

## HEAVENLY ASCENT IN JEWISH AND PAGAN TRADITIONS

The NT contains numerous references to heavenly ascent or [rapture](#): for example, the [transfiguration](#) ([Mk 9:2–8](#) par.); the [ascension](#) ([Lk 24:50–3](#); [Acts 1:1–12](#); cf. [2:34](#); [Jn 3:13–14](#); [6:62](#); [20:17](#); [Phil 2:6–11](#); [Eph 4:8–10](#); [Rev 12:5](#)); the [rapture](#) of the [church](#) to meet the Lord in the air ([1 Thess 4:17](#); cf. [1 Cor 15:51–52](#)); Paul's ascent into third [heaven](#)/paradise ([2 Cor 12:2–4](#)); [Enoch's rapture](#) ([Heb 11:5](#); cf. [Gen 5:24](#)). The list grows longer if we include NT texts that presuppose the [ascension](#) (e.g., [Mk 14:62](#)).

It is possible in this article merely to adumbrate the enormous primary and secondary literature that may be relevant to the various NT texts (see most recently Zwiep). This situation is aggravated by the fact that heavenly ascent is a widespread motif in both Greco-Roman and Jewish sources of many different kinds. Hence the question frequently arises whether the NT references to ascent are to be characterized as Jewish, non-Jewish or a combination of both. A full discussion of the primary source materials, including ancient Near Eastern parallels (e.g., Assmann) and form-critical analysis, remains a desideratum. Additional work is also needed on cosmological assumptions on which the spatial orientation of ascent texts are based (Colpe). What accounts, for example, for the inverted orientation in the *Hekhalot* literature, where one is said to “descend to the Merkabah” (Kuyt; Stroumsa)?

### [1. Greco-Roman Background](#)

### [2. Jewish Background](#)

#### 1. Greco-Roman Background

K. Luck-Huyse's recent study on the dream of flying in antiquity includes ascent texts from the most prominent Greco-Roman sources. It will suffice here to mention only a few categories of this voluminous and diverse material.

**1.1. Ascent as Apotheosis.** In Greco-Roman sources, the gods are frequently portrayed as ascending into [heaven](#). In the Rhapsodic Theogony, for example, Zeus is said to have been carried into [heaven](#) on the back of a goat (West). Euhemerus claimed that gods such as Uranos, Kronos and Zeus were humans who had subsequently been apotheosized (Diodorus Siculus [Bib. Hist. 13.1–17.2](#)). Deification of a mortal hero or ruler was a common idea in the [Hellenistic](#) world. [Alexander the Great](#) himself was thought to have been granted apotheosis. Later the idea was accepted by [Roman](#) emperors as a posthumous ceremony, although Gaius emphasized his own divinity even before [death](#). The deified emperor was endowed with the title *divus* (divine), and his ascent to [heaven](#) was symbolized by various signs, such as an eagle or a chariot (see [Ruler Cult](#)). The Arch of Titus in Rome, for instance, depicts the emperor being carried into [heaven](#) on the back of an eagle (Pfanner).

Apollonius of Tyana, a Neo-Pythagorean holy man who has often been compared to Jesus, led the life of an ascetic wandering teacher, endured persecution under Nero and Domitian, and finally

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ascended into [heaven](#) (Philostratus *Vit. Ap.* 8.29–30). He was the object of a posthumous [cult](#) attracting the patronage of the Severan emperors (Koskenniemi).

**1.2. Ascent and Shamanism.** Shamanism is a widespread phenomenon in the ancient world. The shaman can be described as “a social functionary who, with the help of guardian spirits, attains ecstasy in order to create a rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of his group members” (Hultkrantz). This ecstatic state usually involves the [perception](#) that the soul of the shaman is ascending or descending to levels outside of mundane reality. For instance, Parmenides (DK 28 B 1) used shamanistic imagery in his philosophical poem, speaking of a cosmic chariot journey of the will, through the gates of Day and Night, to consult a goddess. The seven stages of the shaman’s journey to [heaven](#) are represented by seven tiers or notches in a pillar or tree, which stood for an imagined column at the center of the world (Schibli; West).

**1.3. Ascent of the Soul After Death.** [Cicero’s](#) *Somnium Scipionis* regards ascent to the stars as the destiny of the good soul after [death](#) (Cicero *De Rep.* 6.9–26; cf. [Plato](#) *Tim.* 41d-e).

## 2. Jewish Background

In Jewish sources, it is often difficult to ascertain whether an ascent text is the product of mystical experience, exegetical speculation or both. Sometimes an explicitly visionary experience can be described in terms of a bodily ascent ([1 Enoch 14:8](#)). Occasionally the texts themselves register [doubt](#) about whether the ascent is in the body or out of the body ([2 Cor 12:2–4](#); Schäfer 1981, §680). The goal of heavenly ascent varies widely in Jewish sources—anything from apotheosis (see below) to reconnaissance of the inhabited world ([T. Abr. 9:8](#)) to understanding the inscrutable ways of God ([4 Ezra 4:8](#)). Sometimes the individual initiates ascent; at other times God or an angel does so. In the process of ascending, a person may receive priestly vestment (Himmelfarb), or one’s body may undergo transformation into a purified angelic form of fire or light (Morrison-Jones 1992). Ascension seems to be an exclusively male prerogative among humans.

