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Heaven in the early history of Western religions

Chapter 1 Approaches to concepts of heaven

This dissertation examines concepts of heaven in the early history of Western religions and the extent to which themes found in other traditions are found in Christianity. Russell, in *A History of Heaven*, investigates the origins of the concept of heaven, which he dates at about 200 B.C.E. and observes that heaven, a concept that has shaped much of Christian thought and attitudes, has been strangely neglected by modern historians.¹ Christianity has played a central role in Western civilization and instructs its believers to direct their life in this world with a view to achieving eternal life in the next, as observed by Liebeschuetz.² It is of the greatest historical importance that a very large number of people could for many centuries be persuaded to see life in an imperfect visible world as merely a stage in their progress to a world that was perfect but invisible; yet, it has been neglected as a subject for study. Russell notes that *Heaven: A History*³ by McDannell and Lang mainly offers sociological insights.⁴ Russell holds that the most important aspects of the concept of heaven are the beatific vision and the mystical union.⁵ Heaven, he says, is the state of being in

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Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven – The Singing Silence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) xiii, xiv.

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Wolf Liebeschuetz, “The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife. The 1995 Read-Tuckwell Lecture at the University of Bristol by J. N. Bremmer”, *Journal of Roman Studies* 94, (2004): 208.

3

Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988 (2001)).

4

Russell, *A History of Heaven*, xiv.

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Russell, *A History of Heaven*, 5.

which all are united in love with one another and with God. Furthermore, theologian McGrath notes at least one common theme that unites all these different visions and purposes: "The Christian concept of heaven is iconic, rather than intellectual - something that makes its appeal to the imagination, rather than the intellect, which calls out to be visualized rather than merely understood."⁶ On the other hand, J. Edward Wright in *The Early History of Heaven*,⁷ maintains that to understand the heavenly realm as imagined by early Jews and Christians, one must begin with an appreciation of the images of the heavenly realm found in the religiously authoritative texts forming the religious, intellectual and cultural foundation of these two religious communities – the Hebrew Bible; and to understand the broader social context, one must start with an examination of the beliefs of ancient Israel's neighbours regarding the heavenly realm.⁸

However, it is proposed that in order to better understand the implications of concepts of heaven, it is important to examine the conduct or conditions believed to be necessary for a human being to enter the heavenly realms and the implications thereof. Do concepts of heaven emphasize the importance of faith in the divine, require personal moral responsibility, and/or point to special knowledge of magical techniques for attaining to the heavenly realms? Can elements of older religious beliefs and practices be found in Christianity? What is the perceived relationship between heaven and earth? What are the most important aspects of concepts of heaven and their significance.

The concepts of heaven are examined from early antiquity, through the time periods covered by the Bible,⁹ up to the promulgation of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (Nicene Creed) in 381 CE. Points of similarity and divergence will be examined between concepts of the structure of cosmos, the nature of the soul, the soul's journey into heavenly realms and the relevance of morality. The term *Western* is used to encompass the Jewish and Christian traditions along with the religions

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Alister E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003) 166.

7

J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000).

8

Wright, *Early History of Heaven*, ix.

9

The version of the Bible used is the New Revised Standard Version Bible, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1989).

in ancient Egypt, Persia, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome. Reference is made to shamanism as a framework for indigenous traditions involving the soul's flight to the heavenly realms.

Reference is made to the Hebrew and Christian Bibles to gain insights into the Jews' and Christians' understandings of heaven. Non-canonical texts also provide insights into early attitudes, including Gnostic traditions. Extant literature concerning concepts of the heavenly realm, from the neighbouring cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, Greece and Rome are also examined.

Smith¹⁰ argues that due to shifting usage, the term 'belief' has lost its spiritual connotations to the extent that 'belief in God' longer carries the same power as 'faith in God'. Smith also contends that the very concept of "religion" in the West has evolved through a lengthy reification process: "mentally making religion into a thing, gradually coming to conceive it as an objective systematic entity."¹¹ Given varying views about the nature of belief, religion, and faith, Campion's definition has been used, as it avoids dependence on describing psychological states and defines religion as the worship of, or ritual interaction with, divine beings of anthropomorphized natural forces.¹²

Indicating the relevance of concepts of heaven today, in September 2012, the Pastor of an Episcopal Church in Manhattan, New York convened an informal "Think Tank" to discuss heaven, with reference to Neale's book about her near-death experience, *To Heaven and Back*.¹³ Participants¹⁴ raised many questions about heaven, their primary concerns focusing on personal survival after death and being reunited with friends and loved ones in heaven. Yet, it was not clear how this could take place and, in general, their views on Christian doctrines concerning heaven were vague. Some felt that heaven and hell were experienced by people while they were alive on earth.

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Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979 [1998]) 116-7.

11

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The meaning and end of religion* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1978 [1962]), 51.

12

Nicholas Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology, Vol.1: The Ancient and Classical Worlds* (London: Continuum Books, 2008), xi.

13

Mary C. Neale, *To Heaven and Back. A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again: A True Story* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2012).

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Participation in the group ranged between 8 to 13 persons.

Jewish concepts of heaven were discussed in a private conversation with Rabbi Aaron L. Raskin¹⁵ on 1 June 2012. Rabbi Raskin, the author of several books,¹⁶ explained that after death, every Jewish soul would go to paradise. A soul may need to be refined in Hell (*Gehenna*) as a temporary process, in order to enter paradise. After death, angels show the deceased a replay of their life, so that people can judge themselves. Then, the angels assign the deceased to their intermediate destination, which may be *Gehenna* or heaven, which is a stage between death and the messianic era. When the Messiah comes, the ultimate stage of human destiny is the resurrection of the dead, when souls will return to their immortal bodies for eternity. Ultimately, the concept is concerned with bringing heaven to earth and not with people going permanently to a spiritual heaven. The Rabbi explained that resurrection took place not only for Jewish people but also for any good person who follows the seven Laws of Noah¹⁷ and takes every opportunity to help others.

Clearly, heaven is an important topic of inquiry and discussion today, even if it has been somewhat neglected by scholars in recent years.

Chapter 2 Shamanism and the Upper World

This chapter will examine concepts of shamanism, including soul flight and spirit possession, as they have entered scholarly discourse in the West, including references to indigenous cultures. The extent to which ideas about shamanism may be applicable to approaches for entering the heavenly realms will be considered.

Daniel Noel considers¹⁸ how shamanism has been imagined by Western scholars, storytellers and seekers.¹⁹ The *Tungusic* term *saman* (shaman) has been known in the West for at least three

¹⁵

The spiritual leader of Congregation B'nai Avraham of the Chabad Lubavitch movement in Brooklyn, New York.

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These books include: Aaron L. Raskin, *Letters Of Light: A Mystical Journey Through The Hebrew Alphabet* (New York: Sichos In English, 2003); and Thomas D. Zweifel and Aaron L. Raskin, *The Rabbi and the CEO: The Ten Commandments for 21st Century Leaders* (New York: Select Books, 2008).

¹⁷

The Noahide Laws are seven moral imperatives said to have been given by God as a binding code for all humanity. These are the prohibition of idolatry, murder, theft, sexual immorality, blasphemy, eating flesh taken from a living animal; and the establishment of courts of law. Zweifel and Raskin, *The Rabbi and the CEO*, 258.

¹⁸

hundred years, being associated with contradictory notions, namely, whether it is a religion or not.²⁰ Perhaps the most significant precursor to a broader understanding of the term in the West is the work of Mircea Eliade²¹ who, while having been critiqued, has also been influential in setting up the early framework for understanding this phenomenon. Eliade defines shamanism as “techniques of ecstasy”.²² During trance, the shaman's spirit is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky, descend to the underworld or travel in the middle earthly realm. This shamanic flight implies a sacred cosmology, often identified in tribal and other myths and beliefs structuring reality in a three-layered cosmology: the upper world, the earth and the lower world.²³ The vocation of the shaman allows his or her spirit to travel through these planes inhabited by spirit-beings. For example, Tamang shamans maintain that they magically fly through heavens and underworlds where they encounter Gods.²⁴ Shamans often utilise a variation of an axis mundi, a central axis linking the realms, often represented by a cosmic tree, sacred mountain or ladder. According to Eliade, “The pole (= axis mundi), the stripped tree trunk whose top emerges through the upper opening of the yurt (and which symbolizes the cosmic tree) is conceived as a ladder leading to heaven.”²⁵ Common shamanic initiatory rites enumerated by Eliade, include a period of seclusion, symbolic descent to the underworld and hypnotic sleep induced by narcotic drinks²⁶ or awaiting a vision of

Daniel C. Noel, *The Soul of Shamanism* (New York, NY: Continuum), 1999.

19

Noel, 9.

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Noel, 22.

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Noel, 23.

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Eliade, M. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Bollingen Paperbacks, 2004 (1951)), 5.

23

Eliade, *Shamanism*, 284.

24

Larry G. Peters, “Trance, Initiation, and Psychotherapy,” *American Ethnologist*, 9, issue 1 (1982): 22.

25

Eliade, M., *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1987 (1957)), 53.

26

Eliade, *Shamanism*, 64.

the tutelary animal following intoxication by a psychoactive substance.²⁷

Shamanic power is supposedly derived directly from Gods, ancestors or spirits,²⁸ as well as master shamans.²⁹ According to Shirokogoroff, the shaman's basic attribute is the “mastery of the spirits,”³⁰ where the shaman controls spirits by using his body as a vessel into which spirits may be induced and exorcised.³¹

Eliade considers the manifestation of the sacred as something “wholly other”, revealing a fixed central point and detaching a territory from the surrounding milieu as the central axis that ontologically founds the world.³² Eliade’s idea of the “centre” in religious traditions is important to his treatment of shamanism and it has been critiqued.³³ Noel questioned Eliade’s objectivity, due to Eliade's “oscillation between research of a scientific nature and literary imagination”³⁴ and the recurrent imagery of ascent.³⁵ He criticizes Eliade for unduly relying on ancient Near Eastern cosmological models to support his imagery of sacred centres and ascents. Noel dismisses shamanism as “a made-up, modern, Western category.”³⁶

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Eliade, *Shamanism*, 109.

28

Eliade, *Shamanism*, 82.

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“It is only this two-fold initiation – ecstatic and didactic – that transforms the candidate from a possible neurotic into a shaman recognised by his particular society” Eliade, *Shamanism*, 14.

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Shirokogoroff, S. , *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1935), 268, 271.

31

Peters, *Trance, Initiation, and Psychotherapy*, 21.

32

Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 21.

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Noel, 29.

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Noel, 29.

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Noel, 32.

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Noel, 40.

Wallis observed that Eliade sought examples of celestial ascent and a supreme being as a means to authenticate his belief that shamanistic religions displayed a global Ur-Christianity.³⁷ However, Wallis concludes that Eliade's unique conception of the human spirit could have provided him with the perspective for writing *Shamanism*.

Consistent with Eliade's original concept, Krupp sees the central pillar of the Tungus, based on the North Star as the cosmic polar axis that connects heaven with the earth and the underworld, associated with stability. According to Krupp, the shamanic world view comprises an upper sky realm, the earthly middle world and the underworld, all containing spirits that can interact with people. It was thought that the Tungus shamans made contacts with spirits, as hunters and gatherers of supernatural power. Similarly, the final initiation of the Tamang shamans represents the soul's journey to the highest heaven to behold the supreme deity enthroned at the top of a golden staircase.³⁸

Some scholars have applied elements of shamanism to early forms of Christianity. For example, Mount suggests that the form of early Christianity associated with Paul could be characterized as a spirit possessing cult³⁹ where Paul establishes communities possessed by the spirit of Jesus. Two manifestations of such possession are prophesying and speaking in tongues⁴⁰ on which Paul bases his authority as a "spirit master".⁴¹ Mount argues that Paul the Apostle, thus, employs the category of a shaman. Lewis takes a similar approach⁴² treating Paul's blinding "road

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Robert J. Wallis, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans* (London: Routledge, 2003), 37.

38

Peters, 28.

39

Christopher Mount, "1 Corinthians 11:3-16: Spirit Possession and Authority in a Non-Pauline Interpolation", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 124, No. 2 (2005): 316.

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Mount, 236-237.

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Mount, 238.

42

I.M. Lewis, *Religion in Context: Cults and Charisma* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 105-21.

to Damascus” spiritual vocation and his reported ascent to the heavens⁴³ as consistent with shamanic vision and flight. Furthermore, Ashton seeks to understand Paul's religious life by comparing his experiences with shamanism.⁴⁴ Ashton concludes that Paul's effectiveness in promoting the growth of Christianity was largely due to demonstrations of spiritual power, comparable to those of a shaman.⁴⁵ Ellington, in his review of Aston's *Religion of Paul the Apostle*, concludes that Aston's portrait of Paul's religious life and the comparison with shamanism enables an imaginative entry to Paul's life and world.⁴⁶

Several elements in shamanism find parallels in Western concepts of heaven: an individual's ascent into the heavenly realms with aid from spirit beings. Furthermore, the qualifications for ascent may be a combination of special techniques and privileged interactions with spirit-beings. The phenomenon of shamanism, as re-imagined in the West, offers a framework for examining the heavenly journey, as envisaged in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and in those cultures that predated or paralleled it.

