that ex-sists (in the sense of protruding into the world) by 'referring' to the world as a whole ("Sein im Ganzen"). Heidegger's being-in ("In-sein") means dwelling in or inhabiting a place.<sup>5</sup> After Heidegger, philosophical anthropology began to take a more naturalistic perspective on the notion of space, seeing space as the domain within which biological entities, and humans as the exemplars of this type, are situated and within which they carry out their 'vital' interests (*Vitalismus*) and activities.<sup>6</sup> In postmodern philosophy, for example, spatiality is a central category for understanding the structure of any culture. Peter Sloterdijk explains the biography of the self from the 'closedness' of the womb to individual motility, and the development of the intimate village into a globalised society, in terms of spheres, bubbles, and foams.<sup>7</sup>

However, it would be misleading to claim that humankind had to wait until the modern age in order to discover that space is not just an empty container but, rather, the result of vital relations. This chapter argues that angelology contained early precursors to this insight. I show how the differentiation of angels is deeply connected to the differentiation of space into realms and spheres, and how angelology also acted as a driving force for speculation concerning the borders of the universe and the multiplicity of worlds. I focus here on the centuries between the end of the Second Temple and the establishment of fixed canons in Judaism and Christianity. During this period, biblical angelology, apocalyptic expectations, and platonic emanationism mixed together in experimental ways. I examine representative texts from Jewish, Gnostic, and Christian traditions in order to describe the connections between angelic functions and cosmological models, and seek to systematise these against the background of a basic dialectic between transcendence and immanence.

### *Semantic observations: the interchangeability of 'heavens' and 'heaven'*

Before turning our attention to early apocalyptic texts, it will be useful to consider the usage of the word 'heaven'. In some modern languages, as well as in liturgy and in translations of the Bible, 'heaven' is used in the singular form. However, this usage does not reflect the wording in the original languages of the Bible, where we find the plural form is used in all cases in Hebrew and in most cases in *koine* Greek.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed., Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag 1984, 53f.

<sup>6</sup> In his later philosophy, Heidegger turned this model upside down. Each entity is a 'thing' (the Germanic word for 'convention'), where the foundational dimensions (earth, world, mortals, immortals) meet. Cf. Martin Heidegger, "Das Ding" (1950), in: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann 2000, 165-187.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären*, 3 vols., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1998-2004.

The first sentence of the Bible affords us a prominent example: "*B'r'eshit bara' elohim 'et ha-shamayim<sup>8</sup> w'-et ha-'arets*" is translated into German as "Im Anfang schuf Gott Himmel und Erde." Jewish translations, such as those of Tur-Sinai and Buber/Rosenzweig, which claim to be as close to the original as possible, even use a determined singular form, "den Himmel" (*the* heaven). Other translations, such as the King James Bible, shift between plural and singular forms: the first sentence reads "God created the heavens" (Gen 1, 1)<sup>9</sup> while the Lord's Prayer translates "*en tois ouranois*" (Mt 6, 9a) as "Our Father which art in heaven." This meandering between plural and singular forms can be observed throughout the history of the European use of the Greek and Latin languages. For example, one of the most important dogmatic texts in Christianity, The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, employs singular forms in the first article about the creator: "We believe in one God, the father, the almighty, the maker of heaven and earth," which is a correct translation of the Greek singular (*poiētēn ouranou kai gēs*). However, in the second article, concerning the Son, the Greek text chooses plurals instead: *katelthonta ek tōn ouranōn* (he descended from the heavens) and *kai anelthonta eis tous ouranous* (he ascended into the heavens).<sup>10</sup>

There is no apparent logic behind these choices. However, it is easy to sympathise with the struggles faced by the translators, who are caught between the Masoretic Hebrew text on the one hand, with its "*shamayim*," and the Greek Septuagint text on the other, which reads "*epoiēsen tōn ouranōn kai tēn gēn*."<sup>11</sup> One might suppose that these are mere grammatical variations that can be explained by linguistics. The argument would run that the Hebrew *shamayim* is a plural of extension, used to indicate an entity or an element so vast that its borders cannot be described and circumscribed,<sup>12</sup> and this is why it occurs as a *plurale tantum*. However, significant doubts can be raised regarding such a solution. First, we have to consider the famous example of a 'real' plural of 'heaven': "Behold, the heaven and the heaven of heavens (*ha-shamayim ushme ha-shamayim*),<sup>13</sup> is the Lord's thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is" (Dtn 10, 1). The parallelism here sug-

<sup>8</sup> According to Gesenius' *Handwörterbuch*, *shamayim* is derived from Assyrian *shamū*, pl. *shamē*: sky, roof. It is represented as a habitat (cf. Ps 2, 4) on pillars (Job 26, 11) with windows (Gen 7, 11) and doors (Ps 78, 23). Cf. Frederik Torm, "Der Pluralis *ouranoi*," in: *Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 33 (1934), 48-50.

<sup>9</sup> The New KJV reads "God created the heavens and the earth," as do most other modern English Bibles.

<sup>10</sup> The French version renders the plural "cieux"; English and German versions go back to "heaven" and "Himmel."

<sup>11</sup> So does the Vulgata "*creavit Deus caelum et terram*." There are a few verses in which the LXX follows the masoretic plural: "Praise God all you heavens/Lobt Gott vom Himmel her (*min ha-shamayim*, LXX: *ex tōn ouranōn*), praise God in the highest (*ba-m'rowmim*, LXX: *en tois hypsistois*)." Ps 148, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Gerhard von Rad's translation "Wasserfläche," *Das erste Buch Mose*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1949, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Again, the Septuaginta translates this into "*ho ouranos kai ho ouranos tou ouranou*."

gests that the heavenly world is inhabited in a way that is similar to the way in which the earth is inhabited and that there is a realm even beyond the heavens, as the heavenly world is beyond the earth. One might explain this text from a grammatical perspective as a pleonastic trope, but historically it led to Christian and Rabbinic speculation that there must be many heavens.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, the cosmology behind Gen 1 clearly distinguishes the plurality of heavens in verse 1 from the single sky (firmament/*raḳia'*) in verse 8a. The name *shamayim* serves as an obvious allusion to *mayim*,<sup>15</sup> the plural of upper and lower waters. It means that there are at least as many heavens as there are waters.

To summarise, in most cases the Hebrew Bible uses 'heaven' in its plural form, meaning an entirety. However, this form has also been interpreted as a cosmological plural. The plural meaning thus denotes that heaven is a complex being, whereas the singular meaning indicates that heaven is a distinct being, the second part of creation. Unlike 'earth', the 'heavens' were open to further exaggerations and differentiations. I will return to this point later.

