THE PENETRATION OF BARRIERS AND
THE REVELATION OF CHRIST IN THE GOSPELS

by

THOMAS E. SCHMIDT
Santa Barbara, CA

1. Introduction

In a recent article, David Ulansey argued persuasively that the veil to which the Evangelists refer as torn at the moment of Jesus' death was the outer veil of the temple, that between the porch (נוֹלֶא) and the sanctuary proper.1 Ulansey bases his argument primarily on Josephus (BJ 5:212-214), where this veil is described as being embroidered to represent "panorama of the heavens."2 The veil, as a symbol of the vault of the sky, signifies in its being rent not a new way into God's presence as in Hebrews 6:19; 10:20,3 but the passage of God's Spirit through the barrier of the heavens. This view finds strong support by reference to Mark 1:10; where the veil of the sky is "torn apart" (σχίζω, only here and at 15:38 in Mark's Gospel) at Jesus's baptism immediately before the descent of the Spirit and the heavenly voice. The two incidents, apparently quite consciously for the second Evangelist, mark out the parameters of

1 "The Heavenly Veil Torn: Mark’s Cosmic Inclusio," JBL 110 (1991) 123-125. For an extended discussion of the passage and bibliography, see H.M. Jackson, "The Death of Jesus in Mark and the Miracle from the Cross," NTS 33 (1987) 16-37; also M. de Jonge, "Two Interesting Interpretations of the Rending of the Temple-veil in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs" [1985], in Jewish Eschatology ..., Collected Essays (SupplNT, 63, Leiden, 1991) 220-232, and bibliography, ibid., 314-326, n. 31, 32, 78. For a description of the Temple, see B. Narkiss, "Temple," Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem, 1972) 15:942-948. The outer veil could be seen through the 40 x 20 cubit opening in the קהל from a vantage point outside and above the Temple mount (i.e. the Mount of Olives), but probably not from within—due to the height of the walls around the Temple courts. The Gospels are vaguely suggestive that the rending of the veil was seen from the place of crucifixion: see Mark 15:39 (especially the ambiguous έυαντίας ωτος: is the centurion observing the Temple or Jesus?); Matt 27:54; Luke 23:47; Jackson, 24.


Jesus's public ministry in suitably apocalyptic terms. Close scrutiny reveals that the incidents have several common features in addition to the veil imagery of the sky, and that similar or analogous features appear in key christological narratives in the other three Gospels. This paper will argue that this "divine penetration" theme is drawn upon by all four Evangelists—consciously, to a varying degree—and offers some clues about the structure of the respective narratives.

2. The Significance of the Sky God

2.1 The sky god in antiquity

Scholars searching for background material on the baptism of Jesus have been content to find parallels in semitic apocalyptic literature, but for our purposes it is instructive to go further back and to cast the net more widely. We are indebted to Mircea Eliade, whose thoroughly documented book Patterns in Comparative Religion provides a wealth of information about the relation between deities and the sky in primitive and ancient religion.

Virtually every religion begins with a supreme sky deity. This god is generally distant, passive, and abstract, and eventually he is supplanted by a creator-god who is more in touch with the earth. Eliade documents this development in Mesopotamia, India, Greece, and other Indo-Aryan cultures, maintaining that

"(the) meaning is in each case ... a movement away from the transcendence and passivity of sky beings towards more dynamic, active and easily accessible forms. One might say that we are observing a 'progressive descent of the sacred into the concrete' ..." 

This development is particularly interesting in the case of Greece. Eliade draws attention to Hesiod's Theogony, c. 600 B.C. Here, instead of Zeus and Hera in the beginning as we might expect, we find Οὐρανός the sky god as the central player in the drama, the progenitor and "the ever-sure abiding place" for the other gods.

---

1 M. Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion (New York, 1963).
2 Ibid., 52; see 38-123, Part II: The Sky and Sky Gods.
3 Ibid., 75-77.
4 Hesiod, Theog. 126-128: "And earth first bare starry Heaven, equal to herself, to cover her on every side, and to be an ever-sure abiding place for the blessed gods." Cf. 176-177: "And heaven came, bringing on night and longing for love, and he lay about earth spreading himself full upon her."