

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 164

Paul's Ascent and Angelic Torment with David Burnett

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Teacher: Dr. Michael S. Heiser (MH)

Host: Trey Stricklin (TS)

Guest: David Burnett (DB)

David Burnett returns to the podcast to discuss Paul's defense of his apostleship and his heavenly ascent in 2 Corinthians 11-12. This episode expands upon an earlier episode on Paul's ascent, specifically linking it to Second Temple Jewish apocalyptic literature (the Ascension of Abraham) and rabbinic material that appears to draw on that earlier material. The link to Abraham in Jewish thought is important, as it informs part of Paul's comments on being the seed of Abraham.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 164: Paul's Ascent and Angelic Torment with David Burnett. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike, how are you?

MH: Pretty good, pretty good. Busy week. Got some things ahead of me coming up as far as speaking, but it's all fun, it's all good.

TS: There you go. Well, I'm always excited to hear what you and David are going to talk about, so I'm ready for this one.

MH: So am I. It's great to have David Burnett back on the podcast with us. David, I'm sure the audience is going to enjoy whatever you present to us. This time we're going to sort of re-tread a bit of familiar territory. We've done an episode where we got into 2 Corinthians 12 (Paul's experience—as broadly as we could put it) and the reference to the messenger of Satan harassing him and him pleading with the Lord about it. So we've traversed this a little bit, but when you contacted me about having done some recent research on it and you were following certain trajectories, I was more than interested. So why don't you just get us into it? I know you'll probably want to read the passage first, and then I'll just let you lead the podcast and I'll jump in from time to time. So go ahead.

DB: Sounds good. Good to talk with you guys again. Well, the passage I'm dealing with today is 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 and Paul's ascent to heaven. It's a pretty enigmatic passage. I know you've covered it before. I'll be reading from the

ESV. To get the context of the passage, it's important to frame it in the discourse that Paul frames it in, which is in context of what scholars call the "Fool's Discourse" or the "Fool's Speech." So I'm going to start up in chapter 11, verse 16, and just read all the way down. So if you'll just bear with me... I may skip a few verses if I need to, but I think it's necessary to set up the context of the ascent because it'll be critical to my argument. So Paul says:

¹⁶ I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. ¹⁷ What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. ¹⁹ For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! ²⁰ For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. ²¹ To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, ³³ but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

¹ I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² 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.³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—⁴and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—⁶though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

So that's the passage. It's very interesting that you have in the context of this Fool's Speech... Well, first, why we call it a Fool's Speech is it's a rhetorical move by Paul. Instead of the super-apostles that are questioning his apostleship, which he's trying to defend here and whom he's accused to be in ally with Satan (pretty harsh!)... But he says that instead of boasting in successes, which is what you'd expect, he ends up going to weaknesses. To start out the whole Fool's Speech, he goes to the identity of identities—the heights of what someone could claim as greatness under the God of Israel, which was to be a Hebrew and an Israelite and the seed of Abraham. He's even called the servant of the messiah (verse 22 and 23 of chapter 11). The reason why this context is really important is because this is setting up an upside-down boasting. He's saying this is what it means to be a fool, is instead of boasting in these great, wonderful things that you'd normally boast in, he's boasting in his weaknesses. But he starts with the thing that would be positive, which is being the seed of Abraham. He's saying, "Well, if you would say that, well, so am I." And that's how this whole thing begins before he lists all the horrible things that have happened to him (instead of great successes).

The reason why that is significant is because if someone claiming to be the seed of Abraham... First of all, I think there's an increase in the significance of titles here. He chooses three titles, and there seems to be this "three thing" going on: he has three titles, he has the third heaven, he has the three times he prays. I guess it's just probably for rhetorical effect. But I think there's an increase here in verse 22, where he says, "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So

am I. Are they the offspring of Abraham? Well, so am I!" You know, it seems like he keeps increasing the identity politics game he's playing.

MH: Yeah. One would just be ethnic, the other would be covenantal, and then you get to the sentence about Abraham and that's a subset of the other one.

10:00

DB: Right. And if you're familiar with Paul in other places, he's dealt with what it means to be the seed of Abraham—to be in Christ. In Galatians 3 he talks about how the seed *is* Christ and how that *was* what's promised. From my first podcast I did with you guys, we talked about that—how Paul and other Second Temple Jews see the seed of Abraham promise to include the inheritance of the cosmos (to become like the stars, to become like the heavenly host). This would probably be the ascendant order here. It's not just the ethnic category. It's not just the covenantal category. It's everything it means to be the seed of Abraham and then, naturally following that, a servant of the messiah—seeing as he sees messiah as the ultimate seed of Abraham. He's saying he's a better follower than any of the others who would claim to be followers of messiah and boast of those things (that they are the seed of Abraham), but he doesn't use anything you'd expect someone to boast in! He only uses these horrible things. And that's the context in which we get him being almost sarcastic, carrying on the Fool's Speech at the beginning of chapter 12. "I must *go on* boasting!" You can imagine him slinging his hands around being really sarcastic with this. Like, "I've been beaten to death and left for dead. All these horrible things have happened, but I'm gonna just go on boasting!" So it's not exactly rhetorically setting you up for big success here.

MH: Do you think there's a flip side to it, as though... not to draw this out of them, but do you think those who would have been listening to this would be thinking Paul is, in effect, saying, "Let's hear how much you guys have suffered for the right thing." This could also be a dig at them. Do you think there's a flip side to it?

DB: Yeah, I definitely do. There is context for that in other speeches and there are rhetorical one-uppings in Greek literature like this, where the one is a "greater fool for righteousness' sake" than the other person. So there is obviously that going on, but I think there's also this playing on the horrible things that have happened to him and attaching it to being a follower of messiah.

MH: Oh, it's genuine. He's not making it up.

