

MONISM AND DUALISM IN JEWISH-MYSTICAL AND GNOSTIC ASCENT TEXTS

A great variety of texts from the ancient world shows us human beings escaping the constraints of their physical existence, even before death, and ascending to a supernal realm.¹ In this essay, which I am happy to offer to my friend and distinguished colleague Florentino García, I would like to discuss and compare two bodies of ancient esoteric literature in which the ascent theme is prominently present: a group of late antique or medieval Jewish mystical writings commonly designated as *Hekhalot* texts² and some of the early Christian gnostic texts which were recovered in Egypt in 1945. In my analysis of the relevant texts I shall address such questions as: who is the subject or protagonist of the ascension, how is the journey on high imagined and depicted, and what is regarded as its ultimate goal? In this way I hope to gain more insight into the distinct features of these two literary corpora as well as in their possible relationship.

This is not a new topic of study. Ever since the beginning of academic research on ancient Judaism in the 19th century, scholars have drawn attention to what they regarded as gnostic trends of thinking in the Jewish culture of late antiquity, notably in early Jewish mysticism. I will begin with briefly reviewing some of the more relevant and influential studies. It will appear that until recently, “gnosticism” and “mysticism” were two words for more or less the same religious phenomenon.

Gnosticism and Jewish Mysticism in Past Research

1. *Heinrich Graetz*, *Gnosticismus und Judenthum*

The first scholarly publication devoted to this subject was Heinrich Graetz’s critical investigation of “gnostic” tendencies in Mishnaic and Talmudic teachings, *Gnosticismus und Judenthum* (1846). For Graetz and for several generations of scholars after him, who had no access to the authentic gnostic sources which we now have at our disposal, “gnosticism” (or “gnosis”; Graetz and others used the two terms interchangeably) was a rather loose term referring to a variety of syncretistic religious speculations in late antiquity and thereafter. It is worth while to quote Graetz’s characterization of what he considered as diverse forms of “gnosticism”:

In allen diesen verschiedenen Weisen herrscht (...) immer *ein* Grundton vor: mit Hülfe mystischer Erkenntnisweisen und ekstatischer Beschauungen in die Lichtregion der Gottheit aufgenommen zu werden.³

Graetz insisted that these mystical ways of thinking and experiencing divine truths developed from pagan backgrounds and thus that they were alien – if not dangerous and destructive – to the Jewish religion.⁴ On the other hand, he observed that time and again

¹ Martha Himmelfarb, “The Practice of Ascent in the Ancient Mediterranean World”, 123-137.

² The *Hekhalot* texts are the literary base for the study of *Merkavah* mysticism. For the meaning of these Hebrew terms see below.

³ *Gnosticismus und Judenthum*, 3.

⁴ For this reason Graetz had no special interest in Gnostic origins. Manuel Joel, another influential Jewish scholar, basically accepted Graetz’s interpretation but pointed more explicitly to the Greek-philosophical (Platonic and Pythagorean) roots of early Gnostic speculations. Cf. his detailed discussion in *Blicke in die Religionsgeschichte zu Anfang des zweiten christlichen Jahrhunderts*, vol. I, 1880, 103-170.

“gnostic” ideas managed to infiltrate Judaism.⁵ He therefore distinguished gnostic and non-gnostic manifestations of Judaism and felt free to speak of “Jewish gnosticism” and “Jewish gnostics”.

2. Moritz Friedländer, Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus

Half a century later, Moritz Friedländer published a book which he gave the programmatic title, *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus* (1889). In line with Graetz and others, Friedländer regarded cosmogonical and theosophical doctrines as the main characteristics of “gnosticism”.⁶ His new proposal was that these doctrines were based on allegorical interpretations of the Jewish Scriptures. In sharp contrast with Graetz, he therefore argued that “gnosticism” was an originally Jewish current of thought.

It is probable that according to Friedländer, the theosophical teachings of “gnosticism” included mystical themes such as heavenly ascent and visions of God.⁷ But where he speaks of gnostic doctrines based on allegorical Bible interpretations he seems to have had in mind first of all doctrines relating to the origin of the world and man and to the earliest history of humanity (the “descent myth” rather than the “ascent myth”, see below).

Friedländer suggested that his Jewish gnosticism originated in the Diaspora-community of Alexandria out of the encounter of Jews with their Hellenistic-pagan environment. He hypothesized that still in the pre-Christian era, Jewish gnostics went two separate ways. The first movement, which he called “orthodox” or “conservative” (represented by Philo), remained faithful to the Law. Friedländer had a high opinion of this form of “Jewish gnosticism” for, “gnosticism was a very appropriate and in fact indispensable means to transform Judaism into a universal religion”.⁸ Because he recognized some of the main features of this originally Alexandrian-Jewish gnosticism in Palestinian-Jewish mystical traditions, Friedländer guessed that in the course of time, it moved also to the Jewish homeland.⁹

Friedländer also discerned a “radical” gnostic movement.¹⁰ In his view, these radical gnostics became “heretical” – even in the pre-Christian era – because their allegorical approach to the Scriptures eventually led them to distance themselves from the biblical Creator and his Law (therefore he designated the heretics in question also as “antinomians”).¹¹ The important thing is that Friedländer detected similarities between this hypothetical pre-Christian Jewish gnosticism and such gnostic-Christian sects as the Ophites, the Cainites, the Sethians or Sethites, and the Melchizedekians (known to him from Patristic reports). A characteristic feature which these sects had in common with his

⁵ In *Gnosticismus und Judenthum*, Graetz wished to prove that Gnostic ideas already penetrated Judaism in the Mishnaic period, in spite of the fact that they were rejected by prominent rabbi's. In “Die mystische Literatur in der gaonischen Epoche”, published 15 years later in *Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 8 (1859), Graetz draws attention more specifically to *Hekhalot* writings, arguing that they are “degenerate” texts produced in the post-Talmudic period under the influence of certain Islamic mystical speculations.

⁶ P. 45.

⁷ Friedländer referred to *Merkavah* passages “in the earliest Mishnah-teachings”, cf. below, n. 9.

⁸ *Ibid.* In *Die religiösen Bewegungen innerhalb des Judenthums im Zeitalter Jesu* (1905), p. vi, Friedländer clarifies his position in claiming that the Judaism of the Diaspora “preserved the universalistic traditions of the prophets, which were wide-spread at the time of the Maccabees, whereas the traditions of the Pharisees were the more recent ones, artificially implanted into the Law by a then dominant nationalism.” Cf. Michael Brenner, “Gnosis and History: Polemics of German-Jewish Identity from Graetz to Scholem”, esp. 46 and 51.

⁹ *Der vorchr. jüd. Gnosticismus*, 46-62, p. 49: “Unbestreitbare Thatsache bleibt jedenfalls, dass die kosmogonischen und theosophischen Mysterien selbst in Palästina, und in den Kreisen der hervorragendsten Gesetzeslehrer, schon im ersten christlichen Jahrhundert, wo das Christenthum noch nicht erkennbar aus dem Rahmen des Judenthums herausgetreten, und von einer christlichen Gnosis auch nicht die geringste Spur vorhanden sein konnte, in vollster Blüte stand”; on p. 46 and 56-62 Friedländer refers to *Maasseh-Bereshith* and *Maasseh-Merkavah* passages “bei den ältesten Mischna-Lehrern”.

¹⁰ Pp. 5-8 and passim. For this radical movement Friedländer referred to Philo, *De migr. Abr.* I 450 (where Philo mentions people who regard the written laws as symbols of spiritual teachings but in fact contempt these laws); Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* VII 10, and a few other Patristic sources.

