TRAVELING UP AND AWAY:
JOURNEYS TO THE UPPER AND OUTER REGIONS OF THE WORLD

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Ascents to heaven and journeys to the ends of the earth in the literature of antiquity do not constitute a genre, since writings of several different kinds include accounts of them. It seems better then to take such ascents and journeys as a theme in the Bible, post-Biblical Jewish and Christian texts, as well as in Greek and Roman works. Some earlier and later texts from Mesopotamia and Persia are included to fill out the picture a bit.\(^1\) Two general types may be discerned in ancient literature. In the first, the ascent occurs instead of death or at death. The person or soul that ascends remains in heaven.\(^2\) Some accounts of this type are narrated from the perspective of the traveler; others from the perspective of those left behind. In the second, the ascent occurs during the traveler’s lifetime. The person or soul that ascends returns home after visiting or touring heaven or the ends of the earth.\(^3\)

BRIEF HISTORY OF SCHOLARSHIP

Members of the history of religion school were the first to study texts about ascents to heaven in a comprehensive way. Scholars of this “school” approached both biblical and extra-biblical texts by placing them in their cultural contexts. In a related development in the field of classics, Albrecht Dieterich published a text giving instructions for an ascent to heaven. This text is part of the collection known as the Greek Magical Papyri. Dieterich gave the work the title, “a Mithras liturgy.”\(^4\) The major contribution of the history of religion school was to show the way in which ancient Jewish and

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\(^1\) Due to the limits of time and space, Egyptian texts and the works discovered at Nag Hammadi are not discussed here.


\(^3\) C. Colpe and P. Habermehl, “Jenseitsreise (Reise durch das Jenseits),” *RAC* 17 (1996) 490–543.

Christian religious ideas and practices were embedded in the Hellenized and Romanized cultures of the eastern Mediterranean world. The failure of specific hypotheses or terminology does not undercut the value of this achievement. The theological problem raised by the method was the issue whether and how Christianity could be seen as unique and what value other religious traditions might have. Wilhelm Bousset was probably the most influential member of the history of religion school. He published a study of ascent texts in 1901. In it he argued that the two general types of ascent are closely related: the ascent during life through the practice of ecstasy anticipates the final ascent after death. He had two aims in writing this essay. One was to show that the great religions of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, on this point at least, have a common history and have influenced each other. The other was to show that one particular religion has priority on this point and had the greatest influence on the others (the Iranian). He began with Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic materials because they can be dated most precisely. Then came a survey of Iranian religion, the mysteries of Mithras, Mandaean religion, and Babylonian religion. Next came a synthesis of the related Greek material (including Philo), followed by a comparison of Greek and oriental eschatology. Finally, he offered a brief discussion of certain mixed entities (Greek-oriental): Chaldean Oracles and the Hermetic corpus. He concluded that the phenomenon does not have its roots in Christianity. It existed already in the Jewish texts and practices of the time of the New Testament, and there is evidence that it continued in Jewish circles for centuries. But Judaism is not the home of this phenomenon either. The ideas are too rare and occur in unusual texts. They were recognized as heretical in the second century CE. At this point Bousset noted that accounts of ascent are closely tied

"Mithras Liturgy": Text, Translation, and Commentary (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 18; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).


7 On the variety of uses of the theme of ascent in the Nag Hammadi corpus, see Segal, “Heavenly Ascent,” 1384–1385.

8 The word “oriental” was used at the time to refer to Near and Middle Eastern cultures. See now E. Said, Orientalism (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

9 Today such judgments are challenged.