### *Systematic distinctions: three kinds of transcendence*

The mixing of 'heaven' and 'heavens' in most languages is not an inconsistent *façon de parler* but, rather, represents the ambivalence of transcendence as such. Heaven can be looked at from below, as earthlings do when they see the sky. It can also be imagined as looked down upon from above, as in the case of the perspective afforded to angelic beings.

From the earliest times, humans looked up at the sky and speculated about what might lie beyond.<sup>16</sup> The visible sky seems to be the border of the world, the limit that defines the world of finite things. But this observable heaven cannot yet be infinite. The movement of the stars and the planets, and the change of light into darkness and back again, make the sky appear to be a living being or a realm of living beings. However, infinity would require a perfect being with perfect movements, while the sky as seen from the earth appears to be replete with irregular motions. These irregular phenomena are what drove Plato, Aristotle, and

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Chagiga* 12b. Similar speculations were triggered by 1Kings 8, 27 (consecration of the temple). Cf. Hans Bietenhard, *Die himmlische Welt im Urchristentum und Spätjudentum*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1951, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Later Midrashim reflect the derivation of *shamayim* from *mayim* and propose that *shamayim* is a compositum of *esh* (fire) and *mayim* (water). Cf. Wilfred Shuchat, *The Creation According to the Midrash Rabbah*, Jerusalem, New York: Devora Publishing 2002, 142ff.

<sup>16</sup> Astronomic observations were much more than just calendric calculations. They also served as indications of the contact between this world and another. Anthropologists use the fact that an early culture buries its deads in the direction of sunrise (resp. sunset) as an indicator of religiosity. Cf. Hans Jonas, "Werkzeug, Bild und Grab. Vom Transanimalischen im Menschen," in: Hans Jonas: *Philosophische Untersuchungen und metaphysische Vermutungen*, Frankfurt and Leipzig: Insel 1992, 34-49.

many other ancient astronomers,<sup>17</sup> to seek a model that would explain how the irregular visible movements can be derived from an underlying regular and more perfect motion. From this perspective, the visible sky is, thus, only the lower surface of a higher transcendence.<sup>18</sup>

Let us consider this position in abstract terms. Heaven contains two different kinds of transcendence. The sky stands for the empirical, or what I call *low transcendence*, because it is still part – albeit a distant part – of the visible world. The heavens *above* the sky, by contrast, may be visible in some models but they are definitively beyond reach. Despite this, these heavens may still be similar to the earth below, perhaps inhabited and, in some models, loosely connected with the earthly realm in that they consist of stratified layers containing elements such as rain, hail, and snow. Let us call this second level *relative transcendence*. Epistemologically, there must also be an external perspective on everything, capable of distinguishing and relating the different parts into a single cosmos. This perspective, which embraces the model as a whole, is neither immanent nor transcendent, as this distinction is itself transcended from the perspective of the external observer,<sup>19</sup> a position that actually results more from a philosophical necessity than from depictions that occur in religious texts. I call this perspective *high transcendence*. Let us keep this in mind as we move on in the argument.

### *Angelic and spatial diversifications in antiquity*

Having clarified the semantic and philosophical patterns at issues, let us now turn to the source material.

#### *1. Angelic groups in a single heaven (Apocalypse of John, ca. 100 CE)*

We start with the most influential angelic text in Christianity, the Revelation of John. This text – commonly dated to the late first century – unfolds its main scene in chapters 4 and 5, concerning the appearance together of God on his throne and

<sup>17</sup> For the diversification of angelic spheres and worlds in Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, see Johann Hafner, "Die Himmel. Wege zur Vervielfältigung von Welt im antiken Christentum," in: *Der Himmel als transkultureller und ethischer Raum*, Bernd Oberdorfer and Stefanie Waldow, eds., Munich: Fink 2016, 77-104, where I also recall philosophical traditions.

<sup>18</sup> The closing sentence of the biblical creation-account can be interpreted as an expression of this ambivalence: "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them." *u'kol z'ba'am* (and all the host of him) stands for a complex totality. *Zaba* is used for the multiplicity of celestial beings or the angelic legions, the *zebaoth*. This is a clear indication of the above mentioned double-perspective: looking from below/inside we see the difference between heaven and earth, looking from above/outside the narrator describes the totality of heavens and earth as a "vast array" (LXX: *kai pas ho kosmos auton*).

<sup>19</sup> In religious terms, it is the perspective of God looking at his creations, the heaven(s) and the earth.

the lamb. The two central figures are framed by a complex heavenly liturgy, which consists of very different kinds of angelic beings: the 24 "elders"/*presbyteroi*, the seven "spirits"/*pneumata tou theou* surrounding God, the four winged "beasts"/*zôa* guarding God, a "mighty angel"/*aggelos ischuros* announcing the lamb, and finally 10,000 × 10,000 angels/*aggeloi* giving praise. The ordinary reader is familiar with most of these creatures from the prophetic visions in Isaiah 6 and Hesekeil 1 while the learned reader might recall some of these creatures from non-canonical texts such as 1Hen and 4Esr.

Nowadays, this vision is commonly recognised because it is a widely used motif in Christian art. It has become so familiar to us that we tend to overlook its subtleties: the different beings complement each other as part of a multi-layered ritual;<sup>20</sup> guarding, praising, announcing, all these processes are interwoven with each other in this one and only space:

And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, [...] the four and twenty elders fall down before him [...]. And worship him that liveth for ever and ever and cast their crowns before the throne saying: Thou art worthy ... (Apc 4,9f.).

The seven spirits are transformed into the eyes of the divine lamb. Everyone listens to the command of the herald-angel; angels and the redeemed join together in the eschatological song 'Halleluja'. All of this takes place in one single heaven, inhabited by different angelic and human beings situated around a central throne. We do not yet see a plurality of spaces and it is only at the end of Apc that the new heaven is created to replace the old one.<sup>21</sup> As a consequence, the whole scene appears to be rather chaotic and this chaos presented Christian iconographers with a difficult task in depicting this heavenly apparition as a structured scene. The painting of this scene was more easily accomplished in the baroque style, in which angelic groups could be freely mixed, than in the more orderly Gothic style, in which one would expect them to be presented in neat rows.<sup>22</sup>

The angelic pandemonium in John's apocalypse is a useful place to start because it serves as a good background-layer for comparison with other texts of the same and subsequent centuries. When considering this period, we should refrain from identifying 'Christianity' and 'Judaism' as defined traditions, because they are still in a state of crisscrossing and interlacing with one another. Angelology, moreover, is a religious ingredient that turns out to be poly-compatible. Angels

<sup>20</sup> In his attempt to overcome a narrow scholastic view, Erik Peterson derived his interpretation of angels from their liturgical functions, mainly based on Apc 4f. Cf. Erik Peterson, *Das Buch von den Engeln. Stellung und Bedeutung der heiligen Engel im Kultus*, Leipzig: Kösel 1934.

