"Whether in the body or out of the body I do not know": Corporeality and Heavenly Ascent

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Zusammenfassung

Im Artikel werden Fragen zum Themenfeld Körperlichkeit und Aufstieg in die Himmel untersucht. Dies geschieht anhand von Texten vom 1. Buch Henoch bis hin zur Hekhalot Literatur, zudem werden Philos Schriften einbezogen. Es werden sowohl Beschreibungen der himmlischen Sphären als auch des Prozesses des Emporsteigens behandelt. Trotz seiner von Platon geprägten, negativen Theologie setzt Philo kosmologische und spirituelle Himmel voraus und stützt sich auf die biblische Vorstellung der strahlenden Herrlichkeit. Auch wenn die Texte des Aufstiegs in die Himmeln nicht in einer philosophischen Sprache verfasst sind, verdeutlichen sie dennoch, dass der Mensch nicht in seinem irdischen Körper in die Himmel aufsteigen kann und dass Gott nicht mit irdischen Augen gesehen werden kann. Ideengeschichtlich sind diese Texte nicht so weit vom Philosophen Philo entfernt wie dies zuerst den Anschein haben mag.

Abstract

This paper explores questions surrounding corporeality and heavenly ascent, in texts ranging from 1 Enoch to the Hekhalot literature, including Philo's works. It examines both descriptions of the heavenly realms and accounts of the ascent process. Despite his Platonic apophaticism, Philo superimposes cosmological and spiritual heavens, and draws upon the biblical imagery of dazzling glory. Although they do not express themselves in philosophical language, the heavenly ascent texts make it clear that human beings cannot ascend to heaven in their earthly bodies, and that God cannot be seen with terrestrial eyes. In terms of ideas they are not so far from the philosopher Philo as might at first appear.

Introduction

In 2 Corinthians 12:3, Paul confesses that he does not know whether he was caught up into the third heaven in or out of the body.[1] This paper explores questions surrounding corporeality and heavenly ascent, in texts ranging from *1 Enoch* to the Hekhalot literature, including Philo's works.[2] In *Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, Schäfer draws a sharp distinction between Philo's writings and all the other early texts subsumed by the heading 'Jewish mysticism':[3]

> "Philo sometimes uses the traditional language of vision and ascent, but whereas the seer in the ascent apocalypses no doubt ascended in his body *and* soul, Philo splits the unity of body and soul and is only concerned with the fate of the soul as the better half of human existence."[4]

Similarly, Stroumsa notes that, thanks to Platonism, "Christian theologians – but not Jewish thinkers after Philo ... could claim the vision of God to be a spiritual vision, which had nothing to do with the vision of the corporal eyes.[5] He argues that Jews retained archaic patterns of thought for much longer, so that it is hard "to find a serious disengagement from anthropomorphic conceptions of God among Jews before Maimonides".[6] This paper will argue, following Philip Alexander, that even texts which do not use Platonic categories have ways of signalling that heaven is a "different dimension", "where the terrestrial laws of nature do not apply".[7] This is not a study of phenomenology, but of

1 Most commentators agree that Paul is talking of himself, despite the third person description. See Thrall, Margaret E.: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, Volume 2. Commentary on II Corinthians VIII-XIII. Edinburgh 2000, pp. 778–779.

2 Most scholars see *1 Enoch* 14 as marking a new departure, for "nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is the gap between heaven and earth bridged in such a way that a human being leaves his place on earth and explores heaven" (Schäfer, Peter: The Origins of Jewish Mysticism. Tübingen 2009, p. 53; cf. Himmelfarb, Martha: Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses. Oxford 1993, p. 9).

3 Schäfer views this heading as problematic, and says that he uses the word 'mysticism' "only because it is the label that scholarly tradition has long attached to (these) texts" (Schäfer: The Origins of Jewish Mysticism, pp. 23–4).