¹¹ P. 6: “noch vor der Entstehung des Christenthums (hat es) in der Diaspora eine jüdische Partei (...) gegeben, welche das Ceremonialgesetz unter Anwendung der allegorischen Auslegung aufgelöst (...) und sich selbst ausserhalb des Verbandes des nationalen Judenthums und der jüdischen Gemeinde gestellt (hat)”.

pre-Christian Jewish gnosticism was their critical attitude towards the Jewish Scriptures.¹² Furthermore Friedländer pointed to the fact that their “idols” were Old Testament figures (the serpent, Cain, Seth, Melchizedek).¹³ In his opinion, Jesus would have entered into the doctrines of these sects in a later stage of their development.

For a comparatively long period of time, Friedländer’s suggestions were ignored or even brushed aside.¹⁴ To a certain extent this was due to the strong position of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* in the first half of the 20th century and its “orientalizing” approach to gnostic as well as to biblical texts and traditions. Influential scholars as Wilhelm Bousset and Richard Reizenstein found ever more indications of Babylonian, Persian, and other non-Jewish oriental antecedents of gnostic ideas and mythological motifs.¹⁵ But at least from the middle of the 20th century onward, Friedländer’s suggestions were taken more seriously.¹⁶

3. Gershom Scholem, Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition

The writings of Gershom Scholem mark the beginning of contemporary research of *Merkavah* and *Hekhalot* mysticism. In accordance with Graetz and Friedländer, Scholem treated Jewish mysticism as a form of gnosticism. In *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (1st ed. 1960), he states:

Gnosticism (is a) convenient term for the religious movement that proclaimed a mystical esotericism for the elect based on illumination and the acquisition of a higher knowledge of things heavenly and divine.¹⁷

In his earlier book, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941) Scholem already gave as his opinion that “the ascent of the soul from the earth, through the spheres of the hostile planet-angels and rulers of the cosmos, and its return to its divine home in the ‘fullness’ of God’s light” was the central idea of gnosticism.¹⁸

In his appreciation of “gnosticism” and his view of the relationship of “gnosticism” and Jewish mysticism he agreed much more with Friedländer than with Graetz. Apparently his difference of opinion with Graetz first of all concerned the definition of Judaism. Against Graetz’s narrow concept of (“legitimate”, “normative”) Judaism and his description of classical rabbinic Judaism as entirely rational and logical, Scholem emphasized the pluralistic and heterogeneous character of Judaism, and he maintained that the ancient Jewish mystical texts were the products of the very same culture which created the Mishnah and the Talmud. In his view, “Jewish Gnosticism” originated within the heart of Palestinian Judaism and not, as Friedländer suggested, from contacts of Diaspora Jews

¹² P. 17: “Diese ‘christlichen’ Häretiker verraten sich auf den ersten Blick als die Nachkommen der von Philo gerügten, das ‘Gesetz’ geringachtenden Radicalen der jüdischen Diapora”; 27: “sie sind Kinder der jüdischen Diaspora und zwar der allegorischen Schule Alexandria’s, deren radicalsten Flügel sie bildeten”.

¹³ Cf. p. 27.

¹⁴ As Gershom Scholem observes, “many scholars, not always justifiably, have been poking fun” at the writings of Friedländer (*Jewish Gnosticism*, 3); as his own judgement he gives that in Friedländer’s writings “quite a grain of truth has been overshadowed by many inconsequential and misleading statements” (*o.c.*, 9); cf. Brenner, *art. cit.*, 52.

¹⁵ Wilhelm Bousset, “Die Himmelsreise der Seele”, 1901 (repr. 1971); *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, 1907; Richard Reizenstein, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium*, 1921; *Studien zum antiken Synkretismus aus Iran und Griechenland*, 1926; cf. Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 71-109.

¹⁶ Cf. Birger Pearson’s statement: “The evidence continues to mount that Gnosticism is not, in its origins, a Christian heresy, but that it is, in fact, a Jewish heresy. Friedländer’s arguments tracing the origins of Gnosticism to a Hellenized Judaism are very strong indeed, and are bolstered with every passing year by newly discovered or newly studied texts, the Nag Hammadi Coptic Gnostic Library providing the bulk of this evidence. (“Friedländer Revisited: Alexandrian Judaism and Gnostic Origins”, *Studia Philonica* 2, 35, (id., *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 26).

¹⁷ 2nd improved ed. 1965, 1.

¹⁸ Repr. of the 3rd ed., 1960, 49. Scholem might have adopted this idea from Wilhelm Anz, *Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gnostizismus*, 1897 (p. 9-58: “Die Lehre vom Aufstieg der Seele als die gnostische Zentrallehre”); cf. also W. Bousset, *Die Himmelsreise der Seele*, repr. 1960, 20.

with their pagan environment.¹⁹ Scholem did not have any difficulty with the term “rabbinical Gnosticism” as a designation of ancient Jewish mysticism.²⁰

Scholem’s detailed philological and religious-historical studies of Jewish mystical texts were – and still are – lauded and heavily criticized at the same time.²¹ We will discuss some of the issues in question below. With regard to his qualification of Jewish mysticism as a form of gnosticism, I quote the criticism voiced by Hans Jonas:²²

a Gnosis merely of the heavenly palaces, of the mystical ascent, the ecstatic vision of the Throne, of the awesome secrets of the divine majesty – in short: a *monotheistic* Gnosis of the *mysterium numinosum et tremendum*, important as it is in its own right, is a different matter (different, that is, from gnosticism, G.L.).²³

Halfway through the last century – more or less in the same periode when Scholem and Jonas published their seminal studies – the research of gnostic currents of thought as well as that of ancient Judaism(s) received new impulses thanks to the great manuscript findings in the deserts of Egypt and Judaea. Earlier definitions of ancient Judaism and gnosticism were questioned and ideas about the nature and extent of contacts between these two phenomena were reconsidered, –also those about the gnostic character of Jewish mysticism.

Wholly in conformity with Hans Jonas’ judgement, the general opinion among scholars of ancient gnosticism now is that it does not make sense to stretch the definition of gnosticism to such an extent that also *Hekhalot* and *Merkavah* mysticism comes under this denominator.²⁴ One of the consequences of the more delimited definition is that the question of the relationship between gnosticism and Judaism lost much of its relevance to scholars of ancient Judaism.²⁵

There have been attempts to make a distinction between “gnosis” and “gnosticism”. (For instance, it has been proposed to use the term “gnosis” as a general designation of esoteric or intuitive knowledge of divine mysteries, and “gnosticism” as a more specific designation of certain late antique schools of religious thought.)²⁶ But these attempts do not seem to have been very successful. The main reason might be that historians of religion are inclined to connect “gnosis” with the ideas of ancient gnostics. Seen in this way, there is no gnosis outside gnosticism. But of course, historians of religion are not the only ones to use this

¹⁹ But Scholem did not assume that all forms of “gnosticism” originated from Jewish roots, as Friedländer did, for he reckoned with a broad gnostic trend of thinking, of which “Jewish Gnosticism” was just a “branch”; cf. *Major Trends*, 65; *Jewish Gnosticism*, 10.

²⁰ See e.g. *Major Trends*, 47.

²¹ Cf. the detailed discussion of Scholem’s studies by Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Gnostic Imagination. Gnosticism, Mandaeism, and Merkavah Mysticism*, and Rebecca Macy Lesses, *Ritual Practices to Gain Power*, 25-28.