<sup>21</sup> The "new heaven" in Apc 22 provides a more structured and highly cultivated landscape: it hosts God's throne, the liturgical staff, and the redeemed in an ideal city with walls, gates, and gardens.

<sup>22</sup> Gothic style paintings arrange angels in concentric circles or hierarchical lines, whereas baroque art randomises them throughout the picture. See, for example, the ceiling fresco "Engelhimmel" in the basilica of Ottobeuren, Bavaria.

can be imported and redefined, amalgamated and mixed; they belong at the same time to folk-religion and to official theology and, as such, are highly flexible entities. This is why this angelology remains an extremely productive pool of motifs for the religious imagination. These factors led to an explosive diversification of angels during our period and, together with it, a parallel diversification of heavens. As time passed, they less and less frequently formed a synergetic ensemble in which each helped the others out in pursuit of a single goal. Rather, they are separated in both location and role, with each species having its own distinct heaven and its own distinct function. This development was to culminate in the fully-fledged division of labour of the three hierarchies and nine choirs of Pseudo-Dionysios in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, which Giorgio Agamben has argued served as the blueprint for the imperial Byzantine bureaucracy.<sup>23</sup>

There is a master-narrative in religious studies, found in most handbooks and monographs, that is often drawn upon to explain the multiplication of angels and heavens. According to this narrative, whenever God becomes too transcendent, angels have to fill the gap! The angelic inventory is thus seen as a reaction to a more and more abstract monotheism. I want to challenge this explanation on the grounds that it is too easy and that it lies beyond empirical proof. My thesis is this: it is not the transcendence of a distant God that calls for more angels to bridge this distance but, rather, it is the diversification of angels that pushes God more and more towards transcendent heights.

## 2. Paul's audition in the third heaven (2Corinthians 12, ca. 55 CE)

Paul needs to be discussed next because it was his account of a heavenly vision that acted as a trigger for the diversification of angels and heavens. In this account, we find the first explicit mention in Jewish-Christian history of a "third heaven,"<sup>24</sup> when Paul tells the story of "a man" who was "caught up to the third heaven" (*hapargenta heôs tritou ouranou* 2Cor 12, 2). The context of this verse, in which Paul tries to defend his authority as an apostle by reference to the authenticity of his encounter with the divine,<sup>25</sup> makes it clear that the man in the story is, in fact,

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Die Beamten des Himmels: Über Engel*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2007. This is the German version of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* II, 2, chapter 6: Angelology and bureaucracy.

<sup>24</sup> Yet the pluralisation of heavens was already on the rise in early Jewish thought. Cf. Paula Gooder, *Only the Third Heaven? 2 Corinthians 12,1-10 and Heavenly Ascent*, London: Bloomsbury 2006. Gooder argues that Paul wanted to stress that he only went half-way and that the third is not the highest heaven. Most probably, Paul saw the paradise as a realm above the third heaven.

<sup>25</sup> The discussion concerning the redaction of 2Kor is extremely complicated. Most scholars consider the polemical part at ch. 10-13 as a separate letter, probably written after an unsuccessful visit to Corinth. Cf. Willi Marxsen, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 4th. ed., Gütersloh: Mohn 1978, 99f. It is still a matter of considerable contention whether the vision

himself. Members of his parish in Corinth seemingly expected their leaders to have ecstatic or mystic experiences. In order to satisfy his readers, Paul – after a long list of his efforts and sacrifices – concludes by reluctantly boasting:<sup>26</sup>

2 “I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago,  
whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;  
such a one caught up to the third heaven.

5 Of such a one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

7 And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.” (KJV)

The text obviously refrains from excessive enthusiasm. Paul calls the third heaven “paradise,” where he heard “unspeakable words/*arrêta brêmata*” (2Cor 12, 4). He announces a vision, but what he in fact presents is an audition. He heard something, but he will not tell what exactly. The ‘words’ are surely not the word of God, but angelic languages which he cannot and must not translate.<sup>27</sup> Instead of heavenly bliss, he receives a “thorn in the flesh.” He did not see angels in heaven but is tortured by a “Satan-angel”/*aggelos satan* (2Cor 12, 7) here on earth. Obviously, Paul wants to downplay his spiritual journey and to avoid excessive attention to celestial angelic matters.

However, since nothing enflames curiosity more than a mystery, his enigmatic presentation achieved quite the opposite, with his brief mention of a third heaven opening wide the gates of speculation. Later writers provide us with a cascade of apocalypses of Paul, in which he explores the heavens and encounters angels. Paul’s

is identical with his vocation (Gal 1,21, cf. Apg 9,30) or another experience. According to Paul’s own specification, the vision took place around 40 CE, after his vocation in the year 33 CE. Cf. William Baird, “Visions, Revelation, and Ministry. Reflections on 2Cor 12:1-5 and Gal 1:11-17,” in: *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985), 651–662, 652.

<sup>26</sup> I render this passage in a table in order to show its intricate composition. Verse 2 talks about rapture into the third heaven and into Paradise while verses 3-4 are clearly parallel in their repetition. The two movements must, thus, be treated as a single experience. Cf. Josef Zmijewski, *Der Stil der paulinischen Narrenrede*, Cologne, Bonn: Peter Hanstein 1978, 324f.; Bernhard Heining, *Paulus als Visionär. Eine religionsgeschichtliche Studie*, Freiburg: Herder 1996.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Thomas Schmeller, *Der Zweite Brief an die Korinther (2Kor 7,5-13,13)*, Neukirchen-Vlyun/Ostfildern: Neukirchener Verlag 2015, 290f.