**2.1. Ascent in the Old Testament.** Several texts seem to refer to [ascension](#) in the OT (Schmitt). In [Genesis 5:24](#), [Enoch](#) is said to have “walked with God,” which may refer to an ascent prior to his final translation, when “God took him.” This is how later Jewish and Christian sources interpreted the account (e.g., Philo *Quaest. in Gen.* 1.86; [Wis 4:10–11](#); [1 Clem. 9:3](#); *Tg. Neof.* to [Gen 5:24](#); [1 Enoch 71:16](#); [93:8](#); [2 Enoch 68:1](#); [Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions 1.52.5](#); see [Enoch, Books of](#)).

The builders of the tower of Babel wanted to build a tower whose top was in the heavens ([Gen 11:4](#)). This was frequently interpreted to mean that the builders wanted to ascend into [heaven](#) (e.g., [Jub. 10:19](#); [Sib. Or. 3:100](#); [Josephus Ant. 1.4.3 §118](#)).

According to the narrative in [Exodus 24](#), Moses, together with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy elders, “went up and they saw the God of Israel” ([Ex 24:9–10](#)). Moses was given “the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction” ([Ex 24:12](#)). In

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[Deuteronomy 30:12](#), Moses insists that the divine commandment is neither too difficult nor too far away: “It is not in [heaven](#) that you should say, ‘Who will go up to [heaven](#) for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ ” When we put these texts together, it is understandable why later Jewish [tradition](#) regarded [Moses](#)’ ascent to receive the law on Mt. Sinai as an ascent into [heaven](#) and an encounter with the Merkabah throne-chariot of God (cf. [Ps 68:19](#) and the [tradition](#) based on it; Halperin).

Standing in the line of the greatest prophet Moses, the other Hebrew prophets are frequently said to have had visions of the divine throne, although their ascent into [heaven](#) is never described. These visions have a twofold purpose: to establish the [authority](#) and legitimacy of the prophet as an intermediary between [heaven](#) and earth and to provide revealed information.

[Psalm 110:1](#) can be interpreted to mean that the Davidic king is exalted and enthroned in [heaven](#) next to God himself: “The LORD says to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’ ” This passage, together with [Isaiah 6](#), [Ezekiel 1](#) and [Daniel 7](#), later gave rise to further mystical speculation about the divine Merkabah, including accounts of individuals who ascended to [heaven](#) (e.g., [1 Enoch 14](#); [Apoc. Abr. 17](#); [Jos. and As. 17:7–8](#); [T. Abr. 11](#); [Rev 4](#); [2 Enoch 22](#); see further [4Q530 2:16–19](#)). Elijah’s [ascension](#) into [heaven](#) and his expected return at the end of time also played a significant role in Jewish [tradition](#) (cf. [2 Kings 2:1–18](#); [Mal 3:2–3](#); [1 Enoch 89:52](#); [Sir 48:9–12](#); [1 Macc 2:58](#)).

**2.2. Ascent of the Soul After Death.** W. Bousset suggested that the ascent of the visionary is an anticipation of the ascent of the soul after [death](#), an idea that is found in many apocalypses of the Christian era (Himmelfarb 1991). The language of [1QH 3:19–20](#) is suggestive in this regard: “I thank you, Lord, for you have redeemed my life from the pit and from [Sheol](#) of the dead; you have raised me up to an eternal height.” Possible parallels to the aforementioned Ciceronian passage can be found in [Daniel 12:3](#) and [Matthew 13:43](#). In the first-century Similitudes of [Enoch](#) ([1 Enoch 71:16](#)) and in the second-century, Jewish-Christian source in [Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions 1.27–71 \(1.52.5\)](#), [Enoch](#) is a [model](#) for all those who have pleased God and are similarly translated into [heaven](#) and are being preserved for the [kingdom of God](#) (see also Philo [Quaest. in Gen. 1.86](#)).

**2.3. Ascent as Apotheosis.** The [ascension](#) and [deification](#) of a mortal is found in the early Jewish literature of both Palestine and the [Diaspora](#) (Collins 1995). The Egyptian [Diaspora](#) features the apotheosis of Moses in several writings. For example, the *Exagoge* of Ezekiel the Tragedian, written in the second century B.C., describes Moses’ ascent to Mt. Sinai and his enthronement in [heaven](#). The figure on the throne on high abdicates his throne and beckons Moses to sit on it (*Exag.* 68–76), thereby conferring upon Moses universal [sovereignty](#) (*Exag.* 77–78, 85–89). Philo of Alexandria also describes the apotheosis of Moses (Philo [Vit. Mos. 1.158](#); cf. Borgen).