Chapter 3 Ancient Egypt and Early Antiquity

This chapter will examine the concepts of heaven prevalent in the groups that influenced early Jewish people i.e., ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Persia.

According to Wright, understanding the broader social context in which early Jewish and Christian ideas of heaven developed begins by examining the beliefs of ancient Israel's neighbours about the heavenly realm.⁴⁷ This chapter considers the concepts of heaven prevalent in the groups

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Mount, 321.

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John Ashton, *The Religion of Paul the Apostle* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2000), 29-61.

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See also Dustin W. Ellington, “The Religion of Paul the Apostle by John Ashton, Review”, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 121, No. 4 (Winter, 2002) 774-777.

46

Ellington, 776.

47

J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ix.

that influenced early Jewish people i.e., ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Persia. The *Pyramid texts*, *Coffin texts*, the *Book of the Dead (Coming Forth by Day)* and other archaeological resources provide information on ancient Egyptian concepts of heaven, the afterlife and funerary practices, including the afterlife topography, the human constitution, and the navigation of the deceased in the hereafter. The relevance of magical expertise, moral integrity and social standing of the deceased as criteria for a favourable afterlife are also considered. The mythology and epic tales of Mesopotamia and Sumeria are examined, with respect to images and conceptions of the heavenly realms, together with the possibility of human access to them. Egyptian and Mesopotamian traditions concerning the afterlife are compared. Persian Zoroastrianism is examined with reference to its dualistic eschatology.

Ancient Egypt participated in the cultural milieu of the ancient Near East and influenced its neighbours, including the people of Israel.⁴⁸ The *Pyramid Texts* from the Old Kingdom (2686-2160 BCE) consist of prayers and rituals that aid the Pharaoh in his post-mortem journey into the celestial realm.

“They made a ladder for N., that he might ascend to heaven on it. The double doors of heaven are open for N.”⁴⁹

From the Middle Kingdom (2040-1633 BCE), the *Coffin Texts*⁵⁰ are inscribed inside coffins to guide the deceased through the dangers of the afterlife. The *Pyramid Texts* and the *Coffin Texts* were revised and expanded during the New Kingdom (1558-1085 BCE) in a funerary collection, known as the *Book of the Coming Forth by Day* or the *Book of the Dead*.⁵¹ Campion observes that the soul, the *Ba*, might travel either to the sun's rising, to Orion or the circumpolar stars, in order to achieve immortality.⁵² Regarding the individual's composition, Zabkar disputes the dualistic view

⁴⁸ Wright, 3.

⁴⁹ Samuel A.B. Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co, 1952) Utterance 572.

⁵⁰ R. O. Faulker, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*. Vol. 1-III. (Stilwell, KS: Digireads, 1973 (2007)).

⁵¹ Eva Von Dassow (Ed.), Raymond Faulkner (Trans.), James Wasserman (Foreword), *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day* (San Francisco:Chronicle Books, 1994, 1998, 2008).

⁵² Nicholas Campion. *The Dawn of Astrology* (London: Continuum, 2008), 94.

of the body being divided into corpse and *Ankh* or *Ba*, saying that all of these remain connected in the Egyptian thought.⁵³ Hence, the phrase “Ba to heaven”, as found in funerary texts, may express the wish that the *Ba* may enjoy freedom of movement in the heavenly realms, but not be permanently limited to it. After an efficacious ritual has been performed, the individual is “risen and made whole,” in possession of physical qualities and he enters a new glorified life, conceived in physical terms.⁵⁴

According to ancient Egyptians, there are three main regions: earth, the land of the living; the sky - a watery expanse stretched above the earth like a canopy; and the Duat - the Otherworld or the Underworld. The realm above the earth could be depicted in four basic forms: a bird, a cow, a woman and a flat plane.⁵⁵ A depiction of the Goddess Nut from 323-30 BCE represents the Goddess as she bends over the earth, with dual heavens comprising the sphere of the Moon and the upper Nut as the sphere of the Sun. Another depiction of the heavenly realm is a pastoral paradise, known as the Field of Reeds.⁵⁶ The Duat is a complex other-worldly region, including Osiris and the kingdom of the dead. Beyond the sky, earth and Duat lies the limitless expanse of primal waters.

The Field of Reeds is described in three utterances in the *Book of the Dead* (110,109,149), as a landscape of waterways leading through fields, where abundant crops grow, in a place where Gods and the blessed dead live in peace. It contains islands, mounds, fields, pathways, caves, creatures, and fantastic elements, such as lakes of fire and trees of turquoise. Mounds of sand and gravel rising above the flood plain signified the primeval mound that first emerged from the waters of chaos.

The path of the sun, moon and planets, which the Egyptians called the “Winding Waterway”, divided the sky into northern and southern parts. The northern sky contained the Field of Rest (or

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Louis V. Zabkar, “Herodotus and the Egyptian Idea of Immortality,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 22, no.1 (1963): 61.

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Zabkar, 62.

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Wright, 6.

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Wright, 13.

Offerings) and the southern sky the Field of Reeds.⁵⁷ In the *Pyramid Texts*, the deceased are purified in the Field of Reeds before ascending to the sky, but in the *Coffin Texts* the Field of Reeds becomes a destination for the deceased, as in the *Book of the Dead*. In the *Book of the Dead*, it is not clear whether the Field of Reeds is located in the sky or under the earth, but according to utterance 149, it seems to be in the east at the point where Ra ends his nightly journey. It resembles the Nile flood plain at harvest time, similar to the best aspects of the earth. Utterance 110 describes ploughing, reaping and eating, drinking and copulating in the Field.⁵⁸ The deceased are reunited with their parents and then sail to meet the Gods. Any work required is performed by small figures placed in the tomb.⁵⁹ The tomb provides access between the world of the living and the dead for the mummy in the burial chamber. This marks the body's transition from an “inanimate corpse to a functional complex of physical and spiritual components.”⁶⁰ The ability to “come forth by day” i.e., for a spirit to leave the tomb, is crucial and names the funerary collection.

The funerary texts span diverse ages and were never fully synthesized; hence, the afterlife journey was not recorded in a consistent sequence.⁶¹ However, the *Book of the Dead* (utterances 144-147) describes multiple gates through which the deceased pass to reach Osiris. Utterances 144-146 provide a procedure for passing through seven gates, by correctly saying the names of the fierce guardians. The deceased review their lives before Osiris, including the weighing of the heart. Thoth, the God of learning and magic, asks ritual questions.⁶² The deceased must answer correctly and

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Taylor, 242.

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See also *Coffin Text* 467.

59

Book of the Dead, Utterance 6.

60

Taylor, 132.

61

Taylor, 134.

62

“Why have you come?”

“To be anointed.”

“What is your condition?”

“I am free of every sin.”

“To whom shall I announce you?”

declare themselves to be innocent of a list of offences, thereby suggesting that the test may have originated in priestly initiations, e.g., “I have not stolen the Gods' offerings”. The deceased, led by psychopomp Anubis, would then be judged in the “Weighing of the Heart”⁶³ against a feather of the Goddess Ma'at, embodying truth and justice. If the scales balance the deceased, the Gods assign them a good afterlife.⁶⁴ Utterance 30B guards against the heart of the deceased admitting to sins, so ritual knowledge safeguards the destiny of the deceased. However, if all does not go well, the deceased is given over to a wrathful entity called “the Devourer” for punishments, including decapitation, dismemberment and burning.

According to Smith, the ancient Egyptian concept of the human being comprised a corporeal self and a social self and the individual could only function as a member of a properly structured society. Death severed the links between parts of the body as well as between the individual and his social group.⁶⁵ Osiris provided a model by which this rupture could be reversed, as the God had undergone resurrection and restoration. The Egyptian *Book of the Dead* states “Heaven hath thy soul (*ba*), earth hath thy body”⁶⁶, which could be interpreted as the soul possessing the freedom to enter heaven. Just as Osiris overcame the injustice of his murder, so did ancient Egyptians hope to achieve immortality through the embalming process. Furthermore, a favourable assessment of the deceased's character would ensure his or her integration into the society of Gods and blessed spirits in the afterlife.⁶⁷ The rituals were believed to make the deceased a follower of Osiris and gain admission to his presence in the underworld.

“To him whose ceiling is fire, whose walls are living uraeii, whose house floor is the flood.”

“Who is that?”

“Osiris.” Taylor, 206-7.

63

Utterance 125.

64

Taylor, 215.

65

Mark Smith, “Osiris and the Deceased,” in *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, (2008): 2.

66

Wright, *Early History of Heaven*, 115.

67

Smith, *Osiris and the Deceased*, 3.

That the *Coffin Texts* expanding access to heavenly realms beyond members of royalty represents a democratization of the afterlife, is disputed by Smith, who warns against coming to conclusions about changes in religious practice in the absence of all the relevant evidence.⁶⁸ He suggests that the expectations of royalty and the Egyptian nobility of the afterlife may not have differed much over time. According to Champion, the funereal texts could be interpreted as ecstatic rites to be conducted in life, in which the king, shaman-like, travelled to the sun and stars to maintain the link between heaven and earth.⁶⁹ The Egyptian notion of cyclic time may have made it possible to bring an experience of the future into the present, so that the realities of death and the afterlife could be experienced in this life. The Egyptian concept of non-linear cyclic divine time without a sharp temporal distinction between life and death and their beliefs could provide a framework for a process culminating in the individual assuming the likeness of the sun God.⁷⁰ The Egyptian cosmos was a moral one with divine judgment with the condition of the heart as a key to the afterlife. However, a mystical technology and magical mastery was an essential ingredient for reaching the desired destination.

Ancient Mesopotamian traditions

Mesopotamian beliefs from the late third millennium to the middle of the first millennium BCE provide further intellectual contexts in which biblical beliefs may be placed.⁷¹ The creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*, records Mesopotamian beliefs about the basic tripartite structure of the cosmos: the heavenly realms (of the high Gods), earth (realm of humans) and the netherworld (of the deceased and mortuary Gods). Heaven is subdivided into three levels comprised of different coloured stone⁷² and two terrestrial [worlds] plus the underworld.⁷³ Sumerians built their temples

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Mark Smith, "Democratization of the Afterlife", in *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, (2009): 10-11.

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Campion, *Dawn of Astrology*, 90.

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Edward F. Wente, "Mysticism in Pharaonic Egypt", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (1982): 178-179.

71

Wright, 26.

72

Wright, 57 citing Akkadian text KAR 307.

on the summits of artificial hills or ziggurats, where a person is believed to be appearing before the God in heaven.⁷⁴ Priests performed divination by observing the sky to obtain information from the Gods. “Sky and earth both produce portents though appearing separately, they are not separate (because) sky and earth are related.”⁷⁵

The Mesopotamians saw the grave as the final destiny of mankind. Punishment for evil deeds comes on earth and there is no concept of humans uniting with the Gods in heaven after death. “When Gods created humanity, they appointed death for humanity and kept life in their own hands.”⁷⁶

The earthly paradise of Dilmun is normally reserved for Gods, with the exception of Ziusudra who, like Noah, survived the great Flood and was transferred there. Etana, the first king after the Flood, asked an eagle to carry him to the heavenly realms to obtain the “plant of birth” that would provide a dynastic heir. The poem emphasizes the vast chasm separating heaven and earth. Humans have no place in the divine, heavenly realm and even the great antediluvian king Etana was forced to declare “I cannot go up into heaven!”⁷⁷ As Gilgamesh said, “Who can go up to heaven, my friend? Only the Gods dwell with the Shamash forever. Mankind can number his days. Whatever he may achieve, it is only wind.”⁷⁸

High Gods are considered to be living as part of a divine assembly in heaven, where they decide the fate of Gods and men. Ultimate power and authority resided with the chief God, similar to an earthly king. The *Kirta Epic* states that El is the chief God in the Ugaritic pantheon, presiding over the other Gods in the Council of El. However, in the *Baal Cycle*, Baal replaces El as Chief

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The light of a star or planet when close to the horizon separates into three rays - blue-violet above, green in the middle and red below and perhaps was the basis for the colours of the three heavens. Erica Reiner and David Pingree., *Babylonian Planetary Omens 2*. 1981, 19.

⁷⁴

Wright, 37.

⁷⁵

A.L. Oppenheim, “A Babylonian Diviners Manual”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 33, (1974): 204.

⁷⁶

Morris Jastrow and Albert T. Clay, *An Old Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), x.ii. 4-5.

⁷⁷

Wright, 45.

⁷⁸

This is paralleled by Ecc. 4:16 “Surely this also is vanity and a chasing after wind.”