3 And I knew such a man,

whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;

4 How that he was caught up into paradise,  
and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

6 For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me.

angelology is usually quite unspecific. He knows “angels, principalities, powers” (Rom 8, 38), but in most cases the powers/princes are not exclusively defined as heavenly beings. They are either identical with (cf. 1Cor 2, 8) or a side effect of (cf. Rom 13,1-3) forms of coercion by human social systems.<sup>28</sup> The powers do not only rule the world in history but also enforce the limits of the created world:

For I am persuaded, that  
neither death, nor life,  
nor angels, nor principalities/*archai*,  
nor things present, nor things to come,  
nor powers/*dynameis*,  
nor height/*hypsôma*, nor depth/*bathos*,  
nor any other creature,  
shall be able to separate us from the love of God (Rom 8, 38f.).

Here Paul enlists all the overwhelming forces he can think of. Angelic beings and cosmic dimensions are closely connected here. Height and depth are presented as distracting or even hostile actors, and Paul probably takes them to be astral subjects. Since the terms used here are taken from an apocalyptic text in which these beings are not just members of this world but also of another (cf. 1Hen 18, 11), a further connotation is that heaven is expanded beyond human comprehension.<sup>29</sup> Angels appear not simply as inhabitants of a space, but also as sheer spaces or realms. They are like human rulers, yet in a higher sense as the abstraction of rule itself rather than being bound to certain persons and spots. Angels and the cosmos both share similar potentials to multiply in kind or to grow, and both share a tendency towards an uncontrollable multiplication of spheres.

Paul’s overlapping of the cosmic and the angelic led to further speculations, a development that he did not intend and that his pseudepigraphical successors tried to contain. One such attempt can be found in the deuteropauline<sup>30</sup> text *Letter to the Colossians*, in which the author has to fight rampant speculations (“philosophy” 2, 8) concerning diverse angelic beings. He criticises the community in Colossae for venerating angels, but he already accepts the concept that the heavens (plural!) and the earth (*en tois ouranois kai epi tês gês* 1, 16) are inhabited by ambivalent beings such as thrones, dominions, principalities, powers (cf. 1, 16), and cosmic elements (*stoicheia* 2, 8).<sup>31</sup> Obviously, this author connects angels to the astral

<sup>28</sup> For an exhaustive and modern interpretation, see Walter Wink, *The Powers*, 4 vols., Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1984-1998; and its popular summary Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be*, New York: Harmony 1998.

<sup>29</sup> “I saw how the winds stretch out the vaults of heaven.” 1Hen 18, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Vgl. Philipp Vielhauer, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur*, Berlin, New York: De Gruyter 1975, 196. Because of the highly institutionalised situation and the established everyday Christian way of life, most date this text to the early second century.

<sup>31</sup> The cosmological hymn (1, 12-20), which presents Christ as a high potency (head), is so different from Pauline vocabulary that it could be regarded as a Christianised version of pre-Christian mythology.

phenomena of day and night. The direction of man's longing is towards heaven, "where Christ sits at the right of God" (3, 1) and reigns over the angelic powers. Col stresses the Lordship of Christ through his subjugation ("stripping/disarming") of the powers and dominions (*apekdysamenous tas archas kai tas exousias*, 2, 15; cf. 2, 10) precisely because the Colossians seem to admire mystics who enter and fathom<sup>32</sup> the heavens, where they see different kinds of angels. The Colossians replace a Christ-centered attitude with a complex angelic spirituality. Unlike Paul, the author of Col does not reject cosmological and angelological ideas on the grounds that they are something worldly. Rather, he surpasses them with an even more spectacular idea: that of Christ as the super-angel.<sup>33</sup>

So, despite Paul's reluctance, his followers began to accept a more complex cosmological and angelological view. It seems there is an inherent driving force connected to such views that pushes in the direction of further differentiation. Once the gates to the plural heavens had been reluctantly opened by Paul, the floor was opened up to questions concerning the numbers, orders, and inhabitants of these higher worlds.

### 3. From the three-layer to the seven-layer heavens (*Testamentum Levi*, ca. 200 CE)

The Testamentum Levi – a part of the "Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs," compiled sometime around 200 CE – diligently distributes different angels across different heavens. This Jewish text, the origins of which can be traced back to the second century BCE, was Christianised during the second century CE.<sup>34</sup> The twelve sons of Israel are praised here as ideals of faith and justice. One part of the text, the TestLevi 2-3, narrates two dreams that the patriarch Levi had about his journey

<sup>32</sup> *Embateuein* is a *terminus technicus* for visions in mystery cults.

<sup>33</sup> The analogies between Christ and high angels (messenger, residing in heaven, guarding men, son of man, sons of God, origin before time, human appearance) are so many that it took a whole letter (Hebrew) and many christological dogmas to draw a distinction. From a bird's eye view, christology is contracted angelology. Cf. Johann Hafner, *Angelologie*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh 2010, 184-192; Daniel Boyarin, *Die jüdischen Evangelien. Die Geschichte des jüdischen Christus*, Würzburg: Ergon 2015. Jehova's Witnesses and, to some extent, Seven-Day-Adventists, who still identify Michael and Christ, are heirs of this early angel-Christology.

<sup>34</sup> I cannot resume the debate here. A strong hypothesis suggests that the TestLevi draws on an Aramaic source that is similar to the Qumran-fragments. The writers in Qumran must have copied an Aramaic Testament of Levi. H. Dixon Slingerland, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. A Critical History of Research*, Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature 1977. Jarl H. Ulrichsen, *Die Grundschrift der Testamente der zwölf Patriarchen: Eine Untersuchung zu Umfang, Inhalt und Eigenart der ursprünglichen Schrift*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell 1991. Jonas C. Greenfield, Michael E. Stone and Ester Eshel, *The Aramaic Levi Document. Edition, Translation, Commentary*, Leiden: Brill 2004. James Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006, 155-168. Jürgen Becker, "Die Testamente der zwölf Patriarchen," in: *Jüdische Schriften in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit*, Vol. 3: Unterweisung in lehrhafter Form, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2001, 16-163.

through the seven heavens and his installation as a priest. In this account, Levi is guided by an angel into the self-opening heavens:

Then sleep fell upon me, and I saw a high mountain, and I was on it. And behold, the skies were opened and an angel of the LORD said unto me: Levi, enter. And I entered the first heaven.<sup>35</sup> I saw there a great [body of] water, suspended. And I saw a second heaven, more luminous and brighter, and the height of it was boundless. And I said to the angel: Why is this so? And the angel said to me: Do not marvel over this, for you will see another heaven, brighter still and beyond compare, when you get there. (TestLevi 3, 5b-9)

In this vision, Levi is allowed to proceed to the second heaven and to notice that there is much more to explore above it. Unlike those who experience other prophetic visions – as in the guiding text Is 6 – Levi does not tremble with fear. Rather than displaying human humility before the Most High, Levi is instead fascinated by the manifold spheres. The angelic *fascinosum* thus mitigates the divine *tremendum*. Instead of taking him further, the *angelus interpretis* explains to him the entire fabric of the seven heavens.

