Tobias Nicklas, Joseph Verheyden, Erik M. M. Eynikel, and Florentino García Martínez (eds.)


A major shift in Jewish ideas about the cosmos took place during the Hellenistic Period. Evidence from both literature and material culture demonstrates an explosion in angel/demonologies as well as cosmic geographies. This change in Jewish metaphysics is especially pronounced within the literary genre we call apocalypse. Because apocalypses and other literary forms are inherited and adapted by some of the earliest Christian writers, the new metaphysical possibilities imagined by Jewish writers in the Hellenistic period become integral to Christian worldviews as well.

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati introduces the volume under review by sketching a theoretical basis for interpreting descriptions of other worlds within religious studies. It is not difficult to agree with her that depictions of paradise and hell can stimulate and justify practices and rituals of broad significance in religions. Stefan Beyerle traces the motif-history of the expression “God of Heaven” in literature from the pre-exilic period to the Hellenistic Enoch texts. The term does not imply a distant, transcendent or unattainable God. It normally connotes power and supremacy rather than geography. It is only in the Enochic texts that the term begins to take on more geographic significance. Kelly Coblentz Bautch analyzes three prominent otherworldly sites within the Book of Watchers: the heavenly temple, the otherworldly prison, and the paradise of righteousness (or truth). Her survey indicates that the Book of Watchers provides important evidence that during the Hellenistic period people believed the cosmos was saturated with liminal sites. George Nickelsburg guides the reader on a tour of four other worlds encountered in 1 Enoch’s Book of Parables. The other worlds are “polar opposites” of the world of human experience: judgment is executed and faithfulness is rewarded perfectly. This juxtaposition highlights the extent to which the contemporary world of the author failed to live up to these standards. Loren Stuckenbruck analyzes the cosmology of the Epistle of Enoch by comparing its notion of eschatological judgment with one of its probable sources: 1 Enoch 21–22. Enoch’s discourses in 1 En. 102:4–104:8 are an outgrowth of the Book of Watchers, but not a simple recapitulation. For example, by demythologizing traditions about fallen angels and wayward stars and striking an ambivalent tone about dream visions, the text is able to preserve certain themes from Watchers while simultaneously dealing with growing opposition to key Enochic concepts (these kinds of oppositions are especially
clear in the rabbinic texts treated by Beate Ego in this volume). John J. Collins addresses the notions of other worlds found in the (primarily sectarian) Dead Sea Scrolls. There are differing descriptions of the fate of the damned, but a fiery netherworld is prominent in several sectarian scrolls. There is more consistency in the fate of the blessed: fellowship with the angels. Less clear is the locale of this fellowship. Collins agrees with P. Alexander that several sectarian texts seem to reflect the idea that this fellowship takes place in a different dimension of reality rather than merely a different (geographical) world. And this possibility may explain why one regularly finds a focus on eternal life without a concomitant focus on resurrection of the dead in the sectarian scrolls. Eibert Tigchelaar investigates the other world imagined in the Aramaic New Jerusalem text. Tigchelaar hypothesizes that the seer in the text may be the patriarch Jacob, who has a vision of the future temple at Bethel. He argues convincingly that the temple in New Jerusalem should be considered a type of blueprint for a new temple à la Jub. 1:27–29 and 11QTa 29:8–10 rather than the kind of eternal temples envisioned in Revelation 21 and 2 Baruch 4. He follows Kister and Collins in asserting that the text also reflects halakhic disputes that imply criticisms of the actual Jerusalem temple. Beate Ego surveys rabbinic cosmologies, focusing on b. Hag 12b. Of special note is her emphasis on the pathos of God expressed in a cosmology in which the heavens are changed and affected by events (both corporate and personal) on earth. It is this idea that might help to explain the otherwise strange fact that in rabbinic texts the heavenly temple is not located in the same heaven as the throne of God. In other words, if the integrity of the temple has been compromised on earth, then it has been similarly compromised in heaven. It is also clear that the rabbis have found at least certain aspects of apocalyptic Judaism unhelpful. They clearly distance themselves from the notion that visionary ascension is a legitimate way to approach God. Hindy Najman explores the visions of 4 Ezra and suggests that the pseudonymous scribe Ezra traverses liminal zones on his way to heavenly realms and even transforms into a heavenly being as a moral lesson for those suffering in the chaos of the loss of the Second Temple. There is no suggestion that a new temple or new Jerusalem might be waiting in the wings of history. Ezra’s hope rests exclusively on heaven. Thus, this text reflects an even more severe rejection of the contemporary world than one finds in earlier texts from, e.g., 1 Enoch. Najman calls attention to the fact that throughout six of Ezra’s seven visions, he receives revelations in a liminal state and space. The writer’s strategy is subtle but profound. In Najman’s words “The experience of the destruction of the second temple is turned on its head: instead of it paralyzing Ezra, exile becomes the place where God is again accessible.”