God. Among Iron Age (1200-586 BCE) Israelites, Yahweh is the chief God of the divine council.⁷⁹

Persia

The Book of Daniel records that the Persians occupied Babylon in 539 BCE and the Jewish prophets were influenced by the religion of their new rulers.⁸⁰ Zoroastrianism holds that the material world is a theatre for struggle between good (Ahura-Mazda) and evil (Ahriman). Before the teachings of Zoroaster, it was believed that after death the spirit of the deceased lingered on earth for three days before departing to a subterranean kingdom to live a shadowy existence, depending on their living descendants to satisfy their needs through ritual offerings.⁸¹ Later, some members of higher social groups might ascend to “cross the separator” bridge to heaven. Unworthy souls attempting the passage would fall off the bridge into the kingdom of the dead. The concept of bodily resurrection was important in Zoroastrianism:

“With the hope of attaining Paradise there developed a belief in the resurrection of the body...it came to be held that within the first year after death the bones of the physical body would be raised up, clothed in immortal flesh, (and) be reunited with the soul in heaven.”⁸²

Eventually, people of all classes hoped to attain Paradise based on each soul's ethical achievements.⁸³ Mithra (deity of truth and judgment) presides over the tribunal of Gods, holding the scales of justice that weigh the soul's thoughts and deeds. If good prevails, the soul is judged worthy of Paradise; however, if the scales sink to the bad side, a monster takes the deceased to hell.⁸⁴ Those few souls, whose bad and good qualities are in balance, go to a place where they lead

⁷⁹

1 Kings 22:19-23; Job 1-2

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Campion, *Dawn of Astrology*, 77.

⁸¹

Boyce, page 12.

⁸²

Boyce, p.14.

⁸³

Boyce, 27.

⁸⁴

Mills, L.H. (trans.) “Yasna,” in *Sacred Books of the East* (American Edition, 1898), 32.13.

a grey existence lacking both joy and sorrow.⁸⁵

The story of the soul's journey from death to the afterlife is contained in the Middle Persian or Pahlavi text *Dastan-i Menok-i Krat*.⁸⁶ The bodily resurrection is followed by the Last Judgment, in order to divide the righteous from the wicked. The soul then unites with the “future body”⁸⁷. All the metal on earth will melt and mankind must pass through a river destroying the wicked.⁸⁸ Then, Ahura Mazda and the Gods will make the mystical *soma*, conferring immortality on the resurrected bodies of the blessed in a garden Paradise.⁸⁹

A heavenly journey was undertaken by the high priest Kartir (third Century CE), who reported, in a now fragmentary form, the existence of heaven and hell. Psychotropic drugs were taken in a ritualistic setting to help the adept travel to the next world and prayers were used to protect the journeyers from harm.⁹⁰ The *Book of Arda Viraf*⁹¹ contained a similar account. Arda Viraf is chosen by lot to travel to heaven and learn ways of resolving the crisis caused by the arrival of Alexander the Great. He is given a special drug⁹² to enable him to visit heaven and hell, the respective abodes of the deceased, both righteous and sinful. According to Viraf, the visionary

85

Yasna, 331.

86

R.C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (Whitefish, MT: Literary Licensing, 2011), 302-5.

87

Yasna, 30.7.

88

E. W. West (trans.) “The Bundahishn (“Creation”), or Knowledge from the Zand,” in *Sacred Books of the East*, 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1897), XXXIV. 18-19.

89

E.W. West, (trans.) “Pahlavi Texts,” in *Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1860) Pahl. Riv. Dd. XL.VIII, 99,100, 107.

90

Alan F. Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in the Religions of the West* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 93.

91

Martin Haug (trans.) “Book of Arda Viraf,” in *Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East, Volume VII: Ancient Persia*, edited by Charles F. Horne (Bombay: Govt. Central Book Depot, 1872, 1917).

92

Possibly the *soma* believed to be prepared by the Gods that conferred immortality was based on the practice of taking psychoactive substances to facilitate visionary experiences.

journey to heaven to seek wisdom from the Gods is the same as that undertaken upon death. In heaven, Viraf finds a “star track”, a “moon track,” and a “sun track” where he sees the souls of different kinds of righteous people, for example:

I put forth the first footstep to the star track, on Humat, the place where good thoughts (*humat*) are received with hospitality. And I saw those souls of the pious whose radiance...was glittering as the stars; and their throne and seat were under the radiance, and splendid and full of glory. And I asked Srosh the pious, and Adar the angel, thus: 'Which place is this? And which people are these?' (They) said thus: 'This place is the star track; and those are the souls who, in the world, offered no prayers ... exercised no ... rulership or chieftainship. Through other good works they have become pious.'⁹³

Still higher in the heavenly realm, he encounters the creator God Ohrzmad, orders of angels and other groups of the blessed. The torments of those in hell are described vividly. At the conclusion, Ohrzmad instructs Viraf to exhort the world to piety and performance of good works.

Zoroastrian doctrines include individual judgment, post-mortem destinations of heaven and hell, the resurrection of the body, the last judgment for the populace and immortality for the reunited soul and body. Achievement of a blissful afterlife for the individual depends on the sum of his thoughts, words and deeds, without the possibility of any intervention from a divine being to alter this. On the Day of Judgment, each had to bear responsibility for the fate of his soul.

Discussion

Some common themes emerge in the examination of the cultures indicated over the periods examined: Gods live in the sky and affect what happens on earth. There is a separation of sacred (in the temple or heaven) and profane (mundane earthly space and activity). Furthermore, a tripartite concept of the universe was shared: the underworld, the earth and an upper heavenly realm, having multiple levels. Access to the Gods in heaven is possible at temple sites, which are often elevated, either naturally or as a temple in the form of a pyramid.

Images of heaven include a fertile plain, a garden, a royal court and a place among the stars, sometimes having multiple levels. These levels contain a series of guarded gateways or portals

⁹³

Haug, *The Book of Arda Viraf*, 7:1-9.

through which it was necessary to pass in order to progress. Entrance could be gained by the correct conduct, rituals or offerings. The complex funerary traditions of ancient Egypt may have provided a ritual framework, within which initiates could experience the anticipated post-mortem state while still alive.

The use of psychoactive plants as spiritual sacraments is widespread in cultures practicing shamanism, and has been linked to the Indo-Aryan *soma* of Eurasia.⁹⁴ Their use in inducing the necessary trance-state to undertake heavenly journeys is notable in the Zoroastrian tradition and, perhaps, there is a connection with the Gods' *soma* of immortality to be given to the blessed after the final judgment and resurrection.

Chapter 4 Classical Greece and Rome

This chapter will examine the early concepts of heaven and the afterlife as expressed in the epic poetry of Homer and Hesiod, along with the concepts of judgement of the deceased based on personal conduct during life and the afterlife. The writings of the philosophers Plato, Pythagorus and Aristotle were influential in developing later ideas of heaven as a post-mortem residence, and the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos appears. The mysteries of Mithras are an example of teachings concerning the heavenly journey of initiates during this period. The results of the interaction of Greek, Babylonian and Egyptian culture in the Hellenistic period are identified. Comparisons are made with earlier concepts of heaven, particularly Egyptian and Mesopotamian, including consideration of the views of Franz Cumont on possible links between them.

Greek thought in the Homeric Age (ca 1200-700 BCE), as expressed in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Hesiod's *Theogony*, saw the living dwelling on the earth, while the dead resided in Hades, the underworld. The *Odyssey* contains Odysseus's encounter with the shades of Hades, a place “where there is no joy.”⁹⁵ Humans only went to heaven with an exceptional act by the

94

Kenneth, W. Tupper, “Entheogens and Existential Intelligence: The use of Plant Teachers as Cognitive Tools,” *Canadian Journal of Education*, 27, no.4 (2002): 499.

95

Homer. *The Odyssey*. A.T. Murray (trans.) (Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann, Ltd. 1919), 11:90.

Olympians,⁹⁶ but even in Homeric times, extraordinary mortals could go to the Elysian Fields or Isles of the Blessed situated at the ends of the earth, after death:

“But for yourself, Menelaus, fostered by Zeus... it is not ordained that you should die... but to the Elysian plain and the ends of the earth will the immortals convey you... where life is easiest for men.”⁹⁷

Pythagoreans and Orphics believed⁹⁸ that after death the immortal soul attempted to reunite with the universal soul in the heavenly realm from whence it came. For example, Aristophanes⁹⁹ confirms that men are turned into stars after death:

Servant: Is it true, what they tell us, that men are turned into stars after death?

Trygaeus: Quite true.

Servant: And who is the star over there now?

Trygaeus: Ion of Chios. The one who once wrote a poem about the dawn; as soon as he got up there, everyone called him the Morning Star.

Servant: And those stars like sparks that plough up the air as they dart across the sky?

Trygaeus: They are the rich leaving the feast with a lantern and a light inside it.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, Pindar¹⁰¹ describes the judgment awaiting reckless souls and the rewards of the righteous:

96

Such as Ganymedes, who was taken to heaven to “pour drink for the gods in the house of Zeus” . *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, Hugh G. Evelyn-White (trans) (Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1914), 5:200.

97

Homer, *Odyssey*, 4.561-568.

98

Wright, 100.

99

Greek dramatist, 450-388 BCE.

100

Aristophanes “Peace,” in *The Complete Greek Drama*, vol. 2. Eugene O’Neill, Jr. (New York: Random House, 1938), 830-840.

101

Greek lyric poet, ca 518-438 BCE.

“... that the reckless souls of those who have died on earth immediately pay the penalty... But ... the good receive a life free from toil...Those who have persevered ... follow Zeus' road to the end, to the tower of Cronus, where ocean breezes blow around the island of the blessed, and flowers of gold are blazing....¹⁰²”

While according to the early Greeks, Mt. Olympus and the heavenly realm were for the Gods alone, by the fourth century BCE, the heavenly realm was considered to be a post-mortem residence. For example, a memorial to the Athenians who died in the battle of Potidaia in 432 BCE depicts their souls as attaining immortality after death: “the ether has received their souls, while the earth has their bodies.”

Plato¹⁰³ in *Timaeus* and the *Republic* explains the soul's origin in, and return to, the stars¹⁰⁴, describing the earth as a sphere around which the planets and fixed stars revolve.¹⁰⁵ During his travels, Plato may have encountered purifying rites that blended Orphism with the Eleusinian mysteries, Dionysiac worship and Pythagorean belief, which became the source for the concepts in *Phaedo*, where virtue purifies and wisdom is a purifying rite. “From Orphic rites and Eleusinian mysteries Plato derived the belief that the initiated, the purified, would ascend to the Gods, while the uninitiated, the impure, would wallow in the mud.”¹⁰⁶

In *Phaedrus*, the soul originates above and the highest God is beyond heaven:

For those that are called immortal, when they reach the top, pass outside and ...behold the things outside of the heaven... the mind, the pilot of the soul ...beholds absolute justice,

102

Pindar. Odes. Diane Aronson Svarlien (trans). 1990. 2.52-70.

103

Greek philosopher 428/427-348/347 BCE.

104

Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2012) 149.

105

Plato. “Timaeus,” in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9, W.R.M. Lamb (trans.) (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1925), 38c-d.

106

Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, “Pure of Heart: From Ancient Rites to Renaissance Plato”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Jan., 2002), 48.

temperance, and knowledge, ... abides in the real eternal absolute;...after which, passing down again within the heaven, it goes home...”¹⁰⁷

In *Timaeus*, Plato says that souls are made by the demiurge in numbers equal to the stars - “And when He had compounded the whole He divided it into souls equal in number to the stars, and each several soul He assigned to one star”.¹⁰⁸ The soul that is able to overcome its passions may return to its native star.¹⁰⁹ In Plato's Myth of Er in the *Republic*, the hero dies and his soul visits the underworld and the heavens where he witnesses souls being rewarded or punished according to their behaviour on earth, before returning to tell the tale. Through metempsychosis, souls choose new lives, drink of Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, and then proceed to their birth from the stars via the planetary spheres, while the three Moirae or Fates spin the web of necessity within which each soul must live.

An evil life leaves scars on the soul that can be seen by three judges who view souls: Rhadamanthus, Aecus and Minos are stationed in the afterlife meadow at a place where two paths diverge, one to the Isles of the Blessed and the other to Tartarus.¹¹⁰ Souls' destinations are determined by their scars as being either curable or incurable and then assigned to the appropriate place in the underworld. The curable may go to prison in Hades, where by suffering and seeing the torment of the incurables, they eventually enter the Isles of the Blessed (527d-e).¹¹¹

Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* illustrates a similar Roman belief that people find rewards in the heavenly realm for living a noble life. "To all those who have saved, succoured, or exalted their

107

Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246c7-d1, 247c2-7.

108

Plato, *Timaeus*, 41d8.

109

Plato, *Timaeus*, 41e1-42b4.

110

Plato, *Gorgias*, 524c-e.

111

The negative conduct includes : false oaths, lying, boasting, ugliness, arrogant power, insolence, and incontinence; while the righteous on the other hand live piously, with truth, minds his or her own business, is good and noble and practices virtue. Gary A. Stilwell, *Afterlife – Postmortem Judgments in Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece*, (Lincoln:iUniverse, 2005) 15.

fatherland, there is assigned a fixed place in heaven, where they will enjoy everlasting bliss, for it is from heaven that they who guide and preserve states have descended, thither to reascend.”

