MONISM AND DUALISM IN JEWISH-MYSTICAL AND
CHRISTIAN-GNOSTIC ASCENT TEXTS

Gerard P. Luttikhuizen
(University of Groningen, The Netherlands)

A variety of texts from the ancient world depict human beings escaping the constraints of their physical existence even before death and ascending to a supernal realm. This essay will discuss and compare two bodies of ancient esoteric literature in which the ascent theme is prominently present—a group of late antique or medieval Jewish mystical writings commonly referred to as Hekhalot texts, and some of the early Christian-gnostic texts which were recovered in Egypt in 1945. In my analysis of the relevant texts, I shall address such questions as who the subject or protagonist of the ascension is, how the journey on high is imagined and depicted, and what its ultimate goal is regarded as. In this way I hope to throw some light onto the distinct features of these two literary corpora as well as onto the possible relationship between them.

Descent and Ascent Mythology

It is possible to differentiate two complementary basic patterns in the mythologies of various ancient cultures—the so-called katabasis or descent pattern, and the anabasis or ascent pattern. Alan Segal, who discusses these mythological structures in his article ‘Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and Their Environment’, associates the descent pattern with ‘cosmologies, theophanies or angelophanies and prophetic mediation’ and the ascent pattern with ‘ascensions, ecstatic ascents, journeys to heaven and the heavenly journey of the soul’ (1980, 1340).

In the Hebrew Bible we find various expressions of the descent pattern (creation narratives, stories about the origin of evil, accounts of

1 A longer version of this article is included in: A. Hilhorst, E. Puech and E. Tigchelaar (eds), Flores Florentino. Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Early Jewish Studies in Honour of Florentino Garcia Martinez, Leiden–Boston 2007.

2 The Hekhalot texts are the literary basis for the study of Merkavah mysticism. For the meaning of these Hebrew terms, see below.
divine revelations mediated by angels and prophets), while ascent stories are rare. In biblical tradition, God reveals himself by descending to the recipients of his message rather than by bringing the messenger to the divine realm (Idel 2005, 24). In fact, the only clear example of a heavenly journey is the ascension of Elija in the whirlwind in 2 Kings 2:11 (cf. the brief report of God’s taking Enoch away in Gen 5:24). In non-canonical and post-biblical Jewish traditions, ascent stories became much more popular. Ascensions are told of Enoch and Moses—who according to biblical tradition mounted Sinai and saw God ‘face-to-face’—and of several other biblical heroes, including Adam, Abraham, Levi, Baruch, Phineas, and Isaiah (Segal 1980, 1352–68; Himmelfarb 1993). The ascent theme took a particular shape in various Hekhalot texts. In this literature, the journey on high is presented as a recurring experience of living people. The writings that undisputedly belong to this corpus are Hekhalot Rabbati (the Greater Palaces), Hekhalot Zutarti (the Lesser Palaces), Ma’aseh Merkavah (the Works of the Chariot) and the so-called Hebrew, or Third, Book of Enoch. They all deal, among other things, with the mystic’s journey through the heavenly hekhalot (‘palaces’ or ‘halls’) to reach the Merkavah, the divine Chariot.

In gnostic texts, various versions of the two basic patterns can be found. The gnostic descent myth, or the myth of origins, narrates how God’s original unity disintegrated and how, as a result, a portion of the divine substance fell into the world, where it was detained by the demiurgical God and his powers. As a rule, the gnostic descent myth also mentions spiritual helpers sent down from the divine realm to bring the truth to the first human beings and their progeny. In effect, this myth explains the present situation of humanity as the outcome of a conflict between good and evil powers (Luttikhuizen 2006, 44–58). The gnostic ascent myth, on the other hand, concerns the return of the lost spiritual substance to its divine source. We shall see how this ultimate return could be anticipated in visionary ascents.

3 Ideas about the divine Chariot were inspired by Ezekiel’s Throne-vision, as described in Ezek 1; cf. Isa 6, Dan 7, 1 Enoch 14.