As a revelatory experience, ascension plays an important role in apocalyptic literature. It is conceived as the most authoritative way of receiving revelation and secrets concerning the heavenly and earthly worlds. Thus, ascension narratives are filled with mystery.

Elevation during prayer. This type is most prevalent among poetic or liturgical writings found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, such as the Thanksgiving Scroll (Hodayot), the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and others (e.g., 1Q1H XI, 20–22; 4Q400 1 I; 11Q5 XXVI, 11–12). The Self-Glorification Hymn, in which the speaker describes himself sitting among an assembly of angels (4Q431 1, 4 and parallels), is probably the most explicit account of an ascension among these texts.

In these types of texts the purpose of ascension is not to receive knowledge, but to glorify God. Through prayer the ascenders are elevated to the degree of angels, but the major gain of this elevation is not of the individual ascenders, but the praise of God obtained by it.

Bibliography:
- E. Eschel, “The Identification of the

II. Judaism

- Second Temple and Hellenistic Judaism
- Rabbinic and Medieval Judaism

A. Second Temple and Hellenistic Judaism

The idea of ascension to heaven in Second Temple Judaism has its roots in several biblical accounts, most notably Enoch (Gen 5:24), Elijah (2 Kgs 2:1–11), Ezekiel (Ezek 40–48) and Daniel (Dan 7:9–14). These traditions do not reflect a consistent representation of ascension. Elijah is the only one who is explicitly said to have ascended to the heavens, while Daniel provides the most elaborate account of the heavens.

These and other traditions were developed in Second Temple literature for several purposes, drawing both on the figures mentioned in the Bible and on other biblical figures who might have, or should have ascended, in the eyes of a Second Temple author (e.g., Moses, Isaiah and Ezra).

The concept of ascension to the heavens can be divided into two types of ascension, one involving revelation, the other emphasizing the experience of being in heaven. In both types deification may be implied as part and parcel of the ascension, although this is not true of all ascension narratives (Himmelfahrt: 47–71).

Thus, ascension narratives are filled with mystery.
Ascension (General)


— A. A. Orlov, From Apocalypticism to Merkabah Mysticism (JSJ Supplement 114; Leiden 2007).

Aryeh Amihay

B. Rabbinic and Medieval Judaism

The early rabbinic writings produced in Roman Palestine during the 2nd to 5th centuries CE (i.e., Mishnah, Tosefta, Palestinian Talmud, and early midrashim) evince little interest in the theme of ritual or experiential – discipline (Halperin 1980).

By contrast, rabbinic literature produced in both the Sasanian east and the Roman-Byzantine west from approximately the 5th century onwards exhibits an increasing interest in the theme of heavenly ascent. Thus, several late Palestinian midrashic works explore the process of heavenly ascent, most notably through narrative accounts of which God is said to sit enthroned and through which the visionary ascends. The religious discourse and practice contained in this literature is of the divine chariot-throne (merkavah). The conception of heavenly ascent in Hekhalot literature differs from the passive model of “rapture” characteristic of the apocalyptic genre; here, instead, heavenly ascent is achieved through the performance of ritual speech and action (Himmelfarb). Hekhalot literature and its powerful image of God’s chariot-throne had a lasting impact on the


Ra’anan Boustan

III. New Testament

“Ascension” can include (1) short-term visits to and through heaven (“heavenly journeys”); (2) someone

For preview only. Please contact author for complete version.