Aristotle (384-322 BCE), in his treatise “On the Heavens”, proposes that each of the heavenly bodies encircles earth in its own sphere. The heavenly realm from the ether down to the moon was characterized by perfection and unchanging order, while the lower realms became increasingly disorderly. Aristotle's cosmology was essentially atheist in nature, but he shared the assumption with Plato that humans inhabited an ordered cosmos in which they were directly connected with the stars and planets.¹¹²

The geocentric model is most readily identified with Ptolemy¹¹³, even though it was not solely his innovation. In this system, eight planetary spheres are associated with the seven planets and the fixed stars, as contained in Ptolemy's *Almagest*, a compilation of astronomical speculations and calculations. In this geocentric model, a stationary earth is situated in the centre of the universe, encircled by planetary spheres that partake of the character of the respective celestial body it was named after.

Mysteries of Mithras

The mysteries of Mithras were an influential movement throughout the Roman Empire, featuring a ritual representation of the soul ascending, through the planetary spheres, towards the heavenly realm, in order to help initiates rehearse the ascent while still living.¹¹⁴ By the second Century CE, the Mithraic mysteries had spread throughout the Empire, although it declined with the rise of Christianity in the fourth Century.

Few historical records are available about the mysteries of Mithras, whose central iconography is the Tauroctony, showing the Mithras killing a bull. However, understanding may be gained from the buildings and art of the period, as well as the commentary of *Porphyry*,¹¹⁵ that

¹¹²

Campion, *Astrology and Cosmology*, 156.

¹¹³

Claudius Ptolemy of Alexandria, ca100-170 CE.

¹¹⁴

Campion, *Astrology and Cosmology*, 158.

¹¹⁵

provides a valuable contemporary perspective in *De Antro*:

“The ancients... properly consecrated a cave to the world... mystically signifying the descent of the soul into the sublunary regions, and its regression from it, (and there) initiate the mystic”¹¹⁶

“...Cancer is the gate through which souls descend; but Capricorn that through which they ascend... the southern gates are not the avenues of the Gods, but of souls ascending to the Gods.”¹¹⁷

Beck presented the Mithraic cave as a cosmic model¹¹⁸ with the function of guiding the initiates up and down again along the route of souls”.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, the “Mithras Liturgy”¹²⁰ includes a prayer intended to enable the initiated to ascend to the heavenly realm:

“... I request immortality, O initiates of this power... which the great God Helios Mithras ordered to be revealed to me by his archangel, so that I alone may ascend into heaven as an inquirer and behold the universe.”¹²¹

The interaction of Greek, Babylonian and Egyptian culture in the Hellenistic period resulted in a technical approach to the influence of the heavens, including the *Corpus Hermeticum*. According to the Hermetic texts, the soul returns to God via the planetary spheres.¹²² As it passes

Porphyry, neoplatonic philosopher, 234 - c. 305 CE.

116

Porphyry, *De Antro*, 2.

117

Porphyry, *De Antro*, 10.

118

Beck, *Mithras Cult*, 104.

119

Beck, *Mithras Cult*, 106.

120

David Ulansky, *The origins of the Mithraic mysteries: Cosmology and salvation in the ancient world*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 105.

121

Hans Dieter Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, including the Demotic Spells*, Vol 1. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 48.

122

Walter Scott, *Hermetica*, Vol. 1: *The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus* (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala, 1985) Libellus I.25,

each sphere, the soul discards the vices associated with that planet; for example, as it passes the sphere of Mercury it abandons trickery, Venus voluptuousness, Mars recklessness and so on.¹²³ The planets are depicted as administrators or custodians determining the heavenward progress of human beings.¹²⁴

As discussed below, Cumont observes:

All these doctrines...taught that souls, descended from the light above, were raised to the region of the stars, where they dwelt forever with these radiant divinities. This eschatology of "Chaldean" origin gradually displaced all others under the Empire. The Elysian Fields, which not only the ancient Greeks, but also the followers of Isis and Serapis still located in the depths of the earth, were transferred to the ether which leaves the stars, and the subterranean world became henceforth the gloomy abode of malevolent spirits.¹²⁵

Discussion

In the Homeric Age, Greek beliefs paralleled those of Mesopotamia that humans and Gods dwelt in separate realms and that the deceased were consigned to a dismal underworld, with few exceptions. However, over time, it was considered that morally virtuous individuals resided in the heavenly ethers after death. In Egypt, the non-physical elements of the person along with the embalmed body live on, whereas in Greece, only the psyche survives death and the bodily elements cease to exist.¹²⁶ The soul goes through purgation before returning to a physical body, unless it achieves the highest reward of heaven or deserved punishment in Tartarus; whereas, in Egypt, there was only a happy afterlife or torment, then oblivion.

The judging of souls in Plato's *Gorgias* shows that the moral conduct of the deceased, while alive, determines their post-mortem state as in Persia and Egypt; the passing of a soul through the planetary spheres to reach the fixed stars, in some ways, paralleled the passing of the soul through

129.

¹²³

Cumont, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans*, 108.

¹²⁴

Libellus I.15-16, in Scott, *Hermetica*, vol.1, 123.

¹²⁵ Franz Cumont, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans, American lectures on the history of religions*, series of 1911-1912, New York and London, G. P. Putnam, [1912], 108.

¹²⁶

Stilwell, *Afterlife*, 175.

the Egyptian Duat gateways, in order to attain immortality through magical knowledge and personal integrity. Furthermore, Taylor suggests that the Field of Reeds could have been the origin of the Elysian Fields, as “Elysian” may have been derived from the Egyptian word for reeds.¹²⁷ The blessed finding their place among the stars appears to find a parallel in the Zoroastrian “star track” and other celestial realms, as well as the journey of Arda Viraf, which, in some ways, resembles the journey in the Myth of Er.

While there are some similarities between structural elements of the heavenly realms examined, Cumont goes too far in attributing everything to a “Chaldean eschatology”,¹²⁸ as this would have kept humans and Gods permanently separated. Furthermore, the complex interaction between elements of the individual in ancient Egypt differed from the Greek notion of the soul that separated from the physical body at death and could be reborn, which also has no parallel in Mesopotamian beliefs. Nor is it correct to say, as Cumont did, that the Elysian Fields are located in the underworld like “followers of Isis and Serapis believed.” While in Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI, describes the Elysian Fields as being in Hades, Homer locates them at the end of the earth by the Oceanus River. Moreover, the location of the Field of Reeds is not clear. Nor does Cumont take into account the doctrine of metempsychosis, which has no parallel in Mesopotamian beliefs. However, the notion that the soul and stars are inextricably linked underpins several concepts of human post-mortem destiny.

Chapter 5 Judaism

This chapter will examine Jewish beliefs about heaven through the biblical period to the end of the apocryphal period. Judaism developed in a cultural milieu with a keen interest in celestial events and their influence on earthly life. Its views of the cosmos further developed from the dynamic interaction between ancient Near Eastern and Hellenistic models of the cosmos.¹²⁹

¹²⁷

The Greek pronunciation of *iaru* or *ialu* in Taylor, 243.

¹²⁸

“Chaldean” being a designation of land in southern Babylonia.

¹²⁹

Wright, 199.

Particular attention is given to the apocalyptic traditions of the Merkabah and Hekhalot traditions, which include accounts of heavenly journeys by remarkable Jewish sages and include elaborate descriptions of the heavenly realms and the magical expertise needed to undertake them. The developing concepts of the afterlife are considered, as well as the importance of divine judgement and the resurrection. The prophet Enoch is an early model for ascension and angelification of an individual. Possible parallels with Greek and Persian thought concerning heaven, the afterlife and dualism are considered.

The first book of the Hebrew Bible, Genesis 1:1 states: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” indicating the primacy of heaven and the duality of sky and earth in creation. This became a tripartite structure - heaven or sky above, earth in the middle and the netherworld (*sheol*) below e.g., “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”¹³⁰

The Hebrew word *samayim* can be translated as “heaven” or “sky”. Its suffix “-ayim” signifies plurality, suggesting two or more heavens or the sky’s vast expanse. The floor of heaven is composed of stone: “...they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet, there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.”¹³¹ As the source of rain and weather, on the day the Great Flood started “... all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened.”¹³²

God is depicted as a mighty king, simultaneously dwelling in his Jerusalem temple and in his heavenly palace.¹³³ Furthermore, the celestial realm is populated with the “host of heaven”¹³⁴, which is a vast assembly of celestial beings. The appellation “Yahweh of Hosts” identifies God as the commander-in-chief of a heavenly army. He also acts as a divine judge: “God has taken his

130

Exodus 20:4.

131

Exodus 24:9-10.

132

Gen. 7:11.

133

1 Kings 8, 1 Kings 21:1; 2 Kings 20:18.

134

Jeremiah 33:22.

place in the divine council; in the midst of the Gods he passes judgment”. Since God dwells in heaven, the term *heaven* becomes a metonym for the divine name.

Around the seventeenth or sixteenth centuries BCE, the family tomb became central to understanding the hereafter. The deceased King Solomon “slept with his ancestors”¹³⁵ and Jacob gives instructions for his burial with his kin.¹³⁶ Sheol, as the land of the dead, is cavernous and all-consuming,¹³⁷ where ghosts or shades live. However between the tenth and eighth centuries BCE, scripture indicates that God can save people from Sheol.¹³⁸ Sheol becomes an intermediate resting place for the righteous and a permanent abode for the wicked.¹³⁹ Saul consults the witch of En-Dor in an example of necromancy or mediumship,¹⁴⁰ which was possibly current at the time.

Before the first century BCE, heaven or paradise (*pardes* is Hebrew for “orchard”) is considered the abode of Enoch and Elijah, who had never died but rather ascended to the heavenly realms, becoming models for later ascensions. Later, heaven emerges as the dwelling place of the righteous following the last judgment, which separates from Sheol as the place for the wicked.¹⁴¹ The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead paves the way for the notion of heaven and hell in Psalms¹⁴² and the Book of Daniel:

135

1 Kings 11:43

136

Genesis 49:29-31,33.

137

Isaiah 5:14 “Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure...”

138

Psalm 49:15.

139

Raphael, 75.

140

1 Samuel 28:7.

141

Jubilees 7:29, 22:22, 24:31.

142

Psalm 50:4.

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.¹⁴³

Hekhalot and Merkabah traditions

The texts of the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha provide further insights into Jewish ideas on the hereafter. The apocryphal¹⁴⁴ texts are not present in the Hebrew Bible, but have been included in the Septuagint¹⁴⁵, with some being included in the Catholic Bible. Collections of Jewish speculations in the *hekhalot* (“palace”) and *merkabah* (“chariot”) literature describe God as enthroned in a celestial palace¹⁴⁶ with the throne as an image of absolute authority, which may be animated.¹⁴⁷ They recount tales of the journeys of sages through heavenly palaces or utilize the image of God's chariot. This tradition includes three important elements: the qualities of the ideal mystic, his heavenly journey and the transformation at its conclusion.¹⁴⁸

This literature is “apocalyptic” as defined by Collins:

“a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, describing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”¹⁴⁹

During the Apocryphal period, Heaven becomes the resting place for the deceased righteous. The righteous will “shine like the lights of heaven, and you shall be seen; and the windows of

143

Daniel 12:2.

144

Apocrypha is Greek for “hidden away”.

145

The Greek translation of the Bible.

146

3 *Enoch*; *Synopse*,1; trans. Alexander, 3 Enoch, 255.

147

Isaiah 6:3.

148

Abel, 102.

149

J.J. Collins, *Apocalypse: Morphology of a Genre* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press,1979), 9.

heaven will be opened for you... you will make a great rejoicing like the angels of heaven.”¹⁵⁰ In 1 Enoch, Enoch undertakes a journey through heaven and hell, while 2 Enoch¹⁵¹ describes Enoch's ascent through each of the seven heavens, where mysteries are revealed to him, including the third heaven as a post-mortem realm.¹⁵² 2 Enoch 9 provides the qualifications for entry into paradise:

“This place, O Enoch, is prepared for the righteous, who endure all manner of offence ... who avert their eyes from iniquity, and make righteous judgment, and give bread to the hungry ... walk without fault before the face of the Lord, and serve him alone, and for them is prepared this place for eternal inheritance.”¹⁵³

3 Enoch¹⁵⁴ introduces a third class of deceased souls with intermediate merit and the possibility of post-mortem purification.

While traditional Judaism sees the relationship between God and humanity as divinely initiated and manifesting through the Torah, the Hekhalot and Merkabah traditions emphasize personal mystical encounters with God and the heavenly realms initiated by humans.¹⁵⁵ Students are encouraged to record the accounts of mystics, describing the transmission of esoteric teachings to the Merkabah group.¹⁵⁶

150

1 Enoch 104:2,4.

151

Book of the Secrets of Enoch, written in a Judaeo-Hellenistic environment during the first century BCE.