DB: It's genuine and for real, exactly. But what it plays for him rhetorically (why it's so significant) is that I think what he's doing in the context of the passage (this will be critical to the argument about what this ascent means and why he puts it there) is he frames it as coming as the true seed of Abraham—as the follower of the messiah. So these types of claims—as being the seed of Abraham and the follower of messiah and the *best* of all of them—come with all sorts of apocalyptic nuance. If messiah has come and the revelation of messiah is at hand and the

end is at hand (which, I think Paul is believing eschatology has been inaugurated in the coming of messiah)... But it didn't come with any bombastic destruction of enemies. Quite the opposite—the suffering of the messiah. As a result of his suffering and torment, this is what results in the messiah's glorification—his resurrection and ascendancy. So that is the vindication that comes in the eschaton for him.

MH: That's really important. In your previous episode on the death of the gods... Let's just use one word here—victory. It's defined as bringing people into the body of Christ. Basically, the trajectory for that on the part of those who are doing the work is suffering. It's not this Jewish expectation that the messiah shows up and all you guys are going to die—all our enemies are going to die. Actually, the way victory is achieved here is inverted. I think you can see that pretty clearly. Also, for our listeners, I think David's point about this crescendo leading up to being a child of Abraham... While it's true that within a lot of New Testament books it's hard to figure out the chronological order that they were written, this is *Second Corinthians*, and it's definitely later than *Galatians*. So we don't have a problem with that.

15:00

DB: Yeah, it's much later, which is actually pretty important because when you've already written books like *1 Corinthians* and you've written stuff like *Galatians* and depending on when you date *Romans*... It's interesting that he's already developed this theme of participation in the suffering of Christ, which results in vindication. Hopefully *Romans 8* would come to mind here, that you suffer with Christ so that you may be glorified with him. You're crying out "Abba, Father," just as he did on the cross. There's this assumption that once you're grafted in as a Gentile or once you're baptized into Christ and sharing the same Spirit...that the ancient Mediterranean forms of ultimate ethics would be through mimesis, which is just copying, imitating (where we get the term "imitate"), *Imitatio Christi*—the imitation of Christ. This is coming from Paul, which is part of a wider Mediterranean discourse on ethics. It seems to be very common that that's what you would do... a great philosopher, a great king, a great sage... you would mimic them to achieve the status that they have achieved.

Well, in this case, Paul's mimicry is through suffering and boasting in weaknesses, because that's exactly how Christ was glorified and that's how this ascent ends. So I guess we should get into the ascent now, yeah?

MH: Yeah. I was going to say that this is not a trivial point. I'm going to take you right back to where you want to launch in here.

DB: Yeah, go.

MH: We have a very common notion in certain segments of the Church today... Actually, I'll go with both sides of this. There's one side that sort of marries itself to the political left and we get an entitlement thing and a service thing, which the

service to others is really important, obviously—a point of Christian ethics. But on the other side we get a sort of conquest mentality, where the Church has to sort of take over society and reform it, clean it up. I think what Paul is saying here is this is not how you're going to win. (laughs) This is not how you're going to win the world—to take it over (not by violent force, but by political force), forcing it to be what ethically, theologically, "Christianly," ecclesiastically what you want it to be. The path to victory here is being willing to suffer. I personally think that's something the Church has really lost. But I don't want to drift off into application here.

DB: Yeah, that is definitely the context here. The whole point of a Fool's Discourse like this... There's multiple points to it, he's got a lot of rhetorical goals he's trying to achieve by it. One is obviously the defense of his apostleship. There's a number of reasons why he would have to defend himself, as keeping Gentiles as Gentiles and not making them Jews, calling them the seed of Abraham when they're not even circumcised, but also his gospel. His gospel is pretty radical! The fact that you can say that the crucified messiah is the Lord of the world, that he's the blessed one forever, the ascendant one at the right hand of God vindicated, is the one that the Romans killed. He didn't do any killing! (laughs) It's quite the opposite, actually. He brought people back from the dead. And that's how it ends—it ends with suffering. And then he is vindicated with ascendancy and glorification and status. And so in the midst of this Fool's thing, he goes on boasting, he goes into the ascent.

Now, some traditional views about Paul's ascent, some recent monographs... There's one by James Buchanan Wallace called *Snatched into Paradise: Paul's Heavenly Journey in the Context of Christian Experience*—just sort of framing it as a reflection of early Christian suffering and sort of framing the ascent in that context. He has a pretty developed bibliography of all the ascent traditions in ancient Judaism and in the Greco-Roman world. It's a pretty thorough monograph. But there's others. There's one by Paula Gooder called *Only the Third Heaven: On Paul's Ascent*, saying that it was a failed ascent and he didn't reach the heights. If I remember correctly, it's kind of like a polemic against those who say they've gone up to the heights, you know? It's like, "Well, I failed. I didn't make it all the way" in the list of his failures that he's already listed. So that's an interesting view, but I don't think that's what's going on here. Another common view that I think you mentioned back in your Acts 22 podcast is the Mercaba Mysticism view. It's like these later rabbinic sources that talk about the ascent of these four into paradise, where you have Asher, the man who makes it. I don't necessarily think that's what's going on, either, actually. I think the ascent to paradise as the archetypal is obviously there across the board. I actually think (this would be for another time) that some of those later Jewish rabbinic sources that I believe are in the *Talmud Bavli* (the Babylonian Talmud) is coming from interaction with these Christian sources.

MH: Yeah, that would be interesting.

20:00

DB: Daniel Boyarin has spoken to this (famous Jewish Talmudic rabbinic scholar, and expert on Christian origins, as well). He's spoken about the early Talmud with Asher and the Daniel 7 traditions as sort of arguing with Christological formations that have come in the Church. I think a lot of scholars have done a good job of this, of showing that what we see in later rabbinic Judaism (and the same in later Christianity as it develops), that these are not like broken up and never see each other, never talk to each other, their completely own identity after the temple is destroyed... That's just not the picture anymore. Critical scholarship has done a great job to show that the identities of these two groups are being formed over and against one another, in debate with one another, in wrestling even with scriptural traditions with one another. I would not be surprised if the Pauline tradition of ascent isn't in play later in those conversations. But again, that's for another day.