²² Hans Jonas, who was well acquainted with Gershom Scholem, is generally regarded as the founding-father of recent research of ancient gnosticism. His position within this field of research can be compared to that of Scholem in the study of early Jewish mysticism.

²³ “Response to G. Quispel’s ‘Gnosticism and the New Testament’”, 293. For a similar criticism from the part of a scholar of ancient Judaism see David Flusser, “Scholem’s recent book on Merkavah Literature”.

²⁴ After the recent manuscript findings, the variety of texts, ideas and religious currents commonly designated as gnostic appears to be so wide that it is hardly possible to encompass them all in one descriptive category. A possible solution is to distinguish subcategories of gnostic texts. Martin Schenke’s identification of a group of “Sethian” texts is accepted in several studies. A common feature of these texts is the prominent role assigned to the biblical figure of Seth (“The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism”). In *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions*, 2-3, I propose a broader category of “demiurgical-Gnostic” texts. The distinct feature of these texts is their radical theological dualism: not only is the creator and ruler of this world distinguished from a fully transcendent and hypercosmic true God (as in some ancient philosophies) but the demiurgical God is also viewed as an evil figure.

²⁵ For discussions of this relationship by contemporary scholars of ancient Judaism see Ithamar Gruenwald, “Jewish Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism” and *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*; Philip Alexander, “Comparing Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism: An Essay in Method” and “Jewish Elements in Gnosticism and Magic c. CE 70 – c. CE 270”; Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism in Late Antiquity*, chapt. 1 (“Jewish Gnosticism?”).

²⁶ Cf. the “terminological and conceptual agreement” proposed as a result of the international congress on the Origins of Gnosticism (Messina 1966), in Ugo Bianchi, *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*, XXVI (English text), and the critical reaction by Kurt Rudolph in his handbook, *Die Gnosis. Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiken Religion*, 65 (English transl.: *Gnosis. The Nature & History of Gnosticism*, 56f); cf. also Christoph Marksches, *Gnosis. An Introduction*, 13-16.

terminology. Much broader notions of “gnosis” and “gnosticism” are still current in other areas, e.g. in psychological²⁷, philosophical²⁸ and literary-critical studies and in discussions of various forms of modern spirituality.

Jewish and Gnostic Ascent Texts

1. *Descent and Ascent Mythology*

It is possible to discriminate two complementary basic patterns in the mythologies of various late antique cultures: the so-called *katabasis* or descent pattern and the *anabasis* or ascent pattern. Alan Segal who discusses these mythological structures in his article “Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and their Environment”,²⁹ associates the descent pattern with “cosmologies, theophanies or angelophanies and prophetic mediation”, the ascent pattern with “ascensions, ecstatic ascents, journeys to heaven and the heavenly journey of the soul”.³⁰

Different versions of the gnostic descent myth, or myth of origins, narrate how God’s original unity desintegrated and how, as a result, a portion of divine substance fell down into the world where it was detained by the demiurgical God and his powers. As a rule, they also mention spiritual helpers sent down from the divine realm to bring the truth to the first human beings and their progeny. In effect, this myth explains the present situation of humanity as the outcome of a primordial combat between good and evil powers.³¹ The gnostic ascent myth, on the other hand, concerns the return of the lost spiritual substance to its divine source. We shall see that the final return could be anticipated in visionary ascents.

In the Hebrew Bible we find various expressions of the descent pattern (creation narratives, stories about the origin of evil, accounts of divine revelations mediated by angels and prophets), while ascent stories are rare.³² In fact, the only clear example of a heavenly journey is the ascension of Elija in the whirlwind in 2 Kings 2:11. In post-biblical Jewish traditions, ascent stories became much more popular. Ascensions are told of Enoch (cf. the brief report of God’s taking him away in Gen 5:24) and Moses (who according to the biblical tradition ascended Sinai and saw God “face to face”) and of several other biblical heroes, including Adam, Abraham, Levi, Baruch, Phineas, and Isaiah.³³ The ascent theme has taken special shape in various *Hekhalot* texts. In this literature, the journey on high is presented as a recurring experience of living people.³⁴ The writings that undisputedly belong to this corpus are *Hekhalot Rabbati* (“the Greater Palaces”), *Hekhalot Zutarti* (“the Lesser Palaces”), *Ma’aseh Merkavah* (“the Works of the Chariot”), and the so-called *Hebrew* (or *Third*) *Book of Enoch*. They all deal, among other things, with the journey of the mystic through the heavenly *hekhalot* (“palaces” or “halls”) in order to reach the *Merkavah*, the divine Chariot.³⁵

²⁷ Notably in studies based on the analytical psychology of Carl Jung. See Stephen A. Hoeller, *The Gnostic Jung*.

²⁸ Cf. e.g. Peter Sloterdijk and Thomas Macho, *Weltrevolution der Seele. Ein Leese- und Arbeitsbuch der Gnosis von der Spätantike bis zur Gegenwart*, and Gerald Hanratty, *Studies in Gnosticism and in the Philosophy of Religion*.

²⁹ *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II 23.2, 1333-94.

³⁰ P. 1340.

³¹ This is elaborated in chapt. IV of my *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories* (44-58).

³² In biblical tradition, God reveals himself by coming down to the recipients of his message rather than by bringing the messenger to the divine realm. Moshe Idel, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism*, 24.

³³ Alan Segal, *art. cit.*, 1352-68; Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*. Florentino García, *Qumran and Apocalyptic*, 72 with n. 83, argues that the roots of *Merkavah* mysticism can somehow be connected with early Enochic mystical speculations.

³⁴ Cf. Wilhelm Bousset, “Die Himmelsreise der Seele”, 5, and the classification suggested by Joan Culianu, *Psychanodia*, 5-15.

³⁵ Ideas about the divine Chariot were inspired by the Throne-vision of Ezekiel as described in Ez. 1; cf. Isaiah 6, Daniel 7, 1 Enoch 14 (Enoch’s ascent to the heavenly temple in the Book of the Watchers). Some of the Qumran texts, notably the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (4Q 400-407 en 11QShirShabb), contain detailed descriptions of the heavenly liturgy and the angelic priesthood but they do not include reports of individual ascensions or prescriptions for heavenly journeys. Cf. Carol Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, 17; James

2. The sources

Over the last decades, increased attention has been given to *Hekhalot* literature.³⁶ Virtually all the relevant texts have become easily accessible in synoptic editions prepared by Peter Schäfer and his research team.³⁷ It will not be necessary to recall the growth of our knowledge of ancient gnostic texts and ideas following the discovery and publication of the Nag Hammadi collection of books.³⁸ Thanks to the progress in scholarship in both fields of study, a comparison of Jewish-mystical and gnostic ascent texts can be based on more solid ground. By way of introduction, I shall briefly deal with the literary character and the possible time and place of origin of the relevant Jewish and gnostic texts.