The text is a brilliant example of the multiplication of heavens by introducing different species of angels. The first stage in the evolution of the text, the original Aramaic source, probably presented only one heaven<sup>36</sup> but furnished it with several angels. In a second stage, the passage in TestLevi 2 suggests that three heavens provide the basic architectural framework for the 'world above'. A third stage then involved an author reworking this framework to give into a more detailed and differentiated version. Three additional heavens were inserted between the highest heaven (near God's throne) and the middle heaven, giving the following result:

Heaven 1: The lowest sphere reflects the deeds of the unrighteous.

Heaven 2: Contains the elements (fire, snow and ice) for the judgment of the unrighteous.

Heaven 3: The armies of angels dwell in a third heaven,<sup>37</sup> destined for the Day of Judgment when they will "punish the Spirits of deceit and of Beliar" (cf. 3, 3).<sup>38</sup>

Heaven 7: In the highest heaven, Levi will stand in the holy of holies before the Most High, who sits in his temple on a throne (cf. 2, 10 and 5, 1).

<sup>35</sup> Some text variants skip the first heaven and read instead: "And from the first heaven I entered the second." There Levi sees the hanging sea. Most modern translations follow this variant but it seems to be an attempt to synchronise this passage with that which follows.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993, 32. The Aramaic source's inspirational background, the book of Enoch, assumes one single heaven. Only later parts of this text, 1Hen 18 and 47, mention differentiations into "chambers" and into height and depth. Cf. Siegbert Uhlig, "Das äthiopische Henochbuch," in: *Jüdische Schriften in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit*, Vol. 5: Apokalypsen, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1984, 461-780.

<sup>37</sup> Some variants place the armies in the second heaven.

<sup>38</sup> This refers to 1Hen, which starts with the sin of angels and then unfolds the punishment of angels.

- Heaven 6: The archangels or “angels of presence” are located close-by below God, serving Him and expiating sins by their bloodless and rational<sup>39</sup> sacrifices (cf. 3, 5).
- Heaven 5: Below the archangels, angels transport the “answers” (the good deeds and remorse of humankind as a kind of orthoprax sacrifice)<sup>40</sup> to the higher angels.
- Heaven 4: Below the fifth heaven, “thrones and dominions” praise God (or transport the praise of humankind as a kind of spiritual sacrifice).<sup>41</sup>

By a process of differentiation, the heavens have now reached seven in number. The former *lower heaven* is split into the *heaven of sins* and the *heaven of elements*. The former *middle heaven* is split into the *heaven of punishing armies*, the *heaven of praising thrones*, and the *heaven of transporting angels*. And the former *upper heaven* is split into the *heaven of serving angels* and the *heaven of the Great Glory*.

It is quite clear that a number of different concepts have been amalgamated into a single pattern here. In this case, it is angelology that expands cosmology: the more angels you have, the more heavens you need. The expansion of heavens is not just a result of the lust for spatial exaggeration. Rather, it is driven by the trend towards differentiating between higher functions. Each heaven is the place for another process: storing deeds, preparing judgment, singing praise, advocating on behalf of the humans, or offering sacrifice. It is this differentiation of processes that motivates a further differentiation of heavenly realms with which to associate them.

There are numerous examples from the first and second century CE in which a redactor multiplies heaven into seven distinct realms. Some scholars have assumed that this particular number of heavens dates back to Babylonian astronomical sources,<sup>42</sup> and that the redactors thus felt compelled to furnish the empty spaces with angelic contents. But this conjecture is unable to explain why we find models with two or three or five or, later, even nine and ten heavens in the same century. Clearly, it is angelology, not astronomy, that expands the cosmos. Let us focus on one detail: in contrast to earthly temples in which material sacrifices are given, the heavenly liturgy is expected to be more subtle. What is crammed together in the rituals on earth will be unfolded in heavenly cult: praise, intercession, and sacrificing are distributed among the upper three heavens (4-6), whereas the profane issues

<sup>39</sup> A typical Christian description of liturgy. Cf. Justin, 1Apol.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Harm W. Hollander and Marius de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. A Commentary*, Leiden: Brill 1985, 138f.

<sup>41</sup> For a differing view, see Peter Schäfer, “From Cosmology to Theology. The Rabbinic Appropriation of Apocalyptic Cosmology,” in: *Creation and Re-Creation in Jewish Thought: Festschrift in Honor of Josef Dan On the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, Rachel Elijor, Peter Schäfer, eds., Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2005, 39-58, who places thrones and dominions besides the archangels.

<sup>42</sup> A. Y. Collins, cit. in Himmelfarb, 32f.

(recording, punishment, and judgment (1-3)) are distributed among the lower three heavens.

The lowest heaven is still a problem: it seems still to be a part of the earthly world and it hosts no angelic inventory whatsoever. Cosmologically, it contains the waters of rain,<sup>43</sup> while, theologically, it is a mirror of the wicked deeds committed on earth. Actually, this heaven symbolises not a transcendent world but the part of this world – ‘lower transcendence’, as we called it – that lies beyond our reach: literally, it is the inaccessible sky paired with the irreversible past (time). The lowest heaven has to provide a solution to the theoretical problem of finiteness. We know this from everyday experience: our world is encompassed by borders that we see but never experience, such as the horizon that defines the visible world, or in the way that death defines life. The first sky serves as a membrane whose lower surface belongs to the immanent sphere and whose upper surface belongs to the transcendent. This cosmological ambivalence represents a philosophical problem: how can finiteness be detected in a world where everything is finite? Like a border that is noticed only by crossing it, the finite emphasises the idea of a beyond, of infinity, without which the finite would lack meaning. Classical metaphysics from Augustine through Descartes to Lévinas offers endless variations on this simple form: finiteness presupposes the knowledge of infinity. Or as we can put it in our specific case: a lower heaven leads to higher heavens.