Another interesting view, which also comes from later sources from the Talmud, is that David Litwa (who we've spoken about before) has suggested that this is a Mosaic ascent story, drawing on a tradition of how Moses' heavenly ascent and b. Shabbat 88b-89a—that early traditions of Moses' ascent to heaven and dominance over angels... That he had trouble ascending and angels didn't want him to ascend and yet he ascended the heavenly mountain anyways to get the law. So there was push-back from the heavenly forces in his ascent, which is also later tradition. But it is interpreting earlier evidence. So it is probably an early tradition.

MH: Does Litwa do anything with some of the Second Temple stuff—you know, where Moses is given a seat next to or—in some cases—God's own seat, for a while?

DB: Oh, in *Ezekiel the Tragedian*?

MH: Yeah.

DB: I don't remember if he brings that up in the article or not.

MH: You could see it as being part of the picture, so there'd be threads to pick up there that would get picked up in the later stuff. You would think, anyway.

DB: Yeah, he's got a lot of early rabbinic stuff in there, a little bit from Philo, but mainly that one tractate that he sticks on. The point is, there are a lot of different vantage points into the back ground of this material. But I think many of them fail to take into account the actual rhetorical context of the Fool's Speech, so they kind of treat the ascent vision as... They want to focus just on the ascent stories that could function as the background. And I think they miss one that I think might be the background here, and it's the ascent of Abraham. Even in some of the bigger monographs there is sort of a mention of Abraham's ascent to heaven and

in *Apocalypse of Abraham*. Wallace has a section on that. But it doesn't sort of function archetypically for the whole story for him. Why I think there may be an ascent of Abraham as the background here is because of the appeal to being the seed of Abraham—the best follower of Christ. That sort of sets the tone for the trajectory of this whole speech and the inclusion of the ascent.

MH: Essentially, you're saying when his listeners or readers would have seen the reference to the seed of Abraham, if they're familiar with that Second Temple text they're going to put two and two together.

25:00 **DB:** Right. Not even the Second Temple text itself, but I'm going to show that this is a pretty wide tradition that goes beyond the Second Temple text. So yes, they could be familiar with... The first place I'll go is the *Apocalypse of Abraham* to demonstrate this tradition, but it goes all the way into early rabbinic literature, as well. In *Genesis Rabbah*, which is part of the Midrash, and early Jewish Midrash dating somewhere probably 3rd century CE, if I remember correctly... So you'll see that this tradition lasts a long time because a similar way of reading Genesis 15 (which I've talked about before on the podcast) seems to go a long ways into rabbinic tradition and seems to formulate how someone would go back and think, "What does it mean to be a seed of Abraham?" That's really what Paul is already doing. He says, "Okay, if you want to boast of something, I can, too. I'm a Hebrew, I'm an Israelite, I'm the seed of Abraham, as well." And he even includes an ascent tradition. So I want to suggest that rhetorically, this ascent tradition is coming from this Abrahamic ascent, where he gets the promise of seed. So it would be very interesting if this is the case! I'm sort of putting it over as a hypothesis and I'm going to be presenting a paper on the topic at this year's SBL.

MH: Charlesworth assigns the date to the *Apocalypse of Abraham* as first or second century. It's roughly contemporaneous. You could probably be fair and say that much with what Paul's writing here. It could be, anyway. There you go.

DB: That's true. It is very, very old. My supervisor at Marquette (Andrei Orlov) is also an expert on this text and has written an absurd amount of literature on it. He said that probably dates anywhere from first century B.C.E. to first century C.E. They give it a Palestinian provenance, so it's more than likely a Palestinian apocalypse, which makes it very interesting because it would be part of the early Jewish apocalyptic—not from the diaspora, but even though these ascent traditions that go out into the diaspora via apocalyptic can all be traced back to early Palestinian stuff, and it goes on into later Palestinian stuff in rabbinic literature. I don't know. That makes it really interesting and adds more "chips" in the game that this may be more significant than we think.

MH: For listeners, we on this podcast assume that—you might want to be sitting down when you hear this—Paul read books. (laughter) We assume that Paul read things. Again, if Orlov is correct here... He does work in Slavonic (he's one of the few people who really does, because that's part of his heritage—that part

of the world, Eastern Europe). If he's right in moving this back into the B.C. orbit, then this very well could have been something Paul would have read. In other words, he's an informed person. He's an academic for his day. It's not much of a stretch.

DB: Yeah. I think another important point, Mike, that we've covered before when I've been on your podcast is that we have to remember what texts, for the most part, actually are in the ancient world. Yes, they ascribe all sorts of inspiration significance to biblical texts and things like that, but we have to remember that there are also (maybe first and foremost and primarily, perhaps) a preservation of traditions. If you want traditions to last, first of all it's expensive and difficult and there's not tons of scribes. They're a very small bunch. You write things down. And so traditions that would have been more prevalent would have been written down. It's obviously prevalent enough to be kept by the Church in its early apocalyptic traditions and preserved. And so it's not only that it was written down, but it was significant enough to early Christian theology that they're the ones that preserved it, coming out of that Jewish apocalyptic tradition. Again, I think it's particularly difficult for Protestants sometimes to think about the fact that sometimes texts are a preservation of tradition, not the other way around. Yes, they produced traditions in and of themselves, and sometimes we want to question those later traditions and go back to earlier ones, but the texts themselves preserve early traditions that predate it. Looking at texts as sort of archaeological evidence, of sorts, is important when we look at this—like evidence of traditions.