The earliest textual witnesses of *Hekhalot* literature date from the ninth century (manuscript fragments from the Cairo Geniza). The bulk of the texts is contained in large manuscripts produced in Europe in the late Middle Ages. But the texts inscribed in these manuscripts might be much older. As we have seen, Gershom Scholem believed that their essential contents stem from the first and second centuries C.E. This early dating is challenged by several scholars, in particular by Peter Schäfer.³⁹ It would seem that the majority of contemporary experts hypothesizes that some of the *Hekhalot* traditions may go back to third- and fourth century mystical circles in Palestine, but it is also pointed out in recent studies that Babylonian traditions must have been of central importance in the development of *Merkavah* mysticism.⁴⁰

The *Hekhalot* corpus includes various literary genres and diverse traditions: accounts of ascensions, magical prescriptions, cosmological expositions, descriptions of angelic figures and heavenly rituals, speculations of the nature and the appearance of God, and other topics, interlarded with songs, prayers and incantations. Because of the fluctuating and sometimes unordered and fragmentary character of their contents they can hardly be described as clearly composed “books”. Schäfer prefers to speak of “macroforms”.⁴¹

I will compare aspects of the above *Hekhalot* texts with three gnostic treatises from the Nag Hammadi collection that likewise are concerned with *prae mortem* ascensions, to wit *Zostrianos* (Cod. VIII,1), *Marsanes* (Cod. X), and *Allogenes* (Codex XI,3). The manuscripts date from the middle of the fourth century.⁴² The Coptic texts contained in the codices are translations of Greek texts. As we shall see below, there is a good reason to assume that the originals of *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes* were composed sometime before 269. We have to reckon with the possibility that the gnostic texts in question are considerably older than the oldest parts of the *Hekhalot* corpus. Unfortunately the surviving texts, in particular those of *Zostrianos* and *Marsanes*, are in a very bad physical condition. More than half of their pages are lost or seriously damaged.

3. Hekhalot texts

3a. The subject or protagonist of the ascension

Davila, “Heavenly Ascent in the Dead Sea Scrolls”, 479f.

³⁶ See Don Karr, “Notes on the Study of Merkabah Mysticism and Hekhalot Literature in English”, <http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/karr/mmhie.pdf>

³⁷ P. Schäfer et al., *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, 1981.

³⁸ See David M. Scholer, *Nag Hammadi Bibliography*, 2 vols, 1971 and 1997, continued in the journal *Novum Testamentum*.

³⁹ Schäfer relegates the texts to the Gaonic period (end of the sixth to the middle of the eleventh century, a dating which was already suggested by Heinrich Graetz), “The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism”; cf. David Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot. Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel’s Vision*.

⁴⁰ See e.g. James R. Davila, *Descenders to the Chariot*, esp. 20-22; Vita D. Arbel, *Beholders of Divine Secrets*.

⁴¹ “Die Handschriften zur Hekhalot-Literatur” in *Hekhalot-Studien*, 214f; *The Hidden and the Manifest God*, 6.

⁴² This can be inferred from the dates and names mentioned on papyrus scraps that were pasted inside the covers of the codices. Cf. John W.B. Barns et al., *Nag Hammadi Codices: Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Cartonnage of the Covers*, Leiden: Brill, 1981.

The *Hekhalot* texts claim to transmit the teachings of reputed rabbinic teachers like Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Ishmael, and Rabbi Nehunia ben ha-Kanah. The sages relate how they ascended on high and reached the divine realm. Their reports of past heavenly journeys are alternated with detailed instructions informing the addressees what they should do if they wish to follow the lead of the teacher and also embark on a heavenly journey. The texts are pseudepigraphic for, *pace* Scholem, there can be little doubt that they were written several centuries after the lifetime (the beginning of the second century C.E.) of these rabbi's.

That we are dealing with pseudepigraphic and fictional texts is also clear from the fact that their message differs on essential points from what we know about the actual teaching of the rabbinic authorities in question.⁴³ In basic agreement with the ancient Scriptures, the rabbi's described meetings with God as the result of divine rather than human initiative, while the *Hekhalot* texts declare that anyone who fulfills the proper requirements will be able to ascend and to reach the divine realm. Furthermore, the rabbis insisted that all truth is contained in the Scriptures and in the interpretations given orally by Moses, whereas the *Hekhalot* texts claim to show a direct way of coming into contact with the divine, without any reference to Scripture and tradition.⁴⁴ The alleged authorisation by classical sages cannot mask the radical differences from the rabbinic tradition.⁴⁵

The ascending mystic is seen as a representative of Israel, "an emissary of the earthly congregation" (Schäfer).⁴⁶ After his visit to the highest palace, he is supposed to descend and to give testimony of the things seen and heard. A few passages claim that all Jewish people are able to engage in the "matter of the *Merkavah*" and to ascend on high.⁴⁷ But in point of fact, this is a theoretical possibility for the texts make it clear that only highly qualified individuals can initiate a heavenly ascent. The requirements not only include a sufficient level of education, spiritual development and moral integrity but also the willingness to exercise various ascetical practices and to train oneself in magical-theurgic and trance-inducing techniques. Mention is made of fasts and special diets, bodily postures and ritual cleansings, repetition of prayers and adjurations, recitation of divine names, etc. In a conversation of two Babylonian scholars (ca. 1000 C.E.) the effects of these practices is discussed. One of the rabbi's states:

one who possesses the qualities described in the books and who wants to behold the *Merkavah* and the palaces (*hekhalot*) of the angels on high, must follow certain procedures. He must fast a certain number of days, put his head between his knees, and whisper many hymns and praises (...) So he can glimpse into their inner rooms (i.e. inside the palaces), as one who sees the seven palaces with his own eyes, entering from one palace into the other and seeing what is in it.⁴⁸

The mystical methods were supposed to lead to an elevated spiritual consciousness enabling the *Merkavah* seekers to surpass their limited human capacities. At the end of their ecstatic ascent they could experience a direct understanding of veiled divine realities.⁴⁹ It should be observed that the texts do not presuppose an ontological duality in the human being: they do not state that only a higher part (the soul, mind, or spirit) ascends on high while other components of the person stay behind.⁵⁰ Rather than assuming a duality in the human being, *Hekhalot* texts point to a duality – in fact an immense distance – between the

⁴³ Schäfer, "Aim and Purpose", 293 ("we are concerned here with a type of *pseudepigraphical literature* which is related to Rabbinic literature in a way similar to that by which the biblical pseudepigrapha are related to the Bible"); cf. Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism*, 92.

⁴⁴ Rachel Elior, "The Concept of God in Hekhalot Literature", in J. Dan, *Binah*, vol. 2, p. 99: "The divine form and the structure of the celestial realms, rather than God's will and commandments vis-a-vis mankind, interest the mystic."

⁴⁵ Schäfer, "Aim and Purpose", 293; Dan, *Jewish Mysticism*, 98. Cf. Ph. Alexander, "Response" (to P. Schäfer) in P. Schäfer and J. Dan (eds), *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism. 50 Years After*, 79-83.

⁴⁶ "Aim and Purpose", 288; *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 143. Cf. *Hekh. Rabbati*, section 248, where the mystic is addressed as "son of the beloved seed" (apparently for the sake of clarity one manuscript adds: "of Abraham").

⁴⁷ Vita D. Arbel, *Beholders of Divine Secrets*, 34, who refers to sections 181 (81?), 204, 247, 335, 421, 572 in Schäfer's *Synopse zur Hekhalot Literatur*.

⁴⁸ Quoted by Scholem, *Major Trends*, 49; Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 153f; Arbel, *Beholders*, 32.

⁴⁹ Arbel, *Beholders*, 29-47.

⁵⁰ Moshe Idel, *Ascensions on High*, 28-33 and 56-58, considers the possibility that a kind of astral body is meant.

human and the divine. A process of inner transformation supposedly permitted the mystic to bridge this distance.