#### 4. *Angelic exaggerations (Ascension of Isaiah, ca. 150 CE)*

Once this multiplication begins, there are no apparent limits to transcendent inflation. We can consider as an example the “Ascension of Isaiah” (AscIs). This text was widely known in both late antique Christianity (it is mentioned by Origen, Epiphanius, Jerome) and Judaism (jSanh X, 2; bSanh 103b),<sup>44</sup> because it is a hybrid of a Jewish legend and a Christian apocalypse. In its first chapters, it contains a narrative describing the martyrdom of Jesaja under king Manasse, who acts under the influence of Satan.<sup>45</sup> A redactor has added (ch. 1-2 and 5) – without taking any great efforts to hide the rift<sup>46</sup> – an account of Isaiah (ch. 3-4; 6-11) concerning his journey to heaven, back to earth, and then up to heaven once

<sup>43</sup> Some variants of TestLevi place fire, ice, and snow in the first heaven. So, later, does 2Hen in order to reserve the second heaven for the fallen angels plus sun, moon, and stars.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Erling Hammershaimb, “Das Martyrium Jesajas,” in: *Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit*, vol. 2, *Unterweisungen in erzählender Form*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1973, 17 and 19.

<sup>45</sup> Probably mentioned in Hebr 11, 37.

<sup>46</sup> In 1, 5-6a the redactor makes an introductory remark that somehow announces that a vision will follow later in the text.

again. Due to the closeness of this account to early enthronement motifs, we can date the last redaction of the text to the second century.<sup>47</sup>

The sole link between the two very different sources – physical martyrdom and spiritual rapture – is an angelic strand. In the first part, it is the evil “angel of injustice” (2, 4), Beliar or Sammael (2, 2) aka “Satan and his angels and dominions” (2, 2), who seduces the King of Israel to commit magic, oracles, and adultery. In the second part, Satan plays also an important role in trying to stop Isaiah from reaching higher realms.<sup>48</sup> In both parts of the text, we observe a hierarchical differentiation of angelic beings. In the Jewish legend, this distinguishes Balkira (human servant of the evil), Beliar (spirit inhabiting Manasse), Sammael (spirit serving Manasse), and, above them all, Satan (the lord of evil angels). The extended Christian version unfolds the first fully-fledged angelic uranography.

A short summary will suffice to give an idea of its structure. The text begins with a high angel descending to reveal a vision to Isaiah (cf. AscIs 6, 13). The prophet is guided step by step on his journey upwards by this “glorious angel.” The pair first pass the firmament, where Sammael and the angels of Satan envy and fight against each other. The sky seems to contain the same evil as the world down below and is presented not as the negation but as the escalation of earthly conditions. From there, Isaiah and the angel pass through the six successive heavens, each one brighter than the one preceding, while the distances between the heavens increase each time. Each heaven is preceded by its own atmosphere, which must be passed through before the heaven itself can be entered. The first five heavens are each internally divided into a left and a right side, a lesser and more noble side, inhabited by angels who praise the one on the throne.<sup>49</sup> In the third heaven, there is no more reminder of the earth; it is fully disconnected by this point. Nothing remains hidden in this heaven, but everything from the lower realms is forgotten.<sup>50</sup> Isaiah gradually assumes an angelic face (cf. 7, 25) and is then transformed into an angelic shape (cf. 9, 30).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Robert G. Hall, “The Ascension of Isaiah. Community, Situation, and Place in Early Christianity,” in: *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990), 300-306. The martyrdom and the ascent were probably originally separate texts.

<sup>48</sup> “And we ascended to the firmament, me and him, and there I saw Sammael and his hosts and a big fight took place against him, and the angels of Satan were jealous against each other” AscIs 7, 9, cf. 10, 12. “And I saw him, and he was in the firmament, but he did not transform into their likeness, and all the angels of the firmament and Satan saw him and adored him.” AscIs 11, 23.

<sup>49</sup> AscIs thus dramatises what is depicted in a more compact scene at Apc 4f. The text leaves open whether the “one on the throne” is the highest angel of this heaven or whether it is the anticipation of the throne of God, reaching down through all the heavens. Gruenwald’s argument that this contradicts Jewish tradition, since “angels cannot fold their legs and, thus, cannot sit,” refers to later Midrashim like Bereschit Rabba, which reacts to earlier angelologies.

<sup>50</sup> Each heaven seems to unfold through the same logic of exaggeration: it is more glorious than the previous; in each, the throne is more glorious than the angels and the angels to

The sixth heaven is undivided and filled with an abundance of light, which leads to a dialogue between Isaiah and the guiding angel about the experience of light. In chapter 9, Isaiah is finally taken to the highest, the seventh, heaven. Here, not only do angels dwell but also Adam, Abel, Henoch, and all the just. They do not wear their crowns and nor do they sit upon their thrones. Why? This is the moment for the guiding angel to explain the plan of salvation. The Lord, who will be called Christ, has to descend to earth and overcome the angel of death (“And he will rise after three days, when he has plundered the angel of death,” 9, 16).<sup>51</sup> This is all written down in heavenly books, the reader learns. After being informed of the plan by the guiding angel, Isaiah, the patriarchs, and the angels give praise to the “Lord of glories” (9, 31) and to “another glorious one, who was like him” (9, 33, here: Christ, the Son). The guiding angel then becomes a “second angel,” the angel of the Holy Spirit, which is also the angel of prophecy. He has to be adored as the Christ by the heavenly hosts. Finally, the Lord<sup>52</sup> and the angel of the spirit adore God (9, 40), forming a kind of ‘proto-Trinity’.<sup>53</sup>

At the command of God, Christ now descends through the seven heavens. The whole enterprise is enacted as a secret mission. He still appears as the Lord as he passes through the sixth heaven but from there on he travels in disguise, taking on the look of the angels so that nobody recognises him. In the lower heavens, he has to speak a password to pass through the gates of the heavens. The Lord even assimilates the form of the chaotic angels of the first heaven and that of the angels of the air. He sneaks, camouflaged, into the earthly world and becomes a man through the virgin. The text skips over the corporeal birth: the child somehow leaves the womb and even Mary is surprised to see her child (11, 8). He – the name Jesus is not mentioned – grows up, performs miracles, is betrayed, is crucified, descends to the netherworld and rises again after three days. The final return to heaven is a triumphal ascent, this time in his real appearance as Lord. Now the angels of the different heavens immediately acknowledge Christ, bow down, and repent for not having recognised him earlier. In the highest heaven, he is enthroned at the right side of the “great glory.” Finally, the righteous can take their crowns, garments, and thrones.<sup>54</sup>

the right side are more glorious than those to the left. Isaiah is tempted to adore the angels but – like in Apc 22, 8 – the guiding angels forbids it.

<sup>51</sup> Transl. Michael A. Knibb, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, J. H. Charlesworth, ed., New York, Garden City: Doubleday&Company 1985, 164-176.