4 Schäfer: The Origins of Jewish Mysticism, p. 174.

5 Stroumsa, Guy G.: To See or Not to See. On the Early History of the *Visio Beatifica*. In: Wege mystischer Gotteserfahrung. Judentum, Christentum und Islam / Mystical approaches to God. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Ed. by Peter Schäfer. Munich 2006, pp. 67–80, p. 72.

6 Stroumsa: To See or Not to See, p. 71.

7 Alexander, Philip S.: The Dualism of Heaven and Earth in Early Jewish Literature and its Implications. In: Light Against Darkness. Dualism in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and the Contemporary World. Ed. by Armin Lange et al. Göttingen 2011, pp. 169–185, pp. 170, 173.

the language found in heavenly ascent texts. It will start with descriptions of the heavenly realms: Is heaven seen as a material or non-material place? Do its inhabitants – God and the angels – have bodies? And then it will analyse accounts of the ascent process. How do human beings reach heaven, in or out of the body?

Descriptions of heaven

In Philo's Platonic worldview, heaven is the κόσμος νοητός, the realm of immaterial ideas. Commenting on Exodus 20:21, he says,

> "(Moses) entered, we are told, into the darkness where God was, that is into the unseen, invisible, incorporeal and archetypal essence of existing things." (*Mos.* 1.158)[8]

He is clear that God has no body:

> "Moses tells us that man was created after the image of God and after His likeness. … Let no one represent the likeness as one to a bodily form; for neither is God in human form, nor is the human body God-like. No, it is in respect of the Mind, the sovereign element of the soul, that the word 'image' is used …" (*Opif.* 69)

God cannot therefore be seen:

> "When … the God-loving soul probes the question of the essence of the Existent Being, he enters on a quest of that which is beyond matter and beyond sight. And out of this quest there accrues to him a vast boon, namely to apprehend that the God of real Being is apprehensible by no one, and to see precisely this, that He is incapable of being seen." (*Post.* 15)

or even named:

> "He (that is) has no proper name, and … whatever name anyone may use of Him he will use by licence of language; for it is not the nature of Him that is to be spoken of, but simply to be." (*Somn.* 1.230)

Yet despite this insistence on God's immaterial nature, Philo resorts to something like the biblical imagery of glory to explain God's inaccessibility:

[8] All quotations from Philo are taken from Colson, F. H., G. H. Whitaker, and R. Marcus: Philo in Ten Volumes (and Two Supplementary Volumes). Loeb Classical Library. London 1929–62.

> "… (the mind) seems to be on its way to the Great King Himself; but, amid its longing to see Him, pure and untempered rays of concentrated light stream forth like a torrent, so that by its gleams the eye of the understanding is dazzled." (*Opif.* 71; cf. *Fug.* 165)

He describes angels as follows:

> "The highest, and in the truest sense the holy, temple of God is ... the whole universe, having for its sanctuary the most sacred part of all existence, even heaven, for its votive ornaments the stars, for its priests the angels who are servitors to His powers, unbodied souls (ἀσωμάτους ψυχάς), not compounds of rational and irrational nature, as ours are, but with the irrational eliminated, all mind through and through, pure intelligences, in the likeness of the monad." (*Spec.* 1.66)

Winston argues that, in this context, 'unbodied' means 'lacking an earthly body', and that Philo envisages angels as entirely rational souls embodied in the pure upper air. Stars, similarly, are souls embodied in the pure fire of the heavenly spheres.[9] This example shows how Philo fuses material and spiritual heavens. Cherubim he interprets cosmologically as "symbols of the two hemispheres, one above the earth and one under it, for the whole heaven has wings" (*Mos.* 2.98); but also as divine powers:

> "I should myself say that they are allegorical representations of the two most august and highest potencies (δυνάμεις) of Him that is, the creative and the kingly." (*Mos.* 2.99; cf. *Cher.* 25–28)

When interpreting Exodus 25:22 ("I will speak to you (λαλήσω σοι) from above the mercy-seat between the two cherubim") he draws on the biblical imagery of the cherubim as God's chariot (cf. Ps 18:10, 80:1; Ezek 10:19):