3b. *How is the journey on high imagined?*

Note, first of all, that several texts, in particular *Hekh. Rabbati*, paradoxically refer to the ascent to heaven as a *descent* (“descent to the Chariot”, *yeridah la-Merkavah*). Accordingly, the ones who embarked in a heavenly ascent were designated as *descenders* (*yordei Merkavah*).⁵¹ Gershom Scholem explains this terminology from the synagogical practice to “descend” to the Torah-shrine.⁵² Also other explanations have been proposed but unfortunately they all remain hypothetical.⁵³

The *Merkavah* mystics had no special interest in the lower universe for the texts suggest that the “descenders” overstepped the spheres of the planets and the fixed stars and started their journey immediately in the celestial realm above the firmament. Otherwise, the heavenly world resembled the cosmos below the firmament in so far as it was imagined as a structure of super-imposed layers of increasing holiness, all of them more or less equal in size and shape.⁵⁴ The mystics are likely to have imagined the world above as an immense structure with the features of a temple as well those of a royal palace. Also the highest heaven, the palace of the divine Chariot, is depicted as a concrete and tangible space, rather than as a transcendent and unlimited realm.⁵⁵

Hekhalot texts present the process of a gradually increasing awareness of transcendent truths as an outward, corporeal voyage towards the divine realm. The journey is pictured with the help of various biblical, extra-biblical apocalyptic, and Near Eastern mythological concepts and modes of expression.⁵⁶ In some of the texts, several stages of the ascension are distinguished. During the first stage, when the mystic tries to free himself from all the restrictions of his human existence, he often faints or falls backwards. Also the further stages of the ascension appear to be difficult and even dangerous, first of all because mighty and terrifying angelic guardians, or “gatekeepers”, tried to prevent unworthy voyagers from approaching the Godhead. *Hekh. Rabbati* describes the gatekeepers of the seventh palace in the following way:

At the entrance to the seventh palace stand and rage all mighty ones, ruthless, powerful, and hard, terrible, and frightening, higher than mountains and sharper than hills. (...) Bolts of lightning come from their eyes, channels of fire from their noses, and torches of coal from their mouths. They are adorned (with) helmets and armors, lances and spears (...) Their horses are horses of darkness, horses of the shadow of death, horses of gloom, fire, blood, hail, iron, fog (...) And a cloud is over their heads, dripping blood over their heads and the heads of their horses. This is the mark and measurement of the guardians at the entrance to the seventh palace, and such is the entrance of each palace.⁵⁷

Although their frightening appearance and armouring might suggest otherwise, the gatekeepers were not seen as demonic figures. On the contrary, they acted on behalf of God when they defended the heavenly palaces against intruders. The aspirant ascenders were advised to take certain instruments of protection (“seals” on which secret divine names

⁵¹ Cf. the titles of the studies by Annelies Kuyt, *The ‘Descent’ to the Chariot*, and James R. Davila, *Descenders to the Chariot*.

⁵² *Jewish Gnosticism*, 20, n.1.

⁵³ In a later publication Scholem explains the term from the practice of the mystics “to reach down in themselves in order to perceive the chariot”, art. “Kabbalah”, *Enc. Jud.* 10, col. 494; according to Joseph Dan, the expression reflects Song of Songs 6:11, “I went down to the nut orchard”, *Jewish Mysticism*, 40, n.1; David Halperin connects the term with the descent of the Israelites to the Red Sea, *Faces of the Chariot*, 226f; Elliot Wolfson argues that the term only refers to the last phase of the ascension, when the traveller is seated near the throne of glory, “Yeridah la-Merkavah: typology of Ecstasy and Enthronement in Ancient Jewish Mysticism”; cf. the critical discussion of Wolfson’s proposal by Annelies Kuyt, *The “Descent” to the Chariot*, esp. 372-4.

⁵⁴ Cf. Rebecca M. Lesses, *Ritual Power*, 13, and the literature mentioned there.

⁵⁵ Cf. Arbel, *Beholders*, 75-86.

⁵⁶ Arbel, *Beholders*, chaps. 3 and 4.

⁵⁷ *Synopse*, section 213. Cf. Schäfer, “Aim and Purpose”, 251; *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 33.

were engraved) with them.⁵⁸ When the mystic showed the correct seal to the guardians they would let him in and helped him to continue on his way to the divine Throne.

Large portions of the *Hekhalot* texts consist of technical guides or manuals for mystics. It is clearly implied in these instructions that the heavenly ascent could be practiced more than once.⁵⁹ A few texts relate how an enlightened teacher describes what he experiences in the other world while he stays among his disciples.⁶⁰ It is also reported that attendants called an ascender back from his heavenly journey so that he could answer their questions.⁶¹

3c. *The goal of the ascension*

There is some divergence of opinion in recent scholarship about the goal of the heavenly journeys as they are described in *Hekhalot* texts.⁶² For the purpose of this study it may suffice to state that the prospect of a direct encounter with God in his glory must have been at least one of the motivating forces of the ascensions and a supreme goal in itself.⁶³ But what were the mystics supposed to see, and how did they imagine the encounter with God?

First of all, the God of the *Merkavah* mystics is the biblical Creator and Master of the universe. Much emphasis is laid on God's kingly aspect. As a rule, he is portrayed as a mighty, anthropomorph sovereign of enormous dimensions, clothed in garments of light and wearing a royal crown. God is seated on his Chariot-Throne in the seventh heavenly palace, while numerous angels glorify him, exalt his name and accept his absolute authority. It is possible to see the account of God's immense bodily dimensions as a paradoxical attempt to give expression to the idea of his imperceptible transcendence. Anyhow, other texts of the same corpus affirm that God is in fact totally imperceptible and beyond human imagination.⁶⁴ It may be noted that these two seemingly conflicting conceptions of God can already be found in biblical and rabbinic traditions.⁶⁵ The *Hekhalot* corpus does not yet make a distinction between God's true essence and his appearance in anthropomorph form (as later kabbalistic speculation would do).⁶⁶ As Elliot Wolfson notes, "the ancient Jewish mystics lived with the paradox of assuming the visibility of the essentially invisible God."⁶⁷

Gershom Scholem stresses that a total union with the Divine is absent in early Jewish mystical texts:

The Creator and His creature remain apart, and nowhere is an attempt made to bridge the gulf between them or to blur the distinction. The mystic who in his ecstasy has passed through all the gates, braved all the dangers, now stands before the throne; he sees and hears – but that is all.⁶⁸

⁵⁸ For the meaning of the seals see Lesses, *Ritual Practices*, 317-323.

⁵⁹ Schäfer suggests that the ascension to heaven was primarily conceived and practiced as "a ritual, so to speak a liturgical act", "Aim and Purpose", 294.

⁶⁰ Cf. *Hekh. Rabbati*, sections 198-228, and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, section 582, discussed by Michael D. Swartz, *Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism*, 22f, and Moshe Idel, *Ascensions on High*, 32: "the assumption of a double presence (...) may have something to do with the concept of a spiritual body" (ibid.; "a sort of astral body", cf. above **n. 51**).

⁶¹ Cf. Arbel, *Beholders*, 76. We already noticed above that the descender was supposed to return and to give testimony to his community.

⁶² Schäfer and others emphasize the magical aspects of the "ascent ritual" and consider the adjuration of angelic powers as its main goal.

⁶³ Cf. Ira Chernus, "Visions of God in Merkavah Mysticism", esp. 124; Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 81-84.

⁶⁴ Arbel, *Beholders*, 126, speaks of a mythological model of "transcendent anthropomorphism", which in her view is embedded in ancient Near Eastern traditions and found later, in more restricted fashion, in various biblical and apocalyptic sources. Sometimes the dimensions are so large that they in fact are infinite and immeasurable (ibid., 129). R. Elior, "The Concept of God", argues that what the traveller actually sees is the *Merkavah* rather than God himself.

⁶⁵ Over against the anthropomorphism of God in various biblical texts, Deut. 4:12, 15-16 emphasizes that the Israelites did not see (could not see?) God but only heard his voice.