<sup>52</sup> There are two possible ways of reading 9, 39. “My Lord” is either the *angelus interpres* or Christ himself. Even in the first case, it would be Christ – disguised as the guiding angel – who bows before God.

<sup>53</sup> In this early form of the trinity, the Beloved and the Spirit, enthroned to the left and to the right of the highest God, are clearly subordinated.

<sup>54</sup> According to Gruenwald, who counts AscIs among the Jewish texts, “the Christian editor or interpolator of the book ... transforms at least one traditional Jewish theme, the wearing of crowns, into a Christian apocalyptic theologoumenon.” Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, Leiden: Brill 1980, 61.



This apocalypse is not very subtle. There are no hidden hints or symbolic allusions. It is plainly interested in examining the fabric of angelic worlds. Instead of the simple idea of incarnation, AscIs unfolds a complex structure of differentiation across the seven heavens: each heaven has two layers and most also have two sides; the lower three heavens are differentiated from the upper four; various groups of the righteous and angels are distinguished from each other; ordinary angels are differentiated from divine angels (the spirit, the guiding angel); and there is a difference between the heavens before and after Christ's triumph. Becoming a human by taking on flesh is just another disguise. In fact, the word (the "Lord") is not made flesh, as orthodox Christology would define later, but rather takes on flesh as another form of camouflage, so that humans are not able to recognise the descended Lord. It seems that salvation can only be brought by surprise and incognito.<sup>55</sup>

The dialectic between divine and human is transformed into a glissando of downward angelic transformations. This logic produces results that are likely counter to the intentions of the author: by bridging the gap between God and man through infinitesimal transitions and by suggesting that the immanent is connected to the transcendent through progressive upgrades, these models make contact with the divine considerably more complicated. God is pushed up and up into a highest heaven. The upper heavens are organised in a cascade of adoration by angels, righteous, the Spirit, and the Beloved. God himself, the "Lord of all glory," can only be praised but cannot be viewed (cf. 11, 32). The highest remains somehow hidden, even within the angelic liturgy. This is not something new: the Jerusalem temple and many other religious buildings were constructed using a logic that surrounded the sanctissimum with forecourts. In this case, however, it is angels that provide the architectural structure.

##### 5. From seven to ten layers (*The Coptic Apocalypse of Paul, ca. 200 CE*)

Among the texts found at Nag Hammadi, there is a short apocalypse which, while clearly Christian in content, goes far beyond the Biblical texts. The Coptic Apocalypse of Paul (NH V, 2) – not to be confused with the Coptic version of the much later Greek Apocalypse of Paul<sup>56</sup> – locates the vision mentioned in 2Cor12 as oc-

<sup>55</sup> The gnostic myths in the texts of Nag Hammadi express this trickster-soteriology in their own way. Cf. Apocryphon of John (NH II, 1), 30-31. See also the Gospel of Mary 9, 2; Dialogue of the Saviour 8, 7.

<sup>56</sup> There are interesting parallels that we cannot discuss here. Cf. Hans-Josef Klauck, "With Paul through Heaven and Hell. Two Apocryphal Apocalypses," in: *Biblical Research* 52 (2007), 57-72. The Greek ApcPl unfolds the otherworld not vertically into layers but horizontally into regions. Paul is taken *only* into the third heaven. There he explores a transcendent landscape: paradise, the gates of heaven, city of Christ, the Acherusic sea (a precursor of purgatory), and then back to paradise again. Like the Ethiopian Apocalypse of Peter (ca. 150 CE), this text intends to shock its readers with drastic depictions of punish-

curing on Paul's journey to Jerusalem where he plans to join his "co-apostles." On a mountain in Jericho, he meets a child and this meeting prompts him to look upwards and to awaken his mind.<sup>57</sup> Paul is immediately taken by the Spirit to the third heaven and then proceeds to the fourth, from where he looks down on the earth. The co-apostles join him here. At the gate of the fourth heaven, he watches angels conducting a lawsuit against a soul. The soul is sentenced to return to its body. In the fifth heaven, Paul witnesses four angels (probably the archangels) whipping souls towards judgment. As he passes the sixth heaven, about which we are told nothing of the contents, the gates open automatically for him. In the seventh heaven, the apostles meet an old man on a throne, the creator and Lord of the higher angels, the "principalities and authorities" (ApcPl NH 5, 2, 23). In a short dialogue, Paul explains that he journeys to the place from which he originally came – a clearly gnostic motif.<sup>58</sup> The seemingly earthbound<sup>59</sup> creator wants to keep Paul in his heaven but through the use of a secret sign he is able to escape into the eighth. Here, Paul meets the Ogdoad – the eightfold divinity of Gnosticism, before going on to the ninth and then the tenth heaven, where he meets "his fellow spirits" (ApcPl NH 5, 2, 24).

In this narrative, angels are reduced to the status of a lower executive force: they punish, interrogate, and transport souls. In the seventh heaven, they block the way into higher realms. Even the function of interpreter is not taken by an angel but by a spirit, probably the Holy Spirit disguised as a child, who leads the visionary. ApcPl contains angels in each of the first seven heavens. In the end, however, the author seems to run out of imagination and the three highest heavens are listed in the shortest way possible.<sup>60</sup> These upper heavens show the inversion of angelic rituals into the mystic gnostic act of silent understanding. The end of salvation-history will not be a judgment about earthly deeds but the con-spiration, the fusion of intellectual spirituality.

ments in the hereafter. Angels are employed mainly as agents of torture. We observe the same logic here: as the praise is differentiated into many liturgical tasks and levels, so the punishment is transformed into various methods and places.

<sup>57</sup> Text according to *The Nag Hammadi Library*, transl. George W. MacRae and William R. Murdock.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Michael Kaler, *Flora Tells a Story. The Apocalypse of Paul and Its Contexts*, Waterloo: WLU Press 2008.

<sup>59</sup> "He turned his face downwards to his creation" ApcPl NH 5, 2, 23. The God of the Bible resides in the seventh heaven but is depicted as a helpless divinity. He is surpassed by another species of transcendent beings, the aeons (Ogdoad) and the spirits/*pneumata*. This text is not only a critique of apostolic church-authorities in Jerusalem but also a critique of biblical theism.

<sup>60</sup> See, for instance, this tautological description: "We entered the ninth heaven. I greeted those, who are in the ninth heaven." ApcPl NH 5, 2, 24.