30:00

The reason why this particular one that I'm going to be drawing on is so significant is because of this stretch of the dates. When you have early literature in Palestine that shows it and then much later literature that has similar tradition, more than likely it's pretty widespread. More than likely, there are enough Jews that think this way and then even later Christians that think this way that it's worth preserving. So basically, my argument is going to be that it may be a better background to go to these ascent of Abraham traditions as a background for 2 Corinthians 12 than some of the others. I think once we get into them, you'll see why.

The first text where we see this tradition pop up is one I've mentioned before: the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. You find it in chapter 20. The context here is Abraham has been taken up to heaven in a heavenly journey, and this is an interpretation of what's happened to him in Genesis 15, where you have the word of Yahweh coming to him and then taking him outside and him beholding the heavens, beholding the stars, numbering them. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* is obviously part of this long-standing tradition because there's just enormous amounts of material that's added to the biblical text—just tons of material. But it's rooted in that story of him being taken out. That verb that's used there in 15 is used in apocalyptic literature, as well, and we'll see it in the later rabbinic literature—the idea that he's not just taken outside of his tent or something, like "Hey, come

outside and look up!" They actually take it as him taken outside the actual cosmos himself to the heights of heaven. So he's taken out of the world as we know it into the heights of heaven, which would literally be tiered, like we've talked about before on the podcast. In this case of *Apocalypse of Abraham*, he's up in the eighth tier of heaven, so he's just about as high as you can go. I don't remember how many tiers there are in *Apocalypse of Abraham* (either eight or ten), but he's up in the eighth.

MH: I have the *Apocalypse of Abraham* open here and for the sake of the listeners, as section or chapter 21 begins, it says, "And he [God] said to me [Abraham], 'Look now beneath your feet at the firmament and understand the creation that was depicted of old.'" So what David is describing is right out of the text here.

DB: Yeah, he's literally above the firmament. So chapter 20 starts: "The Eternal, Mighty One said to me..." And the Eternal Mighty One is this figure—and this is very clear that in *Apocalypse of Abraham* (amongst many other texts, as we'll see)—he is this Word of Yahweh figure who comes to Abraham in Genesis 15. So these aren't just some sort of prophetic words that come to him. It's a person. It's a figure. In this text, it's the Eternal Mighty One. So the Eternal Mighty One has taken him on this journey, like the great angel tradition, or this second power that we've talked about before as a background to early Christology. But here in this text (we'll just focus on this). Remember, this is in the context of him being taken outside.

And the Eternal, Mighty One said to me, "Abraham Abraham!" And I said, "Here I am!" And he said, "look from on high at the stars which are beneath you and count them for me and tell me their number!"

So again, we see the taking him outside and looking at the stars...

MH: He's *really* outside.

35:00 **DB:** Yeah! He's not just outside, he's outside the firmament. And so this taking him outside and the looking down (*habet*) can be taken as (this is probably where it's coming from)... the Hebrew can easily be taken that way. It can mean looking from up to down. It's used that way in the Proverbs. So when you pair that with being taken out and looking down and seeing the stars, that is an actual legitimate translation of the Hebrew. It's really interesting that they would interpret that, "Well, clearly this is an apocalypse." Now mind you, Genesis says that Abraham was a prophet. Obviously, he's seen the whole exodus. He's seen the seed. He's seen the 400 years. He's seen the conquest. He's seen all that stuff in Genesis 15—so much so that later traditions would say he's seen the end, like the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and others. And even in the Gospel of John you

have Jesus saying "Abraham has seen my day and rejoiced." And so there's this tradition that a lot more was revealed to him than we think, even eschatologically.

MH: So you're saying "Abraham has seen my day" could very well be for us a cryptic reference to "Abraham has seen my coming—essentially, my incarnation and what I'm about to do" and all that stuff. Yeah. That's interesting.

DB: Incorporating it into the whole narrative... I don't want to get off on John right now, but if we were to go to that, you'd have to say that new creation there, conquest and the powers, all that kind of stuff would be included in "the day" because when you think of what Abraham actually saw and what he was actually promised—even in his deep sleep—just in the context of that vision in Genesis 15, he was promised the coming exodus, the conquest of the land. That's the end of Torah. He's seen the end of Torah. For many Jews, especially in the Second Temple period (we have enormous evidence for this, especially in Josephus), we're reading the Torah eschatologically. So the Torah is sort of the framework of all of history. It's not that it ends just before the conquest. Within Torah was encapsulated the history of the world. So if Abraham has seen sort of the ends of that, then he must have seen the end of the world. Especially because when the prophets talk about the eschaton it's a new exodus—it's a new conquest of the powers. It would be perfectly normal, actually, in the apocalyptic tradition, to assume that Abraham must have seen the end. So that's really significant.

Anyways, back to the text itself. So the angel says to him:

Look from on high at the stars which are beneath you and count them for me and tell me their number.

Again, Abraham is *above* the stars—he's been taken up above them in the heights. Then Abraham responds. He says:

And I said, "When can I, for I am a man!"

I don't remember if we talked about that tradition or not. Why would Abraham ask that question? "How can I count them? I'm just a man!" An obvious answer might be, "Have you seen the stars? You'd die before you could count them all." Well, yeah—that may be the case. But this is playing off these traditions from the Hebrew Bible and in the Hebrew Bible we find (and you know this from my thesis, Mike) the only time where we see that combination of numbering the host of heaven and numbering the stars is actually from Yahweh himself. In Psalm 148 and Isaiah 40 he numbers the heavenly host, he calls them all by name. He knows their number. So this is something that the divine general—the divine vizier—knows his whole armies. He knows his whole host before them. He counts all the ranks that move before him. That's the idea. So if you know those texts and you're hearing Apocalypse of Abraham, then you know that's a

legitimate question. If the Eternal Mighty One is telling him to number the stars, he's like "How can I? I'm just a man!" So this is a divine task. This is how the Eternal Mighty One Responds to him:

And he said to me, "As the number of the stars and their power, so shall I place for your seed the nations and men, set apart for me and my lot with Azazel."