152

2 Enoch 8:1-8.

153

R.H. Charles (ed.) *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch*, W R Morfill (Trans.) Filiquarian Publishing, 2006.

154

It is also known as *Sefer Ha Hekhalot – The Book of the Heavenly Palaces* or *The Hebrew Book of Enoch* and is attributed to the Palestinian Rabbi Ishmael around the early second century CE.

155

Vita Daphna Arbel, *Beholders of Divine Secrets: Mysticism and Myth in the Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 144.

156

Smith, Morton (trans.). *Hekhalot Rabbati: The Greater Treatise concerning the Palaces of Heaven*. Edited by Don Karr, corrected by Gershom Scholem. (Morton Smith Estate: Digital Brilliance, 1943-7 (2009)), Synopse 228.

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, Jews within these mystical circles perpetuated Temple worship by mystically visiting a surrogate heavenly Temple.¹⁵⁷ In order to ascend safely, the Rabbis had to perform purifying rituals and memorize passwords to obtain safe passage from angels. Candidates had to meet certain criteria for gaining admission: possession of moral qualities, physiognomic and chiromantic criteria and knowledge of related topics.¹⁵⁸ Scholem views this as a variation to the second and third century Gnosticism and Hermeticism, with the ascent of the soul past hostile angels to its divine home, signifying redemption.¹⁵⁹ This journey is preceded by ascetic practices for 12-40 days, including recitation of prayers in a certain posture (head between knees).¹⁶⁰ Increasingly complex magic seals and recitations to subdue hostile angels are needed for each new level, in a kind of passport procedure.¹⁶¹ The ascent becomes ever more dangerous, especially for the unworthy, as the angels and archons storm against the traveller. The idea of the seven heavens through which the soul ascends after death or during a state of ecstasy is reflected in apocrypha, such as the Fourth Book of Ezra or the Ascension of Isaiah.¹⁶² Hekhalot and Hellenistic mysticism have a different concept of God: in the Hekhalot, God is the Holy King of All, rather than an impersonal divinity. The soul that completes the journey sees and hears all, but that is all; unlike later Jewish and Christian beliefs, there is almost no love of God or a mystical union between the soul and God.¹⁶³

The journeyers ascend to heaven in a chariot, by foot, up a ladder or on the wings of a divine being and re-establish a vision of God. An early model of the heavenly journey was provided by the

157

Elior, Rachel. *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism*. David Louvish (trans.) (Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2005), 63.

158

Scholem, 48.

159

Scholem, 49.

160

Scholem, 49.

161

Scholem, 50.

162

Scholem, 54.

163

Scholem, 55

prophet Ezekiel, who was lifted into a divine chariot and transported by the wind¹⁶⁴ and Elijah: “...there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire... and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.”¹⁶⁵

Rabbi Ishmael states, shaman-like: “It is like having a ladder in one's house on which he ascends and descends and there is no creature who can prevent him.”¹⁶⁶ Similarly, in Jacob's dream, he sees “a stairway set up on the earth with its top reaching the heavens.”¹⁶⁷ 3 Enoch describes seven heavens, palaces and angelic guards. Rabbi Ishmael, after ascending to the seventh palace, is rescued from the fierce gatekeepers by the angel Metatron (formerly Enoch), Prince of the Divine Presence, who shows the Rabbi the sights of heaven.

Divine Judgment and the Transformation of Enoch

The Jewish views of unity of body and soul find expression in bodily resurrection. Eschatological doctrines of divine judgment and resurrection of the righteous form the baseline of afterlife beliefs. “And when the whole of creation, visible and invisible, which the Lord has created, shall come to an end, then each person will go to the Lord's great judgment.”¹⁶⁸

3 Enoch sees the post-mortem judgment occurring in a heavenly court of law, with the Holy One sitting in judgment on individuals after death, rather than at the last judgment.¹⁶⁹ It also suggests a method for re-establishing the harmonious relationship between the divine and humans, with exceptional individuals ascending to heaven and attaining the presence of God. This Book records the transformation of the human Enoch into Metatron, the angelic Prince of the Countenance. Enoch sheds his human form, becoming an enormous, winged, glowing figure and is

¹⁶⁴

Ezek. 3:12-13.

¹⁶⁵

2 Kings 2:11

¹⁶⁶

Hekhalot Rabbati; Synopse, 199.

¹⁶⁷

Genesis 28:12.

¹⁶⁸

2 Enoch 65:6.

¹⁶⁹

There is a tension between individual and collective judgment that is not fully resolved in apocryphal literature.

granted a place in the celestial hierarchy, along with profound wisdom that enables him to guide other Merkaba seekers.¹⁷⁰ As Himmelfarb observes, a human being can become the equal of the angels standing at the centre of a group of eight early Jewish and Christian apocalypses in which ascent to heaven is the mode of revelation.¹⁷¹ Enoch becomes an angel in a kind of priestly investiture, donning special garments and being anointed with oil by the archangel Michael, suggesting that the transformation of the visionary depends on an understanding of heaven as a temple, where angels are heavenly priests. Further implications of angelomorphism, the transformation of human beings into an angelic body, are discussed in the following chapter in the context of Apostle Paul's writings and the Qumran liturgical texts.

Discussion

Parallels may be observed between elements of the Mesopotamian and Jewish traditions regarding the celestial realms and the cosmic blueprint that divided the world into the celestial realm above, the earth and the underworld. Both describe the firmament as being composed of precious stones. God rules the celestial hosts in heaven, apart from humans on earth, although the divine may be encountered through the sacred precincts of the temple. Jewish beliefs of the post-mortem underworld are originally in parallel with those of ancient Babylon. Over time, elevated post-mortem conditions were considered available for more individuals meeting the required moral criteria, whereas initially, a destiny in heaven was reserved only for a chosen few.

The apocrypha and the pseudepigrapha describe the way qualified Hekhalot and Merkabah sages could travel in the celestial realms. Sometimes, they show Hellenistic influences; for example, resembling elements of the myth of Er and the charioteer in Plato's *Republic* and *Phaedrus*.¹⁷² Parallels can also be observed with the Zoroastrian heavenly journeys, where sages, this time under the influence of psychotropic plants, make the journey to obtain wisdom.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰

Hekhalot Rabbati; Synopse, 14, trans. Alexander, "3 Enoch," 264.

¹⁷¹

Himmelfarb, Martha. *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

¹⁷²

G. H. McCurdy, "Platonic Orphism in the Testament of Abraham," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 61 (1942), 213-15, 221, 226.

¹⁷³

While the date of this Book is unknown, it could be fairly late i.e. during the Sasanian Dynasty from 224 CE to

Platonic influences may be observed in abstract notions of immortality of the spirit and joining with the stars in heaven, while other texts offer an elaborate view of the happenings in the celestial realm, using concrete imagery. The spirit of the deceased could come forth from the tomb with a properly embalmed mummy in Egypt or could be finally resurrected, in the case of the Persian or Jewish righteous.

The increasing duality of the Jewish Sheol or Gehenna contrasting with Paradise/Heaven as destinations of the deceased coupled with the role of divine judgment in determining rewards or punishment contains elements resembling aspects of Zoroastrianism. According to Segal, it is probable that Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity had “cross-fertilized” one another in later periods, although he considered it likely that the kernel notion of resurrection was initially a Zoroastrian idea, as it appears in the earliest Persian literature.¹⁷⁴ However, Barr concludes that the Iranian Zoroastrian influence probably came to Judaism through the admixture of Oriental ideas in the Hellenistic world and was adopted as part of an anti-Hellenistic reaction from 170 BCE.¹⁷⁵ He found that convincing evidence of Iranian (or Persian) influence on earlier strata of the Old Testament was lacking.¹⁷⁶ Barr suggests that the Jews might find stimulus in an element of Iranian religion, such as its dualism or its idea of resurrection, even though they might not have appreciated their meaning within Iranian religion itself¹⁷⁷, while there is limited material available regarding the Myth of Er and other such heavenly journeys.

651 CE. See Charles Horne, “Ancient Persia” In *The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East* (New York: Parke, Austin and Lipscomb, 1917) 185. In this case, the writers could well have been influenced by Greek and Jewish traditions.

174

Segal, 197.

175

James Barr, “The Question of Religious Influence: The Case of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 53, No. 2 (1985): 201-235.

176

Barr, 229.

177

Barr, 230.

Chapter 6 Christianity

This chapter will examine the New Testament, which is the second of the two major parts of the Christian Bible. Consideration is given to cosmological elements originating in Judaism, as well as concept concerning the eschaton. Particular attention is given to the writing of Paul the Apostle, as being amenable to both orthodox and gnostic exegesis. His views concerning the transformation of the believer into a “citizen of heaven” are examined, including in the context of traditions based in Qumran. The Book of Revelation is examined as explaining what the believer can expect from the eschaton. The role of layered interpretation of scripture and symbolism is considered, and ways that this has been applied to the New Testament. This chapter culminates with consideration of the Nicene Creed as a widely accepted formulation of Christian beliefs concerning heaven and its relationship with earth.

Among its 27 books are recollections of the life and sayings of Jesus in the four Gospels; a historical narrative of the first years of the Christian Church in Acts of the Apostles; epistles or letters of instruction to groups of Christians; and an apocalyptic description of the eschaton, the Book of Revelation. When Christians die, they go to heaven leaving behind their physical bodies, to be with Christ;¹⁷⁸ however, this is not their final destination. They do not have immortal physical bodies¹⁷⁹ until after the resurrection, which follows the pattern established by Jesus Christ as a prototype: he lived on earth as a mortal man, died and was resurrected from the dead, ascended to heaven and then returned to earth in a physical body. The central message of the Gospel is that a *basileia*, or kingdom of heaven, is “at hand.” Irenaeus, one of the most influential early Church fathers, sets out his vision of the final restoration of God’s creation, emphasising that it must be a physical resurrection, based on the promise that Christ will “drink the fruit of the vine with his disciples in some higher region above the heavens (*in supercaelesti loco*).”¹⁸⁰

Abraham's bosom (or side) is featured in Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the rich man, where, upon death, the poor man was transported by angels to repose in Abraham's bosom, while the rich

178

2 Cor. 5:1-8; Luke 23:43.

179

2 Cor. 5:15; Thess. 4:13-17.

180

Irenaeus. “On the Final Restoration of Creation.” In Alister E. McGrath (ed.), *The Christian Theology Reader*, second ed., (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 1995 (2001) 611.

man was plunged into the torment of hell.¹⁸¹ Abraham's bosom was defined by the first Latin Christian writer, Tertullian, as follows:

"That region, Abraham's bosom, though not in heaven, yet not so deep as hell, will in the meanwhile afford refreshment to the souls of the righteous, until the consummation of all things makes complete the general resurrection with its fullness of reward..."¹⁸²

Paul the Apostle, Angelomorphism and the Apocalyptic Tradition

Paul the Apostle, (4 BCE – 62-4CE), a prolific Christian writer and former Pharisee, was converted to Christianity in the course of a religious experience, wherein he was blinded by a supernatural light – the so-called “Road to Damascus” experience. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul pseudo-epigraphically describes his ascension to the third Heaven, which is a revelation rooted in the Jewish apocalyptic traditions:

“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know ... and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.”

Paul's ascension parallels the mystical experiences of apocalyptic Jews. The ascension to heaven is linked with the newly resurrected body, which is similar to, or the same as, an angelic body, through a process that has been termed angelification or angelomorphism. A master narrative of salvation is marked by the meta-schematization (change in the structure) of the body into a glorious body shared with Christ.

“Lord Jesus Christ...will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”¹⁸³

The Qumran Library and its liturgical texts provide valuable insights into pre-rabbinic Judaism and the cultural background of early Christianity. They include the earliest manuscripts of

¹⁸¹ Luke 16:19-31.

¹⁸² Tertullian. *Tertullian: Adversus Marcionem*. Ed. and trans. Ernest Evans. (London: Oxford University Press) 1972.

¹⁸³ Philippians 3:20-21.

most of the Hebrew Bible books. The historical background of the Dead Sea Scrolls remains controversial, with some of the documents resembling the precepts of the Essenes, a Jewish group comprising a number of writers of the first century CE, including Flavius Josephus and Philo of Alexandria.¹⁸⁴ Dated from BCE or CE 1st century, they refer to divine hierarchies and God's throne chariot.¹⁸⁵ The *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, from Qumran (4QShirShab), known as the *Angelic Liturgy*, describes the Sabbath worship of the angelic priesthood in the heavenly temple.¹⁸⁶ Each of the seven firmaments described have their own sanctuary containing an inner chamber (holy of holies), with each being administered by its own high-priestly chief prince and secondary prince, also mentioning multiple chariots and thrones. The final inner chamber, the central throne room, is inhabited by God himself.¹⁸⁷ The community believed that the righteous would be rewarded by "eternal blessings and everlasting joy in the life everlasting, and a crown of glory and a robe of honour, amid light perpetual"¹⁸⁸ and the sinners would be met with "eternal torment and endless disgrace together with shameful extinction in the fire of the dark regions."¹⁸⁹ Fletcher-Louis argues that the purpose of the language of mystical participation at Qumran is angelification. "The priesthood is a primary conceptual category for the formation of an angelomorphic identity."¹⁹⁰ Segal observes that the Liturgy seems to map a seven-stage ascent to heaven to view God's throne

184

James R. Davila, *Liturgical Works: Eerdman's Commentaries on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 1.