> "... while the Word is the charioteer of the Powers, He Who talks is seated in the chariot, giving directions to the charioteer for the right wielding of the reins of the Universe…" (*Fug.* 101)

Stroumsa comments à propos of Philo's metaphorical descriptions of the Logos that they "might point to origins in mythological traditions".[10] There is no doubt that Philo deploys biblical imagery with mythological origins, combining it with Hellenistic sources of cosmological knowledge. It is not simply, however, that he is stuck with biblical imagery and language. Despite firmly

[9] Winston, David: Logos and Mystical Theology in Philo of Alexandria. Cincinnati 1985, pp. 33–34.

[10] Stroumsa, Gedaliahu G.: Form(s) of God. Some Notes on Meṭaṭron and Christ. For Shlomo Pines. In: Harvard Theological Review 76 (1983), no. 3, pp. 269–288, p. 279.

believing that God is immaterial, invisible and unnameable, and that there is a world of ideas outside this material world, if he is to say anything at all about the divine and the heavenly realms, he is tied to metaphorical language. It is all very well asserting that "comrades of the soul, who can hold converse with intelligible incorporeal natures, do not compare the Existent to any form of created things … (and) have dissociated Him from every category or quality" (*Deus* 55); but it is by no means clear how this 'conversation' is to take place, if not by means of anthropomorphic analogies.

Scholem states,

> "(The essence of the earliest Jewish mysticism) is not absorbed contemplation of God's true nature, but perception of His appearance on the throne, as described by Ezekiel, and cognition of the mysteries of the celestial throne-world."[11]

Heavenly ascent texts contain elaborate descriptions of that throne-world. It is a strange place. In *1 Enoch* 14 the outer wall is built of hailstones surrounded by tongues of fire (14:9). The second house is "greater than the former one" (14:15), and yet appears to be contained within it. "Heaven is a totally paradoxical, topsy-turvy world where the terrestrial laws of nature do not apply".[12] In *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* there is an inconsistent use of singulars and plurals. Sometimes there is one *merkavah* (4Q405 20–22 ii 8), sometimes several *markavot* (4Q405 20–22 ii 3).[13] They are also plural sanctuaries, temples, vestibules, inner rooms, veils, firmaments, and thrones, existing alongside singular forms. Sometimes a sevenfold plurality is specified, as in seven exalted holy places (4Q403 1 ii 11 לשבעת קודשי רום), or seven inner rooms of priesthoods (4Q405 7 7 as restored שבעת דבירי כהונות); but not always. This interchangeable use of singular and plural forms may have been a deliberate rhetorical device designed to disorientate the reader, making it "virtually impossible to extract a coherent and stable image of the heavenly sphere or the heavenly Temple structures that are said to inhabit it".[14] Newsom talks of

11 Scholem, Gershom G.: Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism. 3rd ed. New York 1961, p. 44.

12 Alexander: The Dualism of Heaven and Earth in Early Jewish Literature, p. 173.

13 For the text and translation of *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* see Charlesworth, James H. and Carol A. Newsom: Angelic Liturgy. Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice. The Dead Sea Scrolls. Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Texts with English Translations. Volume 4B. Tübingen 1999.

14 Boustan, Ra'anan S.: Angels in the Architecture. Temple Art and the Poetics of Praise in the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*. In: Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions. Ed. by Ra'anan S. Boustan and Annette Yoshiko Reed. Cambridge 2004, pp. 195–212, p. 210.