40:00

Now this is *very* interesting! The promise of star-like seed here is being not just numerically (like we covered before) but qualitatively—becoming like them, having their power. It's a specific power that's being talked about here. And this is important because this is showing how early Jews are reading the fulfillment of the covenant to Abraham or the "promise" to Abraham, in Paul's language. "The seed has power over nations and men that were set apart for me and my lot with Azazel." Azazel is the chief of demons, which we talked about from *1 Enoch* and other traditions. So the chief of these evil forces—these heavenly hosts that are over these nations and men, allotted to them (again, we're seeing the Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 82 Worldview here)... Abraham is seeing that he will be victorious over them and his seed will actually inherit the rule over them. This is what we see from the inheritance of the nations promise to Abraham. This is how they're interpreting it. It's ultimately a victory over Azazel and those in lot with Azazel—these spirits. That's coming right out of the Deuteronomy 32 Worldview.

The reason why this is so important is because in the ascent, the whole point of taking Abraham to the heights of heaven and above these stars—above these heavenly host—is to promise [Abraham's seed] their power. And it will happen through victorious conquest and they will achieve nations and men—those that were allotted to Azazel. So this is really important because this connects the ascent tradition with the seed of Abraham. This is what I think is going on with Paul.

MH: Yeah, with the line in chapter 11.

DB: Right. Remember, there's no chapters and verses in these letters. It's just the paragraphs. So when you're reading in context of the Fool's Speech as a whole, you set it up as, "Well, what someone would boast in is being *the* seed of Abraham with the messiah—the inheritor of all the nations, those that were given to Azazel and the spirits of his lot, or Satan and the spirits." These types of stories, like the ascent of Abraham here in the Apocalypse of Abraham are being told and retold and retold as etiologies (or origin stories) for the destiny of Israel. "The true Israel—the true seed of Abraham—are going to inherit the world. We're going to be victorious over our enemies." And these are used to buttress revolutionary traditions. So apocalypses, in one sense (these revelatory stories), as many scholars have pointed out, more than likely germinate and grow as sort of anti-imperial type stories, where you tell about these sort of ascent traditions

where they're promised victory over the powers... Well, you're looking forward to one day being over these nations that rule over you, that have abused you! And, actually, it's quite common in the Old Testament to use "thorn" in this way (that we'll see later), as an image for the nations because it's part of the curse in Genesis. But there's this idea that one day that will end, these powers will be destroyed and we'll be victorious, we'll tear them to pieces and inherit what was promised to the seed of Abraham from the beginning.

So when you start out your Fool's Speech boasting about, "Well, I'm the true seed of Abraham and a follower of the messiah..." Messiah is supposed to be the one that secures these victories. And you, as the seed of Abraham, guess what? You get to inherit it all! In many cases in apocalyptic literature, they participate in the divine warfare in the end. A good example of that is the War Scrolls from Qumran.

MH: Yeah, at the Final Day. It's important to point out that the militaristic talk is always associated with the Day of the Lord. It's not present at this point in Paul because he's saying the path of this victory is quite different.

DB: Yeah, very different. So that's one tradition you have of Abraham's ascent to heaven from Genesis 15. Fast forward a couple hundred years now and you have *Genesis Rabbah* (a rabbinic text). Now the way Jewish Midrash works... I like how John Levinson from Harvard University talks about Midrash to his students. He says that when you're normally comparing ways of interpreting texts, you always look for a referent outside of itself: "It's like *this*." Whenever he's talking about Midrash, he's like, "Well, Midrash is like... well... um... it's Midrash." There's not something else generally that is easily comparable to it because for starters, it's not just a commentary the way we think about commentaries in the Protestant world. You have a pastor buying a commentary on a text. Well, Midrash doesn't really work that way. It is a collection of commentary on biblical literature, but it's more than just commentary and they include all kinds of different rabbis in these texts. So you have a collection of rabbis in the Midrash who have sometimes competing interpretations of a text but you codify them together because the conversation or the debate over the text is actually part of the process—that's part of the way of reading scripture in the Jewish tradition.

So in this Midrash you have a number of rabbis who are discussing this text that we're talking about (Genesis 15) and they interpret it in really interesting ways. If you're looking for the reference, this is from Genesis Rabbah 44:12 and the text says:

And he brought him forth without...

He's taking him out, in Genesis 15:5.

MH: It would be "without" as in *outside*, for the audience.

DB: *Ha huzzah* is the form here.

Rabbi Joshua said in Rabbi Levi's name: "Did he then lead him forth without the world, that it says 'and he brought him forth without?'"

It's pretty funny how they question this stuff.

It means, however, that He showed him the streets of heaven, as you read, "While as yet He had not made the earth, nor the outer spaces" —*huzoth* (Prov. VIII, 26).

So this one rabbi (Rabbi Joshua in Rabbi Levi's name) makes a connection with Proverbs 8, saying that *huzoth* used there is the earth and the outer spaces, so he must be in those outer spaces, like it's mentioned there in Proverbs. So this is one way (called *gezerah shavah* in the rabbinic tradition), where you find a word from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and you're looking to compare it or to elucidate what a verse means in another place that has that same word. It's not just that simple. I think some people talk about it that simply, but normally there's some contextual reference why you would do that. For example, here the context of Proverbs 8 is in the creation—making the outer... not just the earth, but the outer spaces. So that's significant why he would draw on that comparison of *huzoth*.

So when he's being "taken without," it's literally taken out and seeing the streets of heaven. Then another rabbi:

Rabbi Judah ben Rabbi Simon said in Rabbi Johanan's name:

So these are rabbis preserving earlier rabbinic tradition, which is also very significant because it predates the text.

"He lifted him up above the vault of heaven; hence He says to him, 'Look (*habbet*) now toward heaven,' *habbet* signifying to look down from above."

MH: That sounds an awful lot like the Apocalypse of Abraham right there.

DB: Doesn't it? It sounds just like it! This is hundreds of years later!