*The logic of angelic inflation*

Let us return to the thesis with which I began this chapter. It is not God's distance that produces angels and heavens, but angels who increase God's distance. In the texts discussed above, God is not defined or described at all.<sup>61</sup> He/It stays behind the curtains of heavenly liturgy. Angelic services are employed in order to maintain God's transcendent position. Thus, angels do not grow in a top-down but a bottom-up way. They interpret, they transport human prayers and deeds, they command silence and proclaim, punish, protect, praise, and sacrifice.<sup>62</sup> God becomes more and more sublime but, as executive functions are shifted elsewhere, he also becomes jobless.

The production of space by angels follows a hidden logic that system-theory calls 're-entry'. It arises from the paradox that occurs when one applies a distinction to itself. The question of whether the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' is good or bad cannot be decided easily without running into tautology or paradox. The same is true in the case of the epistemological doubt concerning whether the distinction between 'true' and 'false' is true or false. Every social system faces this problem of self-references which cannot be solved; they can only be procrastinated over or concealed. In religious systems, the paradox can be rephrased: is the distinction between 'transcendent' and 'immanent' transcendent or immanent? And in the semantics of our texts: is the distinction between earth and the angelic realms drawn from an earthly or from a heavenly perspective? Is it an observation from below or from above? Angelic uranography is a mythological attempt to conceal the paradox by reduplication:<sup>63</sup> each side of the basic 'transcendence/immanence' distinction is split into two halves, one more transcendent and the other more immanent.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> None of the early angelological texts presupposes the concept of a highest being, from which lower beings emanate. This will be the case in gnostic texts, but not here.

<sup>62</sup> Historically, the expansion of a spectacular heavenly cult could be seen as a substitution for the end of the Jerusalem temple in Judaism and the establishment of a very sober and inconspicuous liturgy in Christianity. If we earthlings have no direct contact to our deity, at least our angels do.

<sup>63</sup> For a concise deduction of these laws of form, see Johann Hafner, "Die Codierung des Christentums," in: *Interdisziplinäre Traditionstheorie*, Blahoslav Fajmon and Jaroslav Vokoun, eds., Zürich: Lit-Verlag 2016, 133-193.

<sup>64</sup> This rigid categorisation can serve only as a heuristic orientation. As with all theoretical models, we never find actual particular cases in which it occurs in a completely pure form. Rather, the model allows for overlapping at its borders: the stars of the sky might be part of the higher heavens, some righteous might reach the highest heavens, or some fallen angels might inhabit the telluric spheres.

	transcendent	immanent
transcendent	I transcendent transcendence "divine" "heaven of heavens"	II immanent transcendence "angels" "heavens"
immanent	III transcendent immanence "sky"	IV immanent immanence "earth"

Quadrant IV represents the familiar part of the earth, the empirical surroundings found in space and time.<sup>65</sup> This is encompassed by the inaccessible parts of the visible world (quadrant III), represented by mountaintops, the vast ocean, and the sky.<sup>66</sup> These are endless but not infinite. Quadrant II and I stand for the idea that there is another world beyond the immanent – distant or close – realms.<sup>67</sup> This otherworld is separated from our world by space (heaven) or by time (afterlife) or by perfection (for the righteous only). Quadrant II symbolises the part of the otherworld that is still similar to us. This is the place where angels and souls dwell. Quadrant I represents a transcendence that is completely dissimilar to us,<sup>68</sup> a status that can only be expressed by apophatic symbols or exaggerations such as 'holy of holies' or 'most high'. If a religious tradition decides to differentiate the world below into more or less accessible regions, it is likely to differentiate the world above into more or less accessible parts as well. This is the birth of angelic intermediaries and of the plurality of heavens. Once this duplication first takes place, it can be perpetuated without end. Quadrants I and II are even more prone to differentiation, since their characteristic is infinity. There is always a higher heaven, there is always a stronger angel. Angelic inflation can only be contained by capping the expansion with an absolute being who sits at the top. Again, the same problem arises: is the highest being part of the ladder of angels or is it beyond? If it is a part, it is not the summum but adds to the inflation; if it is beyond, it cannot communicate via intermediaries. If a religion wants to retain God's transcendence and communicability at the same time, it has to choose ways of direct revelation. Perhaps the idea of direct incarnation into a human person (Christianity), the idea of direct emanation into human spirit (Gnosis), and the idea of direct dictation of an absolute text (Islam) are reactions to the unsolvable problem of angelic inflation.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. the Satan-angel in 2Cor 12, who buffets Paul here on earth.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. the lowest heaven in AscJes and TestLevi.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. the God-oriented vs the man-oriented angels in TestLevi and coptApcPl.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. the throne-visions in Apc 4, TestLevi, and AscJes.

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## Uniting Fire and Snow: Representations and Interpretations of the Wondrous Angel 'Ḥabīb' in Medieval Versions of Muḥammad's Ascension<sup>1</sup>

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In popular versions of the story of Muḥammad's ascension through the heavens, especially those circulating outside the Sunni canonical collections of sound *ḥadīth* codified by the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries, over the course of his night journey, Muḥammad encounters a wondrous angel created in fantastic fashion: half of its anthropomorphic body consists of fire, and the other half of its body consists of snow. Typically Muḥammad finds the angel in the midst of a petitionary prayer, calling on God to unite the hearts of his faithful believers, just as God unites the elements of fire and snow in its form. In the popular Islamic ascension narratives, scenes featuring a "Half-Fire Half-Snow Angel" are invariably brief, and they may seem hardly worth significant attention. Previous studies have often come quickly to the conclusion that the origins of this angel should be sought in a Hebrew text, postulating that Muslim storytellers simply must have borrowed the scene in which it appears from an earlier Jewish narrative. What I hope to illustrate, however, is that in asking the question about how this angel relates to humankind, and in discussing how this trope develops over time and relates to similar tropes in other contexts, what first appears to be a minor and simple matter of influence or appropriation actually turns out to involve greater complexities than previously acknowledged. Focusing on the historical development of the representations of the Half-Fire Half-Snow Angel in the Muslim ascension narratives suggests that what begins as a symbol of God's divine omnipotence and communal reconciliation transforms over time into a more pietistic model for divine forgiveness and the petitioning of God for more individual inner reconciliation. Throughout, we will see that the physical depictions of Half-Fire Half-Snow Angels remain fairly constant, despite the changing ways in which the different Muslim accounts portray these wondrous heavenly beings in varying degrees as exemplars of a balanced and pious nature for humankind, and as intercessors on behalf of humanity.

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