The apotheosis of Moses was evidently known also in Palestine. In a text from [Qumran \(4Q491 Frag. 11 i 11–18](#); cf. Smith; Hengel), the author (not an angel) claims to have ascended into [heaven](#), to have received the “mighty throne in the congregation of the gods” and to have been “reckoned with the

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gods.” J. J. Collins suggests that this text was written by someone who held the office of teacher or interpreter of the law and who understood himself either as a new Moses or a complement of Moses. Like Moses, this teacher in the late first century B.C. saw himself enthroned in the heavens and issuing teachings and rulings of irresistible power. Related materials have been observed in [4Q427](#), [4Q458](#) and [4Q471](#) (cf. Abegg; Schuller).

According to Theophilus of Antioch ([Autol. 2.24](#)), a second-century, Jewish-Christian apologist who makes extensive use of Jewish traditions, apotheosis was God’s original intention for humans. When God created man, he “transferred him out of the earth from which he was made into paradise, giving him an opportunity for progress so that by growing and becoming mature, and furthermore having been declared a god, he might also ascend into [heaven](#) (for man was created in an [intermediate state](#), neither entirely mortal nor entirely immortal, but capable of either state), possessing [immortality](#).” Perhaps Theophilus viewed Jesus as a second Adam who follows a similar course of exaltation to that of the first (cf. Grant).

From another perspective, however, apotheosis can be seen as a presumptuous invasion of [heaven](#). In [Isaiah 14:12–20](#), the prideful king of Babylon, who wants to ascend to [heaven](#) and become like God, is cast down to the underworld ([Is 14:11](#)). D. J. Halperin discusses the rabbinic [tradition](#) based on this passage (e.g., [b. Hag. 13a](#)). P. Borgen finds the [tradition](#) of [ascension](#) as invasion of [heaven](#) already in Philo of Alexandria.

**2.4. Ascent as Legitimation of a Revelatory Mediator.** Ascent provides a vehicle for divine [revelation](#) and a means by which to legitimate the revelatory mediator. In the Book of Watchers ([1 Enoch 1–36](#)), for example, the heavenly ascent of [Enoch](#) to the divine throne ([1 Enoch 14](#)) has a revelatory aspect similar to the call visions of the Hebrew prophets. For [1 Enoch](#) the ascent establishes [Enoch](#)’s legitimacy and [authority](#) as mediator between [heaven](#) and earth, as well as providing revealed information. [4QLevi<sup>b</sup> ar \(4Q213a\) 2:13–18](#) describes a vision that Levi received after praying. This vision is not found in the Greek *Testament of Levi* (see [Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs](#)). Instead, we find a more extensive ascent account in a dream vision ([T. Levi 2:5–5:7](#)), which is evidently designed to confirm the priesthood of Levi and to communicate divine [revelation](#). Philo of Alexandria provides an autobiographical account of his own heavenly journey in [De Specialibus Legibus 3.1–2](#) (Borgen). This ascent equips Philo not only to read the laws of Moses but also “to peer into each of them and unfold and reveal what is not known to the multitude” (Philo [Spec. Leg. 3.6](#)). The well-known story of the Four Who Entered Paradise, which is found both in the [Talmud](#) and in *Hek-halot* literature (cf. Morray-Jones), tells how only Rabbi Aqiba was deemed worthy of beholding God’s [glory](#) behind the curtain. J. R. Davila (1996) has recently suggested that this story is reflected in a [Qumran](#) text ([1QH 16:4–26](#)).

**2.5. Ascent as a Periodization of History.** In the [apocalyptic](#) section of the *Apocalypse of Abraham* ([9–32](#)), which is a [midrash](#) on Abraham’s vision in [Genesis 15](#), the length of time that the elect are expected to suffer under foreign domination is expressed in terms of a cryptic chronology of four “ascents” ([Apoc. Abr. 28:2–5](#); cf. [27:3](#)). We may compare the rabbinic interpretation of Jacob’s dream in [Genesis 28:12](#) ([Lev. Rab. 29:2](#); [Pesiq. Rab Kah. 23](#)), according to which the [angels](#) of God ascending and Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

descending on the ladder to [heaven](#) are the guardian [angels](#) of the nations of the world who preside over the rise and fall of their respective empires. The number of rungs ascended represents the number of years that each of these empires reigned before their decline. Thus, Jacob saw Babylon ascend 70 rungs; Media, 52 rungs; Greece, 180 rungs; and Edom (Rome), an unknown number of rungs (cf. Kugel; Gafni).

**2.6. Communal Aspects of Ascent.** J. R. Davila (1994) argues that the later *Hekhalot* literature, which developed in part from traditions found in Second Temple apocalyptic literature, functioned in the context of a community: the shaman intermediary ascended or descended to the Merkabah, in order to create rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of his group. Other evidence suggests perhaps a more direct participation of the community in heavenly ascent or at least contemplation of the Merkabah. Halperin emphasizes that Merkabah speculation was well established in [synagogue worship](#). According to H. Schreckenberg and K. Schubert, the zodiac signs in the synagogues of Hammath Tiberias and Beth Alpha are symbols, as in *Hekhalot* texts, for the [ascension](#) of the worshiper through the seven heavenly “palaces” (*hekhalot*) to the throne of God. The [Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice](#) from [Qumran Caves 4 and 11](#) have demonstrated that participation in the heavenly [liturgy](#) was the goal of worshipers already in the Second Temple period (Newsom).

See also [MYSTICISM](#).

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