"intentional violations of ordinary syntax and meaning in a text which is attempting to communicate something of the elusive transcendence of heavenly reality".[15] Whereas in *1 Enoch* the heavenly temple seems to be constructed of the primordial elements of fire and water, albeit in impossible combinations, in *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* "the architectural structures of the Temple are animated and become living and praising creatures":[16]

> "With these let all fo[undations of …]° holies praise, the uplifting pillars of the supremely lofty abode, and all the corners of its structure. Sin[g-praise]"[17]

A little further on we find:

> "And all the decorations of the inner room make haste with wondrous psalms in the inner ro[om …]
>
> wonder, inner room to inner room with the sound of holy tumult. And all their decorations […]
>
> And the chariots of his inner room give praise together, and their cherubim and thei[r] ophannim bless wondrously […]"[18]

This is not a 'material', but a 'spiritual' temple, composed of living angelic beings. The promised vision of God's appearance on the throne, however, fails to materialise. As Alexander writes,

> "The whole thrust of the Songs is towards the climactic vision of God: as each song moves ever closer to the ultimate mystery, anticipation mounts, but when the climax is reached the description seems to have been astonishingly perfunctory. Because of the damaged state of the text, the final vision of God is, unfortunately, missing, but reconstruction suggests that it cannot have been elaborate."[19]

When it comes to the Hekhalot literature, Schäfer disagrees with Scholem:

> "What is the aim of this journey (the ascent of the Merkavah mystic)? Is it, as Scholem presumes, exclusively or at least primarily the vision of God on his throne? … The first surprising result of an examination of the texts is that the ascent accounts say almost nothing at all about what the mystic actually sees when he finally arrives

15 Newsom, Carol A.: Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice. A Critical Edition. Atlanta 1985, p. 49.
16 Schäfer: The Origins of Jewish Mysticism, p. 133.
17 Song 7.12; 4Q403 1 i 41, 4Q405 6 2; Charlesworth and Newsom: Angelic Liturgy. Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, p. 163.
18 Song 7.36–38; 4Q403 1 ii 13–15; Charlesworth and Newsom: Angelic Liturgy. Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, p. 167.
19 Alexander, Philip S.: The Qumran *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* and the *Celestial Hierarchy* of Dionysius the Areopagite. A Comparative Approach. In: Revue de Qumran 22 (2006), no. 87, pp. 349–372, p. 358.

> at the goal of his wishes. The reader, who has followed the adept in his dangerous and toilsome ascent through the seven palaces, and whose expectations have been greatly raised is rather disappointed."[20]

In the story about Aher ascending to heaven, related in both *3 Enoch* 16 (§20) and *b. Hagigah* 15a, Aher does "*not* see God but an angel (albeit the highest angel in heaven)".[21] The diffidence about describing God is already there in earlier texts. Ezekiel only sees the figure on the chariot at three removes: "Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord (מראה דמות כבוד־יהוה)" (Ezek 1:28). In *1 Enoch* 14, Enoch "does not see much of God: the narrative moves immediately from the Glory of the Great One seated on the throne to his garment".[22] The concept of 'glory' itself functions as much to conceal as to reveal. It seems to be a visible manifestation of the invisible God, which is dangerous to look at, and impossible to describe. "This manifestation has neither shape nor colour nor sound: it is aniconic; it is the dazzling void at the centre of things".[23] In Daniel 7 and *1 Enoch* 14 the figure on the throne is wearing a garment – a covering – to which some luminosity has been transferred. As Alexander remarks in regard to *1 Enoch* 14,

> "The description of the raiment baffles visualization; it is like the glare of the sun's orb, or of a snow-field, both of which overwhelm and 'whiteout' human vision."[24]

Stroumsa is right that Jewish exegesis after Philo "was left to struggle with biblical anthropomorphisms without the help of the most effective of tools: the Platonic conception of a purely immaterial being".[25] Therefore in heavenly ascent texts heaven is a material place, and God has a body. But they make it very clear that heavenly material is nothing like earthly material and does not obey earthly, physical laws. Even in Ezekiel 1, "God's body is of human shape, but its essence is fire".[26] The garments of both God and other heavenly beings signal by their luminosity that heavenly bodies are nothing like earthly ones. They are metaphors for the absence of flesh and blood in heaven.