⁶⁶ I. Chernus, "Visions of God", 145; E. Wolfson, *Speculum*, 107.

⁶⁷ *Speculum*, 90. See also Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 139-141.

⁶⁸ *Major Trends*, 56.

The final words of this statement perhaps need some qualification. Wolfson rightly observes that according to many *Hekhalot* texts, upon his arrival in the seventh palace the mystic is said to be seated on a throne before God. Wolfson interprets this “enthronement” as a form of angelification,⁶⁹ but underlines that this does not make the mystic divine or equal to God’s glory. *Hekhalot* literature is rooted in “Yahwistic dualism”, as Wolfson calls it.⁷⁰ The distinction between God and his creature is of an ontological nature and therefore unsurmountable. Only in kabbalistic texts of the later Middle Ages do we find notions such as the mystic’s total self-annihilation and subsequent immersion in God (“as a drop of water within the sea”) and the integration of all things in God’s infinite Being.⁷¹ Here the *unio mystica* is believed to overcome God’s otherness.

The awareness of God’s sublime and solemn majesty may have prevented the *Merkavah* mystics from describing their relationship with God in the language of love,⁷² although Wolfson points to a few passages where, as he suggests, erotic terminology is used.⁷³ It is probable that this language was influenced by the traditional concept of God’s love for Israel and Israel’s for God,⁷⁴ for, as we noticed before, the mystic was believed to represent God’s people. The loving relationship between God and his community can be imagined as a communion but certainly not as a dissolution of the duality of God and man.

4. *Gnostic ascent texts*

4a. *The subject or protagonist of the ascension*

Three treatises of the Nag Hammadi collection of books relate the visionary ascent of Zostrianos, Marsanes, and Allogenes, respectively. Zostrianos was believed to be the great-grandfather or great-uncle of the founder of the Zoroastrian religion Zoroaster/Zarathustra.⁷⁵ The role attributed to him gives evidence of the wide-spread ancient idea that religious seers of old times such as Hermes Trismegistos, Zoroaster, and Moses had extraordinary information about divine truths.⁷⁶ It is not clear from the damaged text of *Marsanes* whether this book likewise presents its hero as an ancient prophetic figure.⁷⁷ The Greek name “Allogenes”, meaning “Foreigner”/“One of another race”, is a generic rather than a proper name.⁷⁸ Because Gnostics saw themselves as people of another, i.e. divine, race,⁷⁹ it is not unlikely that Allogenes is imagined as a timeless model figure rather than as an ancient seer. Otherwise, his role as a mediator of divinely revealed teachings is comparable to that of Zostrianos and Marsanes in the other two books. Allogenes delivers his revelatory messages to his “son” Messos. The teachings of the books are worded in the first person style. This is a clear indication that we are concerned with pseudographic and fictional literature.

⁶⁹ *Speculum*, 83f.

⁷⁰ *Speculum*, 84, n. 46.

⁷¹ Cf. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah. New Perspectives*, esp. 67-70, and “Universalization and Integration: Two Conceptions of Mystical Union in Jewish Mysticism”.

⁷² Scholem, *Major Trends*, 55: “What there is of love in the relationship between the Jewish mystic and his God belongs to a much later period”.

⁷³ *Speculum*, 98-105, p. 104, n. 139: “Contrary to Scholem’s generalization that there is no love between God and the *Merkavah* mystic, it is possible that the very moment of visual encounter is an erotic experience. The sexual component may be implied in the terminology “beloved” employed to refer to the mystic”. Cf. N. Deutsch, *The Gnostic Imagination*, 132-135.

⁷⁴ Schäfer, “Aim and Purpose”, 289, *The Hidden and the Manifest God*, 149.

⁷⁵ Arnobius, *Adv. nationes* 1.52; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 5.103.2-4. Cf. John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition*, 294f, n. 29.

⁷⁶ Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 122.

⁷⁷ It has been hypothesized that the name “Marsianos” is of Syrian origin. B. Pearson, *Nag Hamm. Codices IX and X*, 232f, recognizes in the first part of the name (*mar*) the Aramaic/Syriac word for “master”.

⁷⁸ Epiphanius, *Pan* 40.7.2-5, writes that the gnostic Archontics used “Allogenes” as another name for Seth (cf. Gen 4:25). As far as I know, this identification is not confirmed by any extant gnostic source. Allogenes seems to be the central figure of the last document inscribed in the codex Maghagha (codex Tchacos). We have to await its publication.

⁷⁹ H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 49-51.

In his biography of the neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus, Porphyry writes that Plotinus was engaged in a polemic against gnostic Christians who “produced revelations by Zoroaster and Zostrianos and Nicotheos and Allogenes and Messos and other such people”.⁸⁰ If Porphyry’s information means that the gnostics in question possessed early Greek texts of the books of *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes* known to us in a fourth century Coptic translation, the original compositions must be dated back to sometime before 269 C.E., when Plotinus left Rome (he was active in Rome as a philosophical teacher between 244 and 269, Plotinus died in 270). Let us first examine a passage of the opening section of *Zostrianos* :

After I parted from the corporeal darkness within me and the psychic chaos in mind (*nous*) and from the feminine desire [that is] in the darkness – as I did not have to do with it – and after I had discovered the boundlessness of my material (nature) and reproved the dead creation within me and the divine ruler of the perceptible world, I powerfully preached wholeness to those with alien parts.⁸¹

Two features of this passages deserve special notice. According to Zostrianos it was his soul, or more precisely the highest part of his soul, his mind (*nous*), that traveled on high. This account presupposes a particular anthropology: the human being is composed of two (body and soul) or rather three (body, soul, mind) parts. Only the highest component is able and worthy to ascend. Note further that Zostrianos speaks in the past tense about his ascension. After he returned from his journey he summoned potential gnostics to seek the divine truth in the same way as he did.⁸² It is important to observe this for it means that his teachings are not so much concerned with the final redemption – the *post mortem* ascent of the soul – as with the question of how one can achieve self-recognition and perfect insight into ultimate reality.⁸³ Insomuch as *Zostrianos*, *Marsanes*, and *Allogenes* report the visionary ascents of their heroes, these gnostic texts can be paralleled with the relevant *Hekhalot* accounts.

More than once, Zostrianos insists that those who endeavour to seek the spiritual truth must withdraw from their material body and its psychic accretions, apparently because attention to the body and the emotions is believed to darken the mind and to distract one from focusing on stability, simplicity, and unity. Indeed the surviving pages are replete with negative statements about the body, the material world, and its creator and ruler.⁸⁴ In the sermon which concludes his book, Zostrianos repeats:

Awaken your divine part as divine, and strengthen your sinless elect soul. Mark the passing of this world and seek the immutable ingenerateness. (...) You have come to escape your bondage. Release yourselves, and that which has bound you will be dissolved.⁸⁵

While the body will disappear (“that which has bound you will be dissolved” or “nullified”), the spiritual part of the seer is destined to be assimilated with the divine.⁸⁶ Allogenes, too, relates that at the moment of his ascension he had to leave behind his body (his “garment, *enduma*”):

After <I> had been seized by an eternal Light out of the garment that clothed me, and had been taken up to a holy place whose likeness cannot be revealed in the world, then, through a great blessedness I saw all those things about which I had heard.⁸⁷

⁸⁰ *Vita Plotini* 16. Cf. B. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 184.

⁸¹ VIII 1.10-21.

⁸² Allogenes leaves this task to Messos

⁸³ Cf. Karen L. King, *Revelation of the Unknowable God*, 2 and passim.

