For much of the Persian and Hellenistic periods, the Jerusalem temple was unrivaled as the central institution of Jewish society, and the priests who served in it constituted a well-defined elite with considerable political influence. Yet precisely because of the temple’s importance, priests often found themselves condemned for their incorrect understanding of the laws governing the temple and for behavior inappropriate to their office. Such criticism is preserved for us in works ranging from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah through the Dead Sea Scrolls. Further, disapproval of priestly behavior sometimes caused anxiety about the status of the temple itself, for the impiety of the priests and their failure to follow the laws of the Torah properly could have the effect of defiling the temple.

Here I would like to examine the attitude toward the temple and its priests in three Enochic apocalypses, the Book of the Watchers (1 Enoch 1–36), which dates to the third century BCE, and two works that probably date to the period after the Maccabean revolt and the Hasmonean assumption of the high priesthood, the Animal Apocalypse (1 En 85–90) and the Apocalypse of Weeks (1 Enoch 93, 91). Though both of the later texts form part of larger Enochic works, the Book of Dream Visions (1 Enoch 83–90) and the Epistle of Enoch (1 Enoch 92–105) respectively, neither of the larger works refers to the temple outside the units on which I focus.

Each of the works considered here is critical of the Second Temple, though temples play a central role in each. The Book of the Watchers offers its criticism of the Jerusalem temple and its priests indirectly: the only temple that appears in its narrative is the heavenly temple with its angelic priests. But I shall argue that the depiction of the watchers who descend to earth is intended as criticism of some of the priests of the Jerusalem temple. The Animal Apocalypse, in contrast, offers a straightforwardly negative evaluation of the Jerusalem temple: its
cult was polluted from the very start. The Apocalypse of Weeks simply ignores the Second Temple altogether. Yet the priests who might have been held responsible for the sad state of the Second Temple are conspicuously absent from both of these later works. Further, all three works revere the ideal of the temple, as can be seen from the heavenly temples of the Book of the Watchers and the Animal Apocalypse and the eschatological temples of the Animal Apocalypse and the Apocalypse of Weeks.

I begin with the most ancient of the works considered here, the Book of the Watchers. As I just noted, the temple of the Book of the Watchers is not the Jerusalem temple, but the heavenly one. It appears in the course of Enoch’s ascent to heaven to plead the case of the fallen watchers (1 Enoch 12–16). Upon arrival in heaven, Enoch finds himself standing before an awesome structure composed of fire and ice, materials that could never coexist in the world we know. He is terrified by the glory of what he sees, but he is able to pass through the outer wall of the structure and its first chamber to stand at the entrance to the even more glorious inner chamber, where he sees God enthroned, surrounded by a host of angels (1 Enoch 14:8–24).

Although it is never made explicit, the identity of the building Enoch enters is clear. Like the earthly temple, the heavenly temple consists of an outer court (1 Enoch 14:9), a central chamber (1 Enoch 14:10), and an inner chamber, the holy of holies (1 Enoch 14:15). The fiery cherubim on the ceiling of the central chamber (1 Enoch 14:11) recall the cherubim on the woven wall hangings of the wilderness tabernacle (Exod 26:1, 31; 36:8, 35) and the walls and doors of Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 6:29, 32, 35). God’s cherubim throne (1 Enoch 14:18) clearly echoes the seat composed of two cherubim with their wings spread forth that stood in the inner sanctum of the tabernacle (Exod 37:6–9) and the temple (1 Kings 6:23–28); it owes its wheels to Ezekiel’s chariot (Ezekiel 1:15–21). The crowd of angels that stands before the divine throne is described using the verb “approach” (1 Enoch 14:22–23), a technical term for priestly service in the priestly corpus of the Torah;

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