MH: He takes him above the firmament and says, "Look down at the firmament." Yeah.

DB: Yeah, look down from above. So this is Abraham's ascent to heaven. Some people have said that rabbis don't do apocalyptic anymore and those apocalyptic

traditions have died off. Well, Daniel Boyarin and lots of other scholars have showed that's not true. And here's another rabbinic text showing that's not true. Clearly, here they're reading this Abrahamic tradition that being taken outside is a literal ascent to heaven—a literal apocalypse here. That's really significant, I think. I get excited about this nerdy stuff. So the rabbi says:

... *habbet* signifying to look down from above." The Rabbis said: [God said to him]: "Thou art a prophet, not an astrologer, as it says, 'Now therefore restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet (Gen. XX.7).'"

That's really interesting how this one rabbi is using the other rabbis that say, "Look, he's a prophet not an astrologer." In other words, the astrologers are the ones who look up into heavens, right? They look up and try to determine the fates by them. But Abraham is not like those. He's taken way up above them all!

MH: He's not looking up, he's looking down.

50:00

DB: Yeah, he's looking down at those suckers, like he's literally above them! Now, if you think about this with ancient... We don't live in a patriarchal culture as much anymore (still a little bit, but not as much), so we don't really think in terms of hierarchies as much, unless you're part of a company/government, whatever. But here you've gotta think of it in terms of hierarchy as significant ontologically, meaning, "What *are* you? Who *are* you really?" Because if you can go up above the host that people look at to try to determine the fates and you're a tier above them, then you're something else entirely. Right? This is ontologically... You've sort of exceeded them in their powers. This is not some regular astrology story we're talking about here, in other words. So it goes on to say:

In the days of Jeremiah the Israelites wished to entertain this belief [in astrology], but the Holy One, blessed be He, would not permit them. Thus it is written, "Thus saith the Lord: 'Learn not the way of the nations, and be not dismayed at the signs of the heaven, etc. (Jer. X,2): your ancestor Abraham wished to entertain this belief long ago, but I would not permit him.'"

Watch what this rabbi says. This is fascinating.

Rabbi Levi said: "While the sandal is on your foot tread down the thorn; he who is placed below them fears them, but thou [Abraham] art placed above them, so trample them down [ignore them].

Now *that* is interesting, isn't it?

MH: The thorn language there, yeah.

DB: The thorn language: "While the sandal is on your foot, tread down the thorn." Remember the context to the rabbinic conversation going on here about Genesis 15:5. When he's taken out, they've already established he's in the heavens. He's in the halls of heaven. He's above the stars. He's above the firmament. He's looking down at them. And so he's not a regular astrologer. He's not like these other Israelites who went astray and did that. He's above all that—so much so that this rabbi says "the sandal on your foot is treading down the thorn."

MH: You're basically wiping your feet on the powers.

DB: Exactly! So they go theological with this and they're saying, "Okay, how we characterize these powers"... because it isn't them. The singular thorn here is like a metaphor for the powers who were over the people.

MH: The stars are considered divine beings, divine powers. There you go. So Abraham is the one who essentially puts or has (I don't know what the correct verb would be here, probably both) the powers underfoot. And he has his foot on their necks, if we could use that image.

DB: That's exactly the image! The treading underfoot is always a Hebraism for defeat of foes. You see it's what messiah does.

MH: Isn't that interesting toward the end of Romans and the whole passage about having Satan under your feet...

DB: Romans 16!

MH: It's not that Jesus is going to do that. He's speaking of the Romans and he's speaking of believers, otherwise known as the children of Abraham.

DB: Yeah, the participatory crushing of Satan's forces. Bingo! Bingo, bingo. So they have the same traditions! This is not new. This is not New Testament stuff. This is Jewish rabbinic stuff—apocalyptic and rabbinic stuff. What's so fascinating of it is the trampling them down... Obviously the forces aren't trampled down when he gets up there. They're still there. But that's the point. This is an apocalypse—a revealing of something in the future. So when people are going to these stories, you've got to think of how these stories function for people. When we're talking about a rhetorical context that's significant with Paul here in this text, we have to think about how these texts function. How do these stories about Abraham ascending to heaven and being promised victory over the forces as he looks down at them and is exalted over them, trampling them underfoot and inheriting the rule from the evil powers, trampling the thorn... How does that function? I mean, why do you even tell those stories? The reason you tell those stories is because you're giving hope to the current generation who's hearing them. That you, being the seed of Abraham, this is your destiny. You will trample them underfoot. This gives you privilege, right? I mean, if you're the group of

people out of all the groups of people under the heavens who are the seed of *this* guy, who are promised to rule eternally, then guess what? You've got some reason to boast! You're literally going to trample down all the powers that rule over everybody else! So basically, you're not just better than everybody else, you're like *way* better than everybody else! I think that's how some of these apocalyptic stories function with people in early Judaism. They're used to say, "Yeah—death to all the Gentiles!"

MH: It's also useful for telling people to stop thinking about your current circumstance. This circumstance that you're experiencing is the temporary one. It's this whole "this world is not your home" kind of thing. If they're conscious of a future destiny that transcends where they are at this point, then that matters.

55:00

DB: Absolutely.

MH: That's the thing you're living for, not your current circumstance (or at least it shouldn't be).

DB: And it's not just to get out of the circumstance and have victory over the powers that will do it. Because for Paul, it's not getting out of it, it's actually participating in the suffering itself.

MH: Participating in the process. Because the irony is that is the process... I think for listeners, if you just think of the old famous quote (I don't know who said it): "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." It's this idea that it's through suffering that the Church actually wins, whereas we're like, "No, it's through marketing. It's through being clever. It's using earthly powers to advance the cause of the Church." No, it's none of that stuff really, that's what Paul is saying.