⁸⁴ The material world and the body are associated with darkness, changeability (VIII 5.9), powerlessness (26.9-11), pain and suffering (46.2-15), bondage (46.15-30), multiplicity and boundlessness (46.5f), death (123.6-8), ignorance (130.7), and perishability. The creator-God is condemned (1.16-190; 9.12-15; 128.7-14; 131.23f). Cf. John H. Sieber, *Nag Hammadi Codex VIII*, 13.

⁸⁵ VIII 130.18-24 and 131.10-12.

⁸⁶ Zostrianos states that it is possible for a certain type of humans to part “from all these matters” and, “having withdrawn into God, to become divine” (44.18-22); at p. 53.18f Zostrianos affirms: “I became divine”.

⁸⁷ XI 58.26-37. “about which I had heard” refers to the first main part of the book in which Allogenes is prepared for his ascent by several revelations.

Only after one has escaped one's earthly confines and ascended to a "holy place" can one achieve direct knowledge of the divine truth. In the preserved pages of *Marsanes* the separation from the body is not reported. But several times we come across expressions such as "incorporeal spheres", "incorporeal beings", "incorporeal substance". This anthropological dualism is quite common in gnostic texts. An interesting parallel to the above passages of *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes* occurs in the first *Apocalypse of James* (Nag Hamm. Cod. V,3) where Christ summons James:

Cast away from yourself (...) this bond of flesh, which encircles you. Then you will reach Him-who-is (the transcendent God). And you will no longer be James; rather you will be The-One-who-is.⁸⁸

In their statements about the earthly condition of humankind, these gnostic texts are explicitly dualistic. But they add that the spiritual part is the only thing that counts: even before death, one should cast off the clutches of the body because the bodily components have nothing to do with one's true identity. In the end everything to do with the body will be reduced to naught whereas one's spiritual core is saved and will be united with the only One who truly is.

4b. *How is the journey on high imagined?*

The three Gnostic books depict the journey on high as an escape from duality and as a search for unity. On the one hand, they do so with the help of philosophical concepts ultimately based on Plato's doctrine about the soul's progress to ever higher levels of comprehension (*Symposium* 210a-212a) in order to attain true knowledge of that which really is (*Phaedrus* 247b-e).⁸⁹ On the other hand, the ascent is described in religious language. Only to a small degree is the progress in knowledge presented as the result of discursive reasoning. For the greater part it is dependent upon the reception of revelations from divine helpers. They explain what the voyager sees and they guide him on his way to higher forms of knowledge.⁹⁰ In addition, the gnostic books describe the ascent as a process of gradual initiation. At each stage *Zostrianos* receives one or more metaphoric washings in celestial water.⁹¹ Anointings in *Allogenes* seem to have a similar function.⁹²

The role of the angelic helpers ("powers" or "glories") is made clear in the following passage of *Zostrianos* speaking of the souls who wish to escape from the bonds of the body:

Powers have been appointed for their (the souls') salvation, and these same ones are in this place. And (...) there stand at each [aeon] certain glories so that one who is in the [world] might be saved together with [them]. The glories are perfect living thoughts (*noêma*). They cannot perish because [they are] models (*tupos*) of salvation; each one will be saved by them. And being a model (oneself) one will receive strength by it, and having that glory as a helper (*boêthos*), one thus passes through the world (*kosmos*) and through [every] aeon.⁹³

First the souls pass through the cosmic world and then through various realms above the firmament. As far as we can assess from the extant portions of their texts, the gnostic books under discussion show little interest in the cosmic stages of the journey on high. The very damaged second page of *Marsanes* seems to distinguish thirteen levels (designated as "seals").⁹⁴ This spatial structure serves as a very long bridge between matter and pure spirit, multiplicity and unity, ignorance and true knowledge, respectively. It is also an attempt to explain the multiplicity of the universe from one divine source. In *Marsanes* the first three

⁸⁸ V 27. 3-10.

⁸⁹ For a detailed comparison with late antique philosophical speculations see John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism*, esp. 693-743; id., "The Setting of the Platonizing Sethian Treatises in Middle Platonism"; John F. Finamore, "Iamblichus, the Sethians, and *Marsanes*".

⁹⁰ Karen L. King, *Revelation of the Unknowable God*, 6-8.

⁹¹ VIII 4.21-7.22; 25.10-20; 53.15-54.1; 62.12-14.

⁹² XI 52.13-15.

⁹³ VIII 46.16-31.

⁹⁴ Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism*, 111 with n. 22.

spheres are viewed as “material” realms. The fourth sphere is probably imagined as “incorporeal” and “divine”. The other “seals” are connected with increasingly abstract entities or “aeons”.

The lack of interest in the passage of the soul through the cosmic (planetary and zodiacal) spheres is a particular feature of *Zostrianos*, *Marsanes* and *Allogenes*. Numerous other gnostic and non-gnostic texts specify in great detail the dangers that threaten the soul when it ascends through these spheres, usually described as the realms of hostile powers. The three books have this almost exclusive interest in otherworldly realities in common with the *Hekhalot* writings.

The higher stages of the ascension reflect the structure of the divine hierarchy. Viewed from above, each aeon is a somewhat less than perfect representation of the former or parent aeon. From the point of view of the ascender, each level represents one stage upwards on one’s way to complete knowledge and salvation. In *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes*, “the all-glorious Youel” prepares the ascender for the reception of the final revelation of the highest realities.⁹⁵

The central figure in the *pleroma* (“fullness”) or divine world is Barbelo.⁹⁶ She is regarded as the first and only externalization of God’s self-contemplating thought and therefore as the principle of all knowledge and salvation.

(She is) a thought of the perfect mind (*nous*) of the Light that causes immortal souls to acquire knowledge.⁹⁷

While the Invisible Spirit remains undivided, Barbelo divides into three aeons, designated with abstract names: Kalyptos, Protophanes, and Autogenes. Each of these major aeons in turn has a multitude of constituent parts, often designated as powers, glories, or luminaries. The luminaries of the Barbelo aeon reveal the highest levels of divine Being to the ascender. While traveling through their aeons, the mind of the seer has to gradually change over from discursive to contemplative knowledge and silent intuition. In this process, it becomes assimilated to ever higher ontological levels.⁹⁸

4c. *The goal of the ascension*

In *Allogenes*, Barbelo’s luminaries teach the ascender that it is impossible to know the Unknowable. Accordingly, they command him to stop when he approaches the highest level of knowledge, for, they caution, seeking the unknowable God would only disturb him (61.25-39). This episode introduces a traditional definition of God’s transcendence with the help of abstractions and negations (the *via negativa*).⁹⁹ But before they warned the seer, the luminaries had told him that he would receive a “first revelation of the Unknowable” (59.27-30). This revelatory knowledge – designated paradoxically as “ignorant knowledge” (64.10-11; cf. 59.30-32) – enabled the gnostic to reach the completely transcendent God, —if, that is, he was prepared to leave behind all attempts to understand.

Do not [know] him, for that is impossible. And if through an enlightened thought (*ennoia*) you should know him: be ignorant of him.¹⁰⁰

This passage of *Allogenes* shows that the author was aware of the theoretical problem raised by the idea of reaching perfect knowledge of God’s unknowable transcendence.¹⁰¹ In *Allogenes* and in the other two treatises, the highest phase of the ascender’s search for

⁹⁵ The name of this angelic figure is likely to have been adopted, directly or indirectly, from a Jewish tradition. Cf. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 68; King, *Revelation of the Unknowable God*, 46. See also below, n. *109*.

⁹⁶ The name “Barbelo” has not yet been explained in a satisfying way.