185

Similar to the Hekalot.

186

Davila, 83-167.

187

Davila, 84.

188

1QS 4:7-8.

189

QS 5:12-13.

190

Crispin Fletcher-Louis. *All the Glory of Adam: Liturgical Anthropology in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 2002), 56.

and glory¹⁹¹. Worship in the Heavenly Temple includes an example of angelomorphism in the blessing:

“May you be as an angel of the Presence in the Abode of Holiness to the Glory of the God of (Hosts)

“May you attend upon the service in the Temple of the kingdom and decree destiny in company with the Angels of the Presence, in common council (with the Holy Ones).”¹⁹²

Fletcher-Louis maintains that the purpose of entry into the sacred temple – of access to the heavenly world offered by the inner sanctuary – is *transformation*. Worship makes proximity to God possible along with conformity to his character and modes of action. The liturgical anthropology of the temple tradition is essentially a matter of *deification*.¹⁹³ Furthermore, a ritual connection between the celibacy of some Essenes and their angelomorphic identity is possible.¹⁹⁴

The Old Testament describes Enoch's life, but not his death:

Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah three hundred years...Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him.¹⁹⁵

The above represents the canonical basis for the belief that Enoch was transformed into an angel in heaven (Metatron), as illustrated in Hekhalot literature. The idea of angelification also finds clear support in all the Gospels of the New Testament:¹⁹⁶

191

Segal, 304.

192

1QSb 4:24-28.

193

Fletcher-Lewis, *All the Glory of Adam*, 203.

194

Segal, 306.

195

Genesis 5:22-24.

196

Also see the resurrected “are like angels in heaven” Matt 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:36.

Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.”¹⁹⁷

Such themes have been further developed by the Apostle Paul, by stating that the body of glory or pneumatic body becomes androgynous, regains its divine likeness, its angelic completeness. In addition, he describes the primal combination of male and female that is lost in the Garden of Eden.¹⁹⁸ As amplified by Paul:

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”¹⁹⁹

The message in the Gospels and in the writings of Paul with respect to believers being transformed into either angelic beings or beings analogous to angels implies that a believer will undergo a radical transformation, which is a prerequisite to becoming a full citizen of heaven.²⁰⁰

Gnosticism

In Gnostic theologies, heavenly ascents are considered as a means to redemption. According to non-canonical Gnostic Christianity, exemplified by the texts discovered at Nag Hammadi and the *Pistis Sophia*, Jesus Christ undertook a journey to heaven and defeated the planetary spirits (archons) thereby enabling his followers to undertake similar journeys. The Gnostic is rescued from the dark powers and is able to depart from this world through the planetary spheres towards the pleroma. The Gnostic text *Pistis Sophia* quotes Christ as saying:

¹⁹⁷

Luke 20:34-36.

¹⁹⁸

Gen 2:10.

¹⁹⁹

Galatians 3:28 and also see Col. 3:11.

²⁰⁰

“But our citizenship is in heaven.” Philippians 3:20.

I flew to the height... And the gates of the firmament ... all opened at the same time. And all the archons and all the powers and all the angels therein ... looked upon the shining garment of light which I wore, they saw the mystery of their name within it...saying: "How has the Lord of the All passed through without our knowing?" And all their bonds were loosened, and their places and their ranks."²⁰¹

Similarly, Paul exhorts believers to spiritual warfare:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers (*archai*), against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heaven.²⁰²

The above is one of the passages where the Apostle seems to use Gnostic terminology to refer to planetary archons.

What would that have profited him - to enter Paradise or the third heaven - if all these are under the realm of the Demiurge, yet, as some would hold, he was a participant in mysteries they say are above the Demiurge?²⁰³

In *The Gnostic Paul*, Pagels examines the way in which Paul's letters can be interpreted either antignostically, or gnostically. Although ecclesiastical tradition since the time of Irenaeus has directed interpretation towards an orthodox exegesis,²⁰⁴ the Naasenes and Valentinians revered Paul as a Gnostic initiate,²⁰⁵ claiming that his receiving of the gnosis²⁰⁶ was a symbolic one, as the teacher of Rheginos explains the meaning of resurrection:

201

Meade (trans.), *Pistis Sophia*, [1921], 2005.

202

Ephesians 6:12

203

Tertullian, "Prescription Against Heretics" 24-30. Translated by Peter Holmes. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.)

204

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul – Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1992), 152.

205

Pagels, xvi.

“The saviour has swallowed up death, so that you should not remain in ignorance (i.e., “death”) ... and he has offered us the way of our immortality. Therefore, as the Apostle says, we suffered with him, and we arose with him, and we went to heaven with him.”²⁰⁷

According to Harrison, Paul's revelation is a paradigm for the Gnostic believer's ascent.²⁰⁸ Furthermore, the motif of the heavenly journey can be seen in John 3:1-21. “Jesus replied, “... unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”” The phrase “born from above” has been translated as “born again” in the King James Version. However, it can also be translated as “born from heaven” or “born from a higher place.” This indicates the pattern of a heavenly journey.²⁰⁹ Tertullian²¹⁰ argues against those who claim that Paul was a Gnostic, suggesting that this was a serious contention at the time.²¹¹

Paul, the traditional author of the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament, writes about another aspect of Jesus Christ's life, which could also be connected to angelomorphism and speaks of its possible connection with the priesthood at Qumran. He describes Christ as “a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”²¹² Melchizedek is a mysterious figure in the Book of Genesis,²¹³ who as “a priest of God Most High”, presents bread and wine to Abraham and blesses

206

Rom. 6:3-11.

207

Epistula ad Rheginum (De Resurrectione), Coptic text ed. and trans. M. Malinine, H.Ch. Puech, G. Quispel, W. Till, (Zuerich:Rascher, 1963) 45.14-28 quoted in Pagels, 29 regarding Rom 6:3-4 and Col. 3:4.

208

J.R. Harrison, “Quest of the Third Heaven: Paul & His Apocalyptic Imitators”, *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (2004), 24-55, 29.

209

Grese, 1988.

210

An early Christian writer from Carthage 160 CE – c. 225.

211

Tertullian, “Prescription Against Heretics” 30.

212

Heb.5:6 with reference to Psalm 110:4.

213

Gen. 14:18-20.

him. Melchizedek does not belong to the traditional Levitical priestly caste of the Israelites. Early Church Fathers understood this as representing a pre-figuration of the priesthood of Christ and that of the Catholic Church.²¹⁴ Paul describes Christ as a high priest in the sanctuary and a true tabernacle, which was set up by God, i.e., in heaven.²¹⁵ The theme has been further amplified by Peter, who says: "But you are ... a royal priesthood ... God's own people."²¹⁶ While in Revelation, John writes "you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God."²¹⁷ This tends to support Elior's contention that the notion of angelomorphism is linked to the viewing of heaven as a temple with angels serving as heavenly priests.

Of the two non-canonical Apocalypses inspired by Paul, one is Gnostic and part of the *Nag Hammadi Codex V*, 2.5., while the other is Coptic Christian. The writings of the historical Paul on the third heaven²¹⁸ are substituted with a Gnostic Paul, who overcomes the unsympathetic Demiurge figure of the seventh heaven by means of a secret sign²¹⁹ and reaches the highest, tenth heaven. The Christian Apocalypse of Paul envisages a soul-body separation immediately after death and a physical resurrection at the eschaton, while the Gnostic Apocalypse separates the souls of the righteous from their bodies permanently, upon death.

The Book of Revelation and Kingdom of Heaven

The *Book of Revelation* follows the Jewish apocalyptic traditions and John sees "there in heaven a door stood open" while an angel tells him to "come up here."²²⁰ John depicts thousands of

214

The Catechism, 1333.

215

Heb. 8:1-2.

216

1 Peter 2:9.

217

Rev. 5:10.

218

2 Cor. 12:4.

219

Apoc. Paul 23:25-26.

220

Rev.4:1-2

Jewish elders and countless others belonging to every nation, around God's throne. The *Revelation* mainly focuses on the way in which the powers of darkness in the world will be overthrown. John's heavenly court is a combination of Hellenistic-Roman ceremony with early Christian worship in a synagogue-like setting. "Just as the celestial liturgy described by John replicates Christian worship or imperial court life, heaven is a sacred space resembling first-century ritual architecture."²²¹

McDannell and Lang have classified the views of heaven into two types, namely, theocentric or anthropocentric. A theocentric view of heaven views eternal life as consisting of an immediate experience of God, whereas an anthropocentric viewing comprises pure relationships with others, especially with friends and family.²²² John's visions can be classified as a theocentric heaven, with God and Christ in the centre. His New Jerusalem is essentially a temple for full communion with God²²³ affirming that seeing God "face to face" is the privilege of those in heaven.²²⁴

Tertullian explains that in the eschaton, the heavenly kingdom can be enjoyed when the righteous are changed into angelic bodies:

"When the resurrection of the saints is completed, the destruction of the world and the conflagration of judgment will be effected, we shall be "changed in a moment" into angelic substance, by the "putting on of incorruption" (1 Cor. 15:52-3), and we shall be transferred to the heavenly kingdom."²²⁵

The millennium refers to God's earthly reign lasting for 1,000 years, during which time evil is eliminated from the earth. Believers are raised to heaven after they have enjoyed the pleasures of the earthly paradise. The "Lord's Prayer"²²⁶ begins with "Our Father in heaven" and continues

221

McDannell and Lang, *Heaven A History*, 41.

222

McDannell and Lang, 178-179.

223

McDannell and Lang, 44.

224

Rev. 22:4.

225

Tertullian. *Tertullian: Adversus Marcionem*. Edited and translated by Ernest Evans (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), III, 25:6.

226

Matthew 6:9-13.

“...your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” implying that the celestial realm is subject to God's will, but his kingdom is yet to come fully to Earth. The concept of the coming kingdom of God, instituting heavenly conditions on earth, is of great significance in Christianity. Poythress distinguishes four “levels of communication” in *Revelation*: the words used in the passage; what is seen in the vision; persons or objects that the elements in the vision refer to; and the symbolic significance of the imagery in the vision: word, vision, object and symbolism levels.²²⁷ John sees the New Jerusalem as the “coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”²²⁸ The City may be considered as a symbol for the redeemed in their future glory. Its description as a golden cube city with large pearl gates, guarded by angels and twelve precious foundation stones is generally not to be taken literally, but more as a model for renewal. The term used for ‘new’ (*kainos*) connotes newness in quality or nature, in contrast with the Greek words *neos*, with the latter connoting newness in time. Similarly, Bede²²⁹ records a layered approach to the interpretation of the Bible, while Solomon literally builds a Temple; allegorically, it is Christ's body or church; topologically, it is each of the faithful; and analogically, it is the joys of the heavenly mansion.²³⁰

Morse considers the idea of heaven as the direction from which God acts in relation to earth.²³¹ God is not confined to heaven, as “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you.”²³² When it is said that Christians wait for a “new heaven and a new earth”, it refers to God taking a new course of action. Furthermore, earth can be understood through the duality of heaven. Heaven may also be considered as a community where God resides with the angels; or seen as a

227

Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36 (1993): 41-54.

228

Rev. 21:2.

229

Historian of English Christianity c. 672 – 735.

230

McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*.

231

Christopher Morse. *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (London:T&T Clark International, 2010), 10.

232

1 Kings 8:27.

kingdom at hand, not restricted to an upper world or afterlife, but even in the present during the daily events of this earth. Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to such ordinary realities as the sowing of seeds, a grain of mustard seed, leavening in bread, treasure hidden in a field, a pearl or a wedding feast. On this basis, Morse argues that we are led to conclude that the word heaven refers primarily to the current conditions under which we lead our lives.²³³

The Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed, also known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, is a Christian statement of faith. It is the only ecumenical creed accepted as an authoritative one by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican and major Protestant churches.²³⁴ The Nicene Creed was probably issued by the Council of Constantinople held in 381, based on a baptismal creed already in existence. "We believe" is an essential part of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, synthesizing the essential contents of doctrine.²³⁵ This Ecumenical Council enlarged parts of the original Nicene Creed; for example, concerning the Holy Spirit,²³⁶ condemned several heresies²³⁷ and made decisions concerning Bishops.²³⁸

233

Morse, 24.

234

Catechism, 195.

235

Catechism, 11.

236

Wilhelm, Joseph. "The Nicene Creed." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 11. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. 25 Nov. 2012<<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11049a.htm>>.

237

Arianism, Macedonianism, and Apollinarianism.

238

The Catholic Encyclopedia. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved November 25, 2012 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12174a.htm>

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,
maker of *heaven and earth*,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,
begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.