DB: Exactly. So when you actually see him to the third heaven, which for him (contra Gooder here, in my opinion) would be the heights of heaven—the high heavens... "Whether in the body or out of the body, I don't know. God knows," he says. That's very interesting. He doesn't really know what that situation is. So it could be an apocalyptic vision or it could be a physical ascent. He's not sure. But the man being caught up into paradise is him. You've talked about that before. So he's been to paradise, like these other texts. It's important for listeners who haven't heard other podcasts, perhaps, to know that when we think of paradise... This is an important divine council concept, as well. When you think of the heights of the cosmic mountain where the gods meet, this is always the paradise area. This is where the seed of the waters, the source of the waters (in the Psalms), where you have the rivers coming down from Eden—the mountain of God, the meeting point of all the fresh water, the place of life, the place with beautiful paradise. This is where we get the "Hanging Gardens of Babylon" concept. Marduk's temple is up there at the top and it's this great paradise at the top of the cosmic mountain. It's the same type of idea. So if you've been to the

heights of heaven, guess what? You've been to paradise where the gods are. You can't get higher, basically. That's why I think this is definitely an accomplished apocalypse—and he even talks about it like it's accomplished. He's definitely made it to the heights. And he heard things that cannot be told, which man cannot utter. I know you've talked about the tongues of angels stuff before so we don't need to go into that. But it's in that context where he says, "On behalf of this man I'll boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast except of my weaknesses." So this is the deal: it's still in the context of that Fool's Speech. "Though, if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool." So he brings it up again, even after his ascent. "I'm still talking as a fool here. I know you would normally attribute these ascents as a great victory." Now if the Abrahamic story is here, by being the seed of Abraham, don't you remember when Abraham ascended and he was promised victory over the Azazel or Satan figure and all the spirits in his lot, he tramples them underfoot? If you have that in mind and then you hear this in verse 7 when he says:

⁷So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations...

He's not saying that it's not great, it's not amazing, it's not real apocalypse like he's really been. Paul is for sure a Jewish mystic apocalypticist. There's no getting around that. When you picture Paul, don't picture just the erudite sort of scribe studying in a school. Picture the crazy apocalyptic mystic as well, because that's what he is.

MH: (laughing) He's a little bit of both!

1:00:00 **DB:** Yeah. He is both, for sure. He's like, "the *greatness* of the revelations, surpassing..." He's definitely harping on that. But he says in the context of that—and this is the key:

...a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

"Thorn" here is interpreted all kinds of different ways. What I think is going on (if this tradition is in the background like we saw in *Genesis Rabbah*), the thorn is just another metaphor for these powers who the people under heaven fear. But he can trample them underfoot. Well,

...a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me...

Now, this "in my flesh" thing is significant. Again, keep it within the Fool's Speech. These other people boast in their flesh, right? They boast in their flesh, like, "We're Hebrews, we're Israelites, we're the descendants of Abraham, this is

it." So they're boasting in their flesh. They're ones who would take ascendancy, they would take domination. In context of Paul's defense of his apostleship, they would see themselves as greater than him. "He's not a legitimate apostle; we are greater than him." So he's using things that you would boast in your flesh about, but his boast is this torment that was given to him to harass him, to torment him, from an angel of Satan. So I think here the thorn is the angel of Satan—one of these powers that those who under heaven fear. In the midst of his ascent, he is not trampling them down. He's actually being tormented by this thorn. So this shows that he's not using his ascent story the way you would typically use an ascent story—to talk about the dominance over these others that are promised, the trampling underfoot, the looking down on them. He is still being tormented, even though he said, "I'm following the messiah; I'm the true seed of Abraham." You see it?

MH: That is the mimesis (the term you used earlier), the template for the messiah. Jesus, of course, knows what the destiny is, but he also knows he has to go through the torment first. So he's actually mimicking Christ very completely.

DB: Exactly. Because what do you have in the Jesus tradition? And there may even be some of the early Jesus tradition behind this, I'm not sure. What you have in Jesus' tradition when they're celebrating his coming into Jerusalem and he finally is there at the Mount of Olives (especially in Luke), you have literally Satan is *there*, tempting him and tormenting him. In the end, Satan is literally there and present in the story. All narrative gospel scholars have made an important point: that the temptation stories from Satan are intended to rhetorically mirror the temptation in the garden, when Satan is there (especially in Luke). So the idea of Jesus being tormented by Satan and then dying but then ascendant and glorified as a *result* of his suffering. Not through it and not ending it, but as a result of his suffering unto death, he is exalted. So I think there is definitely maybe some sort of echoes of the torment by Satan and then overcoming it even through suffering.

This is what Paul is seeking to boast in. So the thorn here, again, is a reference to the angel of Satan. This does not mean that there isn't physical ailment attached to it. There are enormous amounts of Greek literature (including Jewish literature) that ailments are attached to demonic possession, or a malevolent spirit has come and as a result someone is blind or has stomach issues or whatever.

MH: Right. It doesn't have to be an either/or. It's a both/and.

DB: It's not an either/or. So he probably has some physical ailment that he's rooting this in, and maybe he thinks it's come as a result of this ascent that he has experienced. That being said, it's not an either/or. These debates and articles about either/or are kind of silly to me. But I definitely do think what he's doing with this thorn is he's using it metaphorically to speak of the angel that's

tormenting him. The fact is, it's to keep him from being conceited. Again, this is the whole purpose of the passage. This is the whole rhetorical point. Because "the Lord said to me"... Even though he he said he wasn't going to talk about the ascent, he still says what the Lord said to him. It's funny!