⁹⁷ *Zostr.* VIII 29.17-20.

⁹⁸ Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism*, 652f. While *Allogenes* and *Marsanes* reach the highest level, *Zostrianos* does not seem to travel farther than the first levels of the Barbelo Aeon.

⁹⁹ Cf. the discussion of various “negative theologies” in Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions*, 112-116.

¹⁰⁰ *Allog.* XI 60.8-12.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Plato, *Theaetetus* 176a-b: “We ought to try to escape from earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can, and to escape is to become like God, *so far as this is possible*.”

knowledge is described as a contemplative vision. In this vision, the gnostic loses the awareness of his individuality. What the seer experiences is only ineffability, tranquillity, silence, and stability.¹⁰²

Closely connected with the pursuit of perfect knowledge of ultimate reality was the desire of the gnostic to unite with the Divine. Apparently this goal could not be achieved by the protagonists of the three books. After all, they were only temporary residents of the otherworldly realm. We may take it for granted that complete union with God was regarded as the final goal of the soul's *post mortem* ascension.¹⁰³

5. Comparison

So far, I examined the characteristic features of the ascension within their own literary and conceptual frames, in *Hekhalot* texts and in three gnostic texts dealing with visionary ascents, respectively. In conclusion, I will summarize the most striking similarities and dissimilarities, paying special attention to agreements and disagreements in the religious thought structure expressed or presupposed in the texts.

5a. The subject or protagonist of the ascension

In the gnostic treatises, the journey on high is reserved for the highest part of the human being. The physical body and the irrational parts of the soul are left behind. In the *Hekhalot* corpus we do not find clear traces of a similar anthropological dualism. Apparently the whole human person is believed to ascend to the celestial world. Perhaps we may compare the ascender and his journey in *Hekhalot* texts to human persons and their actions as we see them in our dreams. Anyhow, the *Merkavah* mystics do not seem to have reflected upon the physical nature of the ascender.¹⁰⁴ It is interesting to recall the uncertainty in this respect, expressed by the apostle Paul when he speaks of his visionary journey to the third heaven: "in the body or out of the body, I cannot tell" (2 Corinthians 12:2 and 3).¹⁰⁵

5b. How is the journey on high imagined?

The ascension through the realms beyond the starry sky is imagined in quite different ways.¹⁰⁶ Whereas the seekers of the *Merkavah* entered into successive, more or less concrete "halls" or "palaces", all of them guarded by mighty "gatekeepers", the soul or mind of the gnostic had to adapt itself to increasingly abstract levels of existence. In general, the imagery of the *Hekhalot* texts builds on biblical, ancient Near Eastern, and Mesopotamian mythology,¹⁰⁷ while the ascent model of the three gnostic treatises had its roots in Later-Platonic ontology and epistemology.¹⁰⁸

Remarkably enough, the gnostic travellers were somehow guided by angel-like beings, while the *Merkavah*-seekers seem to have travelled on their own. This strikes us because the role of the revealer figures in gnostic ascent texts is remotely reminiscent of the

¹⁰² Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism*, 666-669. The expression "standing at rest" is often used to denote the stability of the supernal realm (in contrast with the chaos and turmoil of the physical world), cf. *Zostr.* VIII 78.15f; 81.12f; 82.13-15; *Allog.* XI 46.13f; 59.20-23; 60.4, 28-37; 66.31f; Middle-Platonic authors and Plotinus used quite similar terminology to denote the experience of stability and tranquillity in a mystical withdrawal to transcendent reality. See Michael A. Williams, "Stability as a Soteriological Theme in Gnosticism", in B. Layton (ed.), *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, II, Leiden: Brill, 1982, 819-829, and *The Immovable Race. A Gnostic Designation and the Theme of Stability in Late Antiquity*, Leiden: Brill, 1985.

¹⁰³ King, *Revelation of the Unknowable God*, 10: "In *Allogenes*, the culmination of the ascent is a primary vision of the Unknowable; for Plotinus, the culminating goal is not vision, but union with the One." This is basically correct but King does not consider that the ascent in *Allogenes* differs from that in Plotinus because it has a temporary character (it anticipates the final union with the Divine).

¹⁰⁴ As we noticed above, n. 54, Moshe Idel suggests that the mystic travelled in an astral body.

¹⁰⁵ But note that Paul did not ascend on his own initiative (and after serious preparations, as the *Merkavah* mystics reportedly did). Rather he experienced a sudden rapture to Paradise. Cf. Peter Schäfer, "New Testament and Hekhalot Literature", and Riemer Roukema, "Paul's Rapture to Paradise in Early Christian Literature".

¹⁰⁶ Like the *Hekhalot* texts, the three gnostic treatises neglect the cosmic phase of the journey on high.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Arbel, *Beholders of Divine Secrets*, ch. 4 ("Mystical Journeys in Mythological Language").

¹⁰⁸ E. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 84, n. 46.

traditional function of the *angelus interpres* in apocalyptic writings, the more so because some of them bear Hebrew sounding names.¹⁰⁹ As we noticed, the spiritual progress of the gnostic ascender was dependent on his reception of divine revelations.

To an extent, the action of Barbelo's luminaries in *Allogenes* is comparable to that of the gatekeepers in *Hekhalot* texts. Both groups of celestial powers caution the traveller when he nears the final goal of his journey. But they had different reasons for doing so: in the *Hekhalot* writings, the guardians of the heavenly palaces act as defenders of God's holiness whereas Barbelo's powers remind the gnostic of God's fully transcendent and therefore unknowable nature.

5c. The goal of the ascension

The three gnostic ascent texts do not present the journey on high as the final return voyage of the soul or spirit to its divine origin. In these books, the ascension is basically a quest for perfect knowledge. Interestingly, we find this epistemological concern also in *Hekhalot* texts, for the heavenly voyage of the *Merkavah*-seeker can be seen as a search for hidden celestial mysteries.¹¹⁰ It is worth mentioning in this connection that the gnostic as well as the Jewish ascenders returned from their journey in order to share their experiences with those who were deemed "worthy".

But these similarities are of a rather superficial and general character. Jewish and gnostic ascenders aspired to see or comprehend quite different things: the ultimate goal of the *Merkavah* mystics apparently was to join in the celestial glorification of God's majesty¹¹¹ (and so to confirm Israel's trust in God?), whereas the gnostics wished to reach perfect knowledge of ultimate reality as well as perfect knowledge of themselves (in anticipation of their final salvation?).

When the *Merkavah* mystic worshipped God's glory in the highest heaven he was as close to God as possible but nevertheless he must have been aware of the ontologically infinite distance between God and his creature, whereas gnostics started from the conviction that the innermost core of their being was not created by a demiurgical God but originated from [?] and was consubstantial with [?] the metacosmic unknowable God; when they attempted to obtain true knowledge of ultimate reality they searched for the source of their own existence.

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¹⁰⁹ Compare the name and the role of "the all-glorious Youel" in *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes* to the angel Yael in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. The function and the names of angel-like helpers in gnostic texts deserve a closer examination. For the time being I refer to Gideon Bohak, "Hebrew, Hebrew Everywhere? Notes on the Interpretation of *Voces Magicae*", and Pieter W. Van der Horst, "'The God who drowned the King of Egypt': A Short Note on an Exorcistic Formula".

¹¹⁰ Note that they did not share the apocalyptic interest in the mysteries of history and in eschatological issues. Attention was focused on God's presence in his otherworldly palace-like temple.

¹¹¹ Cf. P. Schäfer, "Aim and Purpose", 286.

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