20 Schäfer, Peter: The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism. In: Hekhalot-Studien. Tübingen 1988, pp. 277–295, p. 285.
21 Schäfer: The Origins of Jewish Mysticism, p. 235.
22 Schäfer: The Origins of Jewish Mysticism, p. 61.
23 Alexander: *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* and the *Celestial Hierarchy*, p. 358.
24 Alexander: *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* and the *Celestial Hierarchy*, p. 358 n. 15.
25 Stroumsa: Form(s) of God. Some Notes on Meṭaṭron and Christ, p. 270.
26 Schäfer: The Origins of Jewish Mysticism, p. 47.

The process of ascent

How does one get to heaven – in or out of the body? Philo says of Moses on Mount Sinai that "he saw with the soul's eye the immaterial forms of the material objects about to be made" (*Mos.* 2.74). He is describing a noetic ascent, in which 'seeing' equates with knowing. The mind is to leave behind body, sense-perception and speech (*Fug.* 92; *Her.* 71). However, Philo still uses the language of 'space travel':

> "When on soaring wing (the mind) has contemplated the atmosphere and all its phases, it is borne yet higher to the ether and the circuit of heaven, and is whirled round with the dances of planets and fixed stars ... And so, carrying its gaze beyond the confines of all substance, discernible by sense, it comes to a point at which it reaches out after the intelligible word, and on descrying in that world sights of surpassing loveliness, even the patterns and the originals of the things of sense which it saw here, it is seized by a sober intoxication ..." (*Opif.* 70–71; cf. *Spec.* 1.207; 3.1–2)

It seems to be in such a state of ecstasy, when a voice within his soul "is god-possessed and divines where it does not know", that the understanding of the cherubim as symbolic of God's highest powers comes to him (*Cher.* 27). This state arrives unexpectedly, "the ideas falling in a shower from above and being sown invisibly" (*Migr.* 35), yet has still required human effort:

> "When the mind is mastered by the love of the divine, when it strains its powers to reach the inmost shrine, when it puts forth every effort and ardour on its forward march, under the divine impelling force it forgets all else, forgets itself, and fixes its thoughts and memories on Him alone Whose attendant and servant it is ..." (*Somn.* 2.232)

It can then leave as suddenly as it arrived: "my steps were dogged by the deadliest of mischiefs, the hater of the good, envy, which suddenly set upon me and ceased not to pull me down with violence till it had plunged me in the ocean of civil cares ..." (*Spec.* 3.3). When Philo describes the end of Moses' life, he says that "his twofold nature of soul and body" was resolved "into a single unity, transforming his whole being into mind, pure as the sunlight" (*Mos.* 2.288). This is exactly how he describes angels, and the reference to sunlight recalls the luminous garments of heaven. Schäfer speculates that during the temporary state of ecstasy too "it seems as if the soul does not remain a human soul in the strict sense of the word but is replaced by some divine essence; following the

example of Moses, this state may be called the monad of pure soul, bordering on divinization".[27]

In 2 Corinthians Paul implies that he knows of two kinds of ascent – in and out of the body. And heavenly ascent texts do seem to distinguish between ascent in a dream or vision, and ascent in the body. The Book of the Watchers reports Enoch dreaming, and seeing in a vision (*1 Enoch* 14:1, 2, 4, 8). In Revelation, John records being "in the Spirit" (1:10). Rowland has pointed out that "early Christianity emerged in a world where contact with the divine by dreams, visions, divination and other related forms of extraordinary insight was common".[28] He sees dreams – "that tantalizing and inventive part of the human intellect" – as the nearest we can get to the visionary state, "in which the conscious experience merges in the unconscious in forms which are unpredictable and often highly charged".[29] *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* and the later Hekhalot texts seem to contain liturgical or theurgic material. It may have been believed that those who recited them experienced the journey for themselves. As Alexander writes,

> "The fundamental difference between (Sabbath) Songs and apocalyptic is that Songs *performs* (the) vision: it is not merely literary description; it is liturgy – a feature which binds Sabbath Songs tightly to the later Heikhalot tradition, with its evident stress on theurgy and mystical ascent."[30]