Through him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation, *he came down from heaven*:

by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered died and was buried.

On the third day he rose again in fulfilment of the Scriptures;

he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.

He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.

Amen.²³⁹

The Creed is an essential summary of Christian beliefs. The word “heaven” is mentioned three times in the Creed (*italics added*) and is pivotal in that it addresses the relationship between God and Jesus in heaven above and man on earth below, with the resolution of the two in the

eschaton after the resurrection. The expression "heaven and earth" means creation in its entirety, indicating the bond uniting heaven and earth and it distinguishes the one from the other: "the earth" is the world of humanity, whereas "heaven" or "the heavens" can designate both the firmament and God's own "place" - and, consequently, the "heaven", which is eschatological glory. In addition, "heaven" refers to the saints and the place where angels live.²⁴⁰ The Catholic Church maintains that through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ opened heaven to believers, constituting the community of all who are incorporated into Christ. "Looking for" the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come is, perhaps, phrased more as a hope than a belief in the Creed. This communion is referred to in Scripture by the following images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father's house and the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise. Yet, it ultimately defies description as "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."²⁴¹ According to McGrath, whenever the Divine Liturgy is celebrated on earth, the boundaries between heaven and earth are removed with earthly worshippers joining in the eternal heavenly liturgy chanted by angels "...worshippers have the opportunity of being mystically transported to the threshold of heaven."²⁴²

According to Rowan Williams, the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, "eternity is above all a joy in the sheer reality of God - not an absorption in some final 'absolute' but a living relation...set in the heart of the exchange of life and joy within the Trinity."²⁴³ He cites Augustine who wrote the following about heaven:

"We shall rest and we shall see, we shall see and we shall love, we shall love and we shall praise. Behold what will be at the end without end. For what other end do we have, if not to reach the kingdom which has no end?"²⁴⁴

240

Catechism, 326.

241

Catechism 125-127.

242

McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*, 167.

243

Rowan Williams. *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2007) 155.

244

Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 154 quoting Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, XXII.30.

Chapter 7 Discussion and conclusions

This chapter will examine the respective traditions concerning heaven in the following areas, by comparing and contrasting the various elements: the structure of the cosmos; the nature of the soul; the soul's journey; and the role of morality. The questions posed in Chapter 1 are also addressed and conclusions are made.

Structure of the cosmos

A tripartite model is perceived in the cosmologies examined: The heavenly abode of the Gods, situated in the sky above; the earth, home of mankind, as the middle realm; and the underworld below, where spirits or the deceased dwell. The soul flight of the shaman is an early example of soul flight of exceptional individuals to heaven, as well as to the middle and lower worlds. The ancient Egyptian cosmos also comprises three main parts: the land of the living, the sky and the Duat - the Otherworld or the Underworld is usually imagined as lying beneath the earth, but sometimes inside the sky. The dead may reside in the Kingdom of Osiris within the Duat, travel with the sun and his barque or they might reside in the pastoral paradise, known as the Field of Reeds.

In Mesopotamia, the universe has a tripartite structure, including multiple levels of heaven. According to Heimpel,²⁴⁵ at night, the setting sun enters the heavens' interior, where a white house is located and where the Moon also resides during times of invisibility.²⁴⁶ The floor of each of the three layers of heavens is made of stone in different colours. The Gods in heaven are organized in the form of an earthly kingdom, including a king at the head of a council with a group of royal functionaries assisting him. There is a Sumerian earthly paradise in the land of Dilmun, normally reserved for Gods. In ancient Persia, it was believed that a bridge gave the worthy access to heaven, while other souls would fall off, down into the joyless subterranean kingdom of the dead. However, in Zoroastrianism, this was later replaced by the concept of the last judgment. By the early centuries CE, Zoroastrians believed in the concept of different levels of heaven corresponding to stars and the

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Wolfgang Heimpel, in "The Sun at Night and the Doors of Heaven in Babylon", *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, Vol 38, No.2, Autumn, 1986.

²⁴⁶

Heimpel, *Sun at Night*, 130-131.

luminaries, where blessed souls of the deceased resided.

According to Greeks in the Homeric Age, the living dwelt on the earth; the dead resided in Hades; while the Gods dwelt on Mt. Olympus. Plato described the earth as a sphere around which revolved the planetary spheres and the fixed stars. Above the heavens, the soul could contemplate eternal verities in the realm of the Absolute.

According to the Jewish perspective in the Hebrew Bible, the primal duality is between above and below, with heaven being the first in creation. The ancient Israelites perceived the cosmos as comprising a tripartite structure: heaven or sky (*shamayim*) above, earth (*eres*) in the middle and the netherworld (*sheol*) below. The heavenly realm was perceived to be vast²⁴⁷ like a cosmic canopy or “firmament” with a floor of precious stone. God (Yahweh) is a mighty celestial king, ruling over the world and over an assembly of heavenly beings. They believed in a clear dualism of heaven and hell, with heaven being multilayered. According to Hekhalot and Merkabah mysticism, God travels through the heavenly realms, either in a chariot or in a celestial palace. “Abraham's Bosom” represents an intermediate realm where the righteous may rest before entering into heaven proper.

Elements of the Jewish tradition of multiple heavens were passed on to Christianity; for example, the Apostle Paul records that he ascended to the third heaven. The Hebrew and Greek words for heaven, *shamayim* and *ouranus*, have been distinctly used in the Bible: The sky of air, clouds and rain, where birds fly;²⁴⁸ space as the physical “heavens” of the sun, moon and stars;²⁴⁹ and the spiritual realm, where God and the angels dwell.

Christianity retains the Jewish view of heaven being God's abode. The “Lord's Prayer”²⁵⁰ begins with “Our Father in heaven,” being the primary address to the Deity. It continues “...Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” This implies that the celestial realm is subject to God's will and the coming kingdom of God, which would institute heavenly conditions on earth. The Book of Revelation prophesies the coming eschaton in symbolic terms, describing the

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Isa. 40:12, Isa. 55:9.

248

Gen.1:20, 26, 28; 8:2; Deut. 28:12, Ps. 147:8; Matt. 8:20; 13:32; 16:2-3.

249

Gen 1:14, 15,17; 15:5; Deut. 4:19; 28:62; Acts 2:19-20; Heb. 11:12.

250

Matthew 6:9-13.

New Jerusalem descending to earth like a bride adorned for her husband, while describing the dimensions of the City in physical terms. In contrast, statements such as “The kingdom of heaven is at hand”²⁵¹ could suggest that heaven refers to the current conditions under which our life is really being lived²⁵² – where the believer experiences a sense of connection with the Divine. At the same time, heaven is conceived of as an eternity of the believer’s soul abiding in God’s love. This resembles Platonism, where the soul travels to an ethereal realm to contemplate on the Divine. Christianity, thus, incorporates the structure of Jewish cosmology offering a transcendent experience of the Divine similar to Plato and additionally expects the eventual establishment of heaven on earth.

The nature of the soul

Shamanism is a paradigm for understanding disparate cultural practices, where the spirit of the practitioner is believed to detach itself from the body in order to navigate other levels of reality, interact with the spirits therein and return to the body with increased power or knowledge.

The ancient Egyptian view of the human being is complex: the part of the individual known as the *Ka* is usually translated as spirit, image or vital force. It can appear as a duplicate of the person, the vital force that continues after death, while the *Ba* or soul in the image of a bird with a human head separates itself from the body at the time of death. The *Ka* needs to be sustained with funerary offerings, but can also subsist on wall paintings of food offerings.²⁵³ Gordon, in his definition of the *Ka*, states that while the vital force leaves the deceased at death, it must rejoin the deceased in the afterlife. It may be identified with the Hebrew *ruach* or *nephesh*, the life-spirit²⁵⁴. Zabkar disputes the dualistic view of the body being divided into the corpse and *Ankh*, *Ka* or *Ba*,

251

Mat. 3:2.

252

Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*.

253

Carole, R. Fontain, “A modern look at ancient wisdom: the Instruction of Ptahhotep Revised”, *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 44, No.3 1981, 157.

254

Andrew A. Gordon, “The Ka as an Animating Force”, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, Vol.33, 1996.

saying that both remain connected in Egyptian thought.²⁵⁵ Hence, the phrase “*Ba* to heaven” may express the wish that the *Ba* may enjoy freedom of movement in the heavenly realms without being limited to it. After an efficacious ritual is performed, the individual is “risen and made whole” and enters upon a new glorified life, conceived of in physical terms.²⁵⁶ On the other hand, according to Smith, the ancient Egyptian concept of the human being comprises a corporeal self and a social self²⁵⁷ with Osiris providing a model for resurrection and restoration.

The ability of the human soul to gain immortality after death in the presence of the Gods, whether in the celestial realm or the paradisiacal Field of Reeds, depended on a highly ritualized and complex process for the privileged in ancient Egypt. In ancient Mesopotamia, the vast majority of deceased subsisted as ghosts in the underworld, lacking vitality and dependent on the ritual offerings of their living descendants. A similar situation prevailed in ancient Persia, although, in Zoroastrianism, it was believed that the physical body would be resurrected and reunited with the soul in heaven as an interim stage, until after the last judgment, when the Gods would confer immortality on the resurrected bodies of the blessed.

The Greeks believed that the soul experiences immortality when separated from the mortal body. After the cycle of birth and death, in addition to rewards and punishments in the hereafter, the soul would regain its purity and return to its star in the Empyrean. Christian apologists strongly oppose the doctrine of transmigration; for example, claiming it to be an “opinion of a senseless man, ridiculous and more worthy of a stage player than a school of philosophy.”²⁵⁸

Orthodox Christianity shares a belief in physical resurrection, in common with Judaism and Zoroastrianism. There is no clear indication regarding the religion that first proposed the belief. While there is no proven historical connection, it seems likely, as Barr observed that there were mutual influences among the traditions, including themes, such as resurrection and the last

255

Zabkar, *Herodotus and the Egyptian Idea of Immortality*, 61.

256

Zabkar, *Herodotus and the Egyptian Idea of Immortality*, 62.

257

Smith, *Osiris and the Deceased*, 2.

258

Lactantius, *Institutiones* viii. 12.

judgment, which people may have understood differently in different cultural contexts.²⁵⁹ Indeed, it is a general observation that although some common elements emerge among the different traditions, each has a unique frame of reference.

During the intermediate state between death and the final judgment and resurrection, the soul may rest in Abraham's Bosom or Paradise. The righteous "become as angels" and are not given in marriage in heaven like regular human beings on earth. The *Angelic Liturgy* could support the concept that a process of angelification was envisaged among the priests at Qumran. This concept is built on a Hebrew tradition that one greatly favoured by God may rarely be taken up to heaven and transformed into an angel, as Enoch was transformed into Metatron. Himmelfarb concludes her considerations of ascent to heaven in Jewish and Christian apocalypses by surmising that they suggest an understanding of human possibility, of the status of the righteous in the universe *that goes beyond anything found in the Bible*. According to her, ancient Jews and Christians could imagine themselves being as glorious as Enoch, in the midst of their unsatisfactory daily lives. Her conclusion may be correct with respect to the Hebrew Bible, but angelomorphism is an integral part of the Christian Biblical tradition, having received much attention. Followers of Jesus Christ believe that they will benefit from the process of resurrection in a perfectly angelic body, by being united with him spiritually. The concept of the faithful serving God in heaven in the form of divinely appointed priests finds a resonance with the figure of Melchizedek in the Old Testament and the Order of Melchizedek, with Christ as the High Priest referred to by Paul, the Apostle. This belief is built on the Jewish tradition of the mystical heavenly temple, visited by Merkabah and Hekalot practitioners. Gnostics seek the liberation of the soul from the enslaving material world, believing that Jesus had "risen" only in a spiritual sense. Some elements of Christian scripture can be subject to both orthodox and Gnostic exegeses.²⁶⁰ For example, Paul's Epistles could be perceived as speaking symbolically of receiving gnosis or bodily resurrection.

The Soul's Journey

Shamanic initiation allows the soul to ascend via a ladder or pole (*axis mundi*), assisted by spirits or even psychoactive substances, in search of power or knowledge. The Mesopotamian view

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Barr, *Question of Religious Influence*, 229.

²⁶⁰

Pagels, *Gnostic Paul*, 5.

did not envisage human-beings making such an ascent to heavenly realms, except in exceptional circumstances. However, priests could enter God's presence by worshipping him in elevated Ziggurats or temples.

In ancient Egypt, the appropriate magical procedures were required for navigating a complex topography and guarded portals in the afterlife to gain an opportunity for immortality, perhaps involving visionary shamanic flight for priestly initiates while still alive.

According to Jewish beliefs, Sheol was the destination of the deceased, although the concept of a more beneficial post-mortem destination developed over time, where the righteous deceased would await final judgement in the coming Messianic era and resurrection of the body. Merkabah and Hekalot literature describes visionary ascents in the heavenly realms by remarkable sages possessing the required magical knowledge and moral qualities for gaining wisdom and proximity to God.