But my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

It is not made perfect in trampling out the powers underfoot. That's not how it's done. It's the power that's granted to unending fidelity. What you see in the Christ tradition with Jesus... he's faithful until the end, even in the great temptation: "Take this cup from me, but now my will be done. Your will be done." Right? So he doesn't want to suffer the great suffering, but if it's faithfulness unto the Father, he'll do it even to the bitter end. So it's like *this* is how the power is made perfect. It's through weakness. It is not through the violent destruction of his enemies because, just as Christ said, "I can call down legions of angels to destroy all these people that are killing me." It's the same sort of idea. It's, "therefore, I'll boast more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of messiah may rest upon me." See, sharing with the weaknesses of messiah so that the power of messiah can rest on him. This is how the ultimate inheritance and power is achieved. It is not through the demise and destruction of the thorns. It is willing to go through the torment in order for God to glorify, which is part of the Abrahamic story, too. The one who leaves everything, basically dying to himself, God exalts and makes of him a great nation and gives a great name.

MH: It's God's victory anyway. It's a template. You want to participate, you want to play the game (I hate to use the term) the way it's supposed to be played, you play it like Jesus played it. And that's the way you actually win. I don't want to use that to be flippant about it, but it's patterning. I think there are going to be some (maybe not necessarily what I would consider to be the native podcaster, or as Trey would say, the "Nekked Nation" here) who would buy into this idea that we need to go out there and look for demons and cast them out and confront them. This is exactly the opposite. This is the opposite.

For those who have read my fiction, I'll just call your mind back to not the very end scene, but very close to the end scene with Sabi. This is precisely the tactic. You don't assume to confront (in the case of the story and in the case of the passage) a divine power. You are willing to suffer because you know that it's going to lead to its demise anyway. It's the same kind of idea. So if you can think of those analogies, that's what David's getting at here. It inverts what pop-Christianity would sort of assume—that we're supposed to go out there and confront as many demons as we can. Again, the point is not that you never try to deliver someone. We have those stories, too, in the Gospels and even in Paul's case, as well. It's an assumption of exaltation that I think we need to be really, really careful about.

DB: Yeah, and that's the whole point. If this Abrahamic tradition is behind it (and I'm still raising it more as a question than some sort of dogmatic stance), it makes sense of all the parts of being the seed of Abraham, yet at the ascendance. The thorn is set against him instead of him trampling it underfoot. The whole point of this tradition goes to back up exactly what you're saying—that the usurpation of hostile heavenly forces in victory is being flipped to an ascent that results in torment. That is exactly what Paul is attempting to do to those who would doubt his apostleship for his apparent failings or those who would suffer who claim to follow this messiah that Paul is preaching. It's saying that you're not the seed of Abraham just because you're victorious over the powers. It's quite the opposite. It's that you are truly the best—because he says he's the best! He follows messiah the best. He's just speaking rhetorically. He's saying that because this is the way. This is the best way. You really want to follow Christ? Okay, come and be willing. Open yourself up to this because what happens is, in Paul's mind... It's totally redefining the messiah event.

1:10:00

We can't say this definitively because we don't have all the evidence. We don't know if many people believed suffering messiah. Some people say the Gabriel Stone or something does that. We don't really know. But what we can know for sure is what this would have done would be pretty subversive to those who would use these ascent traditions as sort of the bombastic "trample your enemies underfoot" sort of tradition. It's the exact opposite of what Paul's doing here. And he can bring it upon himself. Notice he's not talking about anybody else. He's saying, "Yeah, an angel was sent to torment me. Yeah, great call, huh? The best follower of messiah... well, I'm sitting here in torment!" So it's obviously that greatness is being redefined here. It's not lording it... This is the same sort of tradition we find at the end of the Gospels, as well. Jesus says, "How do the Gentiles do it? They lord it over you. But how did I come to you? As a servant. As a slave." It's the same kind of thing we're seeing here.

MH: Yeah, the inversion is really... That's significant because it's by this inversion that victory will emerge on the other side. It goes with Paul talking earlier in the epistle about the foolishness of the cross and this whole idea that the preaching of the cross is foolishness to this, that, and the other group. It's quite in line with that. It's almost like it's intentionally not supposed to look like what it is. I kind of like stuff like that.

DB: Which is apocalyptic! That's the core of apocalyptic.

MH: You think you're losing everything, but if you take the path and you're confident in what is behind the curtain even though you're not seeing it, you'll get to the point where you do see it and you'll find out this was the way. It's really interesting.

Well, I'm glad that you took the time to a) get into it and b) share it with us here on the podcast. You know the drill here. We try to read the text in context, and I

think you've had a number of trajectories here that are really worth thinking about. So you're going to read a paper on what, specifically? Just sort of this overview or one aspect of it? What's the paper going to be on in November?

DB: Well, it has one of those obtuse titles that you love to make fun of me for. (Mike laughs.) It's "Ascent and Torment: The Apocalyptic Juxtaposition of an Abrahamic Victorious Ascent." Basically, I'm just trying to say that it's sort of a reverse apocalyptic. It's zooming in on the Abrahamic ascent tradition as the primary background to this, drawing on the identity politics on claiming seed of Abraham and rhetorically attaching it to the Abrahamic ascent tradition, which would reveal that Paul is intentionally and actively trying to flip something over for rhetorical effect.

MH: Maybe at the conference in November we can catch up with you after you do the paper and you can let us know if you got any good questions afterwards.

DB: Yeah, that'd be fun. We'll do it.

MH: Well, thanks again for spending the time with us.

DB: Thanks for having me!

MH: Many will certainly have found it interesting. Again, this is what we try to do here. We try to read the text in context and get the first century reader/person in your head to help you understand what Paul was trying to communicate.

TS: And good luck in Wisconsin!

DB: Yeah, still packing like crazy. This is not the fun part!

MH: I don't envy you. Well, thanks again for spending the time with us.

DB: Thanks, guys!

MH: Absolutely. B'bye.

DB: See ya. Bye.

TS: All right, Mike. Another great conversation with David Burnett.

MH: Very interesting again. David spends a lot of time in Second Temple material. It's a good balance to the Semitic stuff. I know I get into it once in a while, but that's where he lives most of the time. Glad to have him.

TS: Sounds good. Next week we'll be doing our 22nd Q&A show, so be looking out for that. I guess with that, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God bless.