This has led Davila to describe the 'descender to the chariot' in the Hekhalot texts "as a magico-religious practitioner with striking similarities to the cross-cultural practitioner known as the 'shaman/healer'".[31] Alexander distinguishes between visionary ascent, in which the seer has "a vision or dream of himself ascending to heaven", and soul-excursion, in which the body is left on earth and the soul or spirit makes the ascent "in a disembodied state", although he admits that "it may be questionable to press too hard the distinction".[32] He sees Ishmael in *3 Enoch* and Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Qanah in the séance described in *Hek-*

27 Schäfer: The Origins of Jewish Mysticism, p. 174.
28 Rowland, Christopher and Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones: The Mystery of God. Early Jewish Mysticism and the New Testament. Leiden 2009, p. 213.
29 Rowland and Morray-Jones: The Mystery of God, p. 209.
30 Alexander, Philip S.: The Mystical Texts. Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and Related Manuscripts. London 2006, p. 128.
31 Davila, James R.: The Ancient Jewish Apocalypses and the *Hekhalot* Literature. In: Paradise Now. Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism. Ed. by April D. DeConick. Atlanta 2006, pp. 105–125, p. 106.
32 Alexander: The Mystical Texts, p. 76.

halot Rabbati §§198–239 as making soul-excursions.[33] *2 Enoch*, however, reports that Enoch woke from his sleep and was taken bodily into heaven by two huge men with eyes like burning lamps (1:4–9). Alexander argues,

> "Bodily ascent to the alien environment of heaven has huge theological implications, and demands the transformation of flesh and blood into a more spiritual substance. The material body in its present terrestrial form cannot endure the fiery celestial regions."[34]

Enoch therefore needs a transformation and change of clothing:

> "The Lord said to Michael, 'Take Enoch, and extract (him) from the earthly clothing. And anoint him with the delightful oil, and put (him) into the clothes of glory.' And Michael extracted me from my clothes. He anointed me with the delightful oil … And I gazed at all of myself, and I had become like one of the glorious ones, and there was no observable difference."[35]

For his descent back to earth his face has to be chilled, otherwise "no human being would be able to look at (it)".[36] In *3 Enoch*, when Enoch is transformed into Metatron, he is first enlarged until he matches the world in length and breadth (*3 Enoch* 9), and then, as he tells Ishmael:

> "My flesh turned to flame, my sinews to blazing fire, my bones to juniper coals, my eyelashes to lightning flashes, my eyeballs to fiery torches, the hairs of my head to hot flames, all my limbs to wings of burning fire, and the substance of my body to blazing fire."[37]

This is reminiscent of the fate of any human being who dares look at the divine robe (חלוק):

> "Of no creature are the eyes able to behold it ...
> And as for him who does behold it, or sees or glimpses it,
> Whirling gyrations grip the balls of his eyes.
> And the balls of his eyes cast out and send forth torches of fire

33 Alexander: The Dualism of Heaven and Earth in Early Jewish Literature, pp. 180, 181.
34 Alexander: The Mystical Texts, p. 77.
35 *2 Enoch* 22:8–10; Andersen, Francis I.: 2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch. In: The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 1. Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments. Ed. by James H. Charlesworth. New York 1983, pp. 91–221, p. 139.
36 *2 Enoch* 37; Andersen: 2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch, p. 160.
37 *3 Enoch* 15:1; §19; Alexander, Philip S.: 3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch. In: The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 1. Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments. Ed. by James H. Charlesworth. New York 1983, pp. 223–315, p. 267.

> And these enkindle him and these burn him."[38]

As Scholem points out,

> "This is not … a description of dangers confronting the mystic, but of a mystical transfiguration taking place within him. What is a permanent transfiguration in the case of Enoch, however, is only a temporary experience in the case of the Merkabah mystic."[39]

And as Morray-Jones adds, the process "is terrifyingly dangerous, even fatal, should he prove unworthy".[40] He has designated it 'transformational mysticism', arguing that in a wide range of texts "the vision of the Glory entailed the transformation of the visionary into an angelic likeness of that divine image