In Plato's Myth of Er, the hero witnesses souls being rewarded or punished, according to their behaviour on earth, in heaven or Tartarus, including through metempsychosis. A similar journey is recorded in Zoroastrian literature, in the *Book of Arda Viraf*, aided by a narcotic draught. However, once the soul is pure enough, it can return to its destined star in the empyrean realm to enjoy immortality and divine verities. In a pattern of visionary journeys, the Mysteries of Mithras, in so far as they are known, provide a schematic whereby initiates can experience a heavenly journey, by ascending through the planetary spheres and returning to earth in preparation for their eventual post-mortem journey. As there were seven grades of initiation, perhaps special passwords, gestures or other secret knowledge allowed them to navigate progressively higher realms associated with the planetary spheres.

The Gnostics believed that the souls of the deceased would try to rise through the planetary spheres, but that without the aid of Jesus Christ, they would be unable to pass the hostile planetary powers seeking to limit the aspirant to the lower realms. However, as Christ had overcome the archons, he would aid the believers in achieving liberation from the evil material world and enter the heavenly realm of the spirit.

Christianity makes Jesus Christ central to the believer's heavenly journey. In case of the righteous, there is an intermediate rest in Abraham's Bosom or paradise, followed by a final resurrection on Judgment Day when each person receives a new body similar to that of an angel, with the Kingdom of God being fully established on earth. The doctrine of metempsychosis was

rejected with the emphasis being on “salvation by grace through faith”²⁶¹ and not on individual effort. Thus, the technology of magic, recitations, overcoming of archons, or navigation of planetary spheres in the after world were no longer necessary, as required by the ancient Egyptians, Merkabah traditions of Judaism and the Gnostics and nor were the ancestral initiations or spirit guides of the traditional shaman. It is believed that Jesus declared these measures irrelevant to reaching the most exalted levels of existence: “Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.””²⁶² As Rabbi Scholem states, the Merkabah practitioners do not experience mystical intimacy with God, as they can observe what is in heaven but not participate in it.²⁶³ In contrast, Christianity conceives the idea of becoming a child of God and entering into a loving relationship with Him. Those who do not accept God's grace, however, are not accepted into heaven and are destined for darkness and torment. The Zoroastrian view is similar to the Jewish one; however, there is no Messiah figure to assist believers in the transition at the eschaton.

Relevance of morality

Moral judgments determine the events in one's afterlife: in ancient Egypt, the heart of the deceased was weighed before the Gods to determine its worthiness for immortality, in addition to magical mastery. In Mesopotamia, the future of the deceased in the underworld is decided by the Sun who, after setting, functions as “judge of those above and below”.²⁶⁴ A moral dimension can also be found in Zoroastrianism, in which a tribunal of Gods weigh the soul's thoughts and deeds in order to declare it as worthy of Paradise. This is followed by the Day of Judgment, after which the righteous are resurrected and rewarded with joyful immortality.

In ancient Greece, the souls of the deceased were judged on the condition of their souls and sent either to paradise on the Isle of the Blessed or to torment in Tartarus. Later, souls return to earth through transmigration, eventually achieving a place in the Empyrean Heaven. The Mysteries of Mithras trained Roman initiates to make the heavenly journey through the planetary spheres that

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Eph. 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

262

John 14:6.

263

Scholem, 55.

264

Heimpel, 146.

they would traverse after death, based on knowledge transmitted in secret ceremonies. As most men were serving military and administrative officers, civil virtues were likely to be important for gaining admission to the cult.

The God of the Jewish Bible, Jehovah,²⁶⁵ is a king and a judge²⁶⁶ and it is essential to follow God's laws for a positive outcome in the eschaton. In the Merkabah tradition, possession of moral qualities is a precondition for being admitted to gain knowledge of theosophical doctrines and principles,²⁶⁷ including the knowledge of secret passwords and magical techniques.

While Jews and Christians worship Jehovah, only Christians place faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah for forgiveness of sins, thereby allowing access to heaven. In *Apologeticus*, Tertullian defends the Christian belief regarding post mortem judgment in the face of pagan (Graeco-Roman) criticisms, at the same time revealing similarities between the two traditions:

...we are also ridiculed because we proclaim that God is going to judge the world. Yet even the poets and philosophers place a judgment seat in the underworld. In the same way, if we threaten Gehenna, which is a store of hidden underground fire for purposes of punishment, we are received with howls of derision. Yet, they, likewise, have the river Pyriphlegethon in the place of the dead. And if we mention paradise, a place of divine delight appointed to receive the spirits of the saints... then the Elysian Fields have anticipated the faith...²⁶⁸

Conclusions

The beginning of this dissertation proposed to examine the conduct or conditions believed to be necessary for a human being to enter the heavenly realms and whether such concepts emphasize the importance of faith in the divine, require personal moral responsibility and/or point to special knowledge of magical techniques for attaining heavenly realms. Other questions sought to be answered were: What elements of older religious beliefs and practices are found in Christianity?

265

The name Jehovah or Yahweh is translated from the Hebrew YHVH in Biblical texts.

266

Isa. 33:22.

267

Scholem, 48.

268

Tertullian, *Apologeticus*.

What is the perceived relationship between heaven and earth? What are the most important aspects of concepts of heaven?

Of the concepts of heaven found in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, Rome and Greece, some correspond with those of Judaism and Christianity, where heaven signifies eternal rest, plenty and joy for the virtuous deceased. The earlier concepts of heaven tended to emphasize descriptions of the heavenly realm as a fertile garden or plain with abundant water and clement weather, such as the Elysian fields and the Field of Reeds of ancient Egypt, in which the deceased could pursue diverting and pleasant pastimes. While the Garden of Eden was an early model of paradise for Christians, later Christian concepts became increasingly abstract incorporating elements of the temple tradition of Judaism and perhaps influenced by Platonic thought of a hereafter for the blessed in the Empyrean heaven, until it both incorporated life on earth and an eternity with God that defies description. All cosmologies are oriented around a three-tiered view of the world including the underworld of the dead (for most people in the earlier cultures, but then the underworld became a less desirable abode for the deceased who were to be punished), the middle realm of the living on earth, and the upper heavenly realms of the Gods, to which human beings aspire. Underlying this triplicity is the basic duality of above and below. Christianity hopes for the overcoming of this duality with the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth in the eschaton, and linked to this is the transformation of the whole human being into a citizen of that kingdom.

Admission to the heavenly realms is conditional on meeting certain moral criteria, which varied between the traditions examined. In ancient Egypt and some subsequent mystical Jewish and Gnostic traditions, knowledge of magical procedures is also a requirement. These technical magical requirements had the disadvantage of being time-consuming and requiring education, which was not available to the general populace; or in the case of Greece, they anticipated lengthy purification of the soul in the afterlife and metempsychosis; while in Rome observing civic duties appeared to secure a beneficial afterlife. Judaism does not strongly emphasize post-mortem experiences in the afterlife, but rather looks forward to the resurrection of the righteous in the Messianic era. However, the development of a sense of dualism, with divine judgment applied to the individual in Judaism, with an increasing dualism in concepts of the afterlife - where a soul could be consigned to Gehenna (hell) or Abraham's Bosom (heavenly paradise) was carried through into Christianity. Christianity rejects metempsychosis and emphasizes faith in Jesus Christ, who enables believers to overcome the sins that would otherwise disqualify them from entering heaven. Gnosticism shares much with early Christianity, but differs in the ideas pertaining to salvation through knowledge

rather than faith; the evils of the material world and the demiurge that created it and wrathful archons. Gnostics reject the concept of bodily resurrection, shared by Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism, along with the importance of the mummified physical body in Egypt; and the ancient Greeks also denied the importance of the physical body in the afterlife. The writings of Paul the Apostle show the ways in which the interpretations of the early Christian narrative can be interpreted in different ways, e.g., orthodox versus gnostic. Comparing Paul's ministry with elements of shamanism enables the understanding of his work as a “spirit master” from a wider perspective. The pattern of journeying from earth into the heavenly realms with the aid of spirits, whether ancestors, angels or other entities, to gain power and wisdom is found in shamanism and paralleled in various ways in the traditions examined. Overall, especially in the later cosmologies, there is a shared perception that the universe is moral at its core, and that people will be rewarded or punished in the afterlife based on their actions and intentions while alive. The magical technologies applied by some traditions are largely a way to accelerate or facilitate access to the heavenly realms, but do not completely supplant the necessity of being morally worthy in terms of the values of the respective cultures.

Another element that is important to gaining access to the heavenly realms emerges from the later Western religions examined, i.e., that of the transformation of the individual undertaking the journey in the afterlife. The process for each qualified soul to enter heaven resulted in the transformation of a mortal being into an immortal. It was hoped that this process would rectify the disruption caused by death to the constitution of the individual and his/her social world. Biblical Christianity expects – or “looks for” in terms of the Nicene Creed regarding the resurrection - a radical transformation of the individual into a heavenly being comparable to an angel. With that lofty status – the term “angel” arising from the Greek *aggelos*, meaning messenger - the individual is able to act in ways more closely aligned with God's purposes. According to one line of tradition, as foreshadowed in the *Angelic Liturgy* as well as the *Enoch* Apocalypses and further elaborated by the Apostle Paul and other New Testament writers, the individual may eventually serve as a kind of priest in the heavenly sanctuary, following the pattern set by Christ as High Priest in the order of Melchizedek i.e., a non-hereditary priesthood role based on selection by God. The individual thus achieves not only the freedom from toil promised by afterlife worldly paradises in the Western religious traditions, but also an elevated station in life eternal and acknowledgment of his/her personal value in heaven based on his or her relationship with God.

In identifying the important aspects of heaven, McDannell and Lang's classified views of heaven as either theocentric or anthropocentric. Elements of community and worship of deities were present in most traditions, with, perhaps, more emphasis on the theocentric in Christianity. However, as indicated in the Episcopal Think Tank, it is important for believers to expect to be reunited with loved ones in the hereafter, along with the doctrine of the Communion of the Saints (*communio sanctorum*, a fellowship of, or with, the saints) in some denominations.²⁶⁹

Concepts of heaven and earth place these realms as being located far apart – as a reflection of the primary duality of “above” and “below”, or of sky and earth. With the sky as the abode of the high Gods and the chief God as divine king ruling over the heavenly host and life on earth, “above” and heaven was seen as the direction from which divine authority was wielded. With the Ptolemaic world view and the planetary spheres around the earth, people were still influenced by the astronomical and astrological influences emanating from above. Furthermore, Babylonian divination practices aimed to learn the will of the Gods mainly by observing signs and activities in the sky. Likewise, Ra was a powerful God bringing light to earth from his heavenly barque, with other sky gods also playing a determinative role in ancient Egypt. In Christianity, the Nicene Creed encapsulates the view that Christ ascended from earth to heaven, where he sits on the right hand of the Father and from where he will judge the living and the dead. From the earliest temple traditions, approaches to the Gods through worship have resulted in a separation of the sacred from the profane through entering sacred space, with this being mirrored in views of the soul's journey in the afterlife being progressively from the profane to the sacred.²⁷⁰

However, other aspects of Christianity have brought heaven and earth closer together, with the expectation of the kingdom of heaven being established on earth - and before that, heavenly experiences are possible for believers on earth through worship and community.²⁷¹ As a consequence, earth and heaven, as well as hell and purgatory, can be increasingly seen as part of a continuum of experience, rather than as entirely separate.

The examined cosmologies emphasize that if individuals make choices that align with authentic values of their society during the course of his or her life – i.e., by choosing “the good”;

²⁶⁹ J. Sollier, “The Communion of Saints”. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol.4. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908.

²⁷⁰ See for example: Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 21; Fletcher-Lewis, *All the Glory of Adam*, 203; and McDannell and Lang, *Heaven A History*, 41.

²⁷¹ McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*, 167.

and by worshipping the deity or deities possessing the power of bestowing transcendence of earthly time, then they can expect to achieve immortality along with other benefits, such as communion with the divine. One result of the transference from the “lower” to the “higher” part of the continuum of life would be to experience life more as a denizen of the heavenly realms was imagined to be experienced i.e., to become more “angelic”. Meditative prayer practices could further prepare the individual for entering a paradisiacal experience of life. In this way, heaven becomes less a physical location in the sky, but rather an orientation towards the sacred in life. The dichotomy between heaven and earth, “above” and “below,” depends on the perspective and orientation of the person perceiving them. Life on earth includes experiences corresponding to periods of elevated awareness and therefore, by analogy, closer to the heavenly powers. Similarly, life on earth may be perceived of as not completely disconnected from the hereafter, but rather as shaped by the thoughts and actions of individuals, which influence conditions while alive, as well as those that are desired or imagined in the afterlife. Therefore, the concept of heaven should not be regarded just as an iconic focus for the imagination, as McGrath suggested,²⁷² or solely the beatific vision and the mystical union and Russell stated,²⁷³ but as part of an active process of engagement by the individual in the context of their expectations for the future, including the afterlife.

-The End-

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McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*, 166.

²⁷³

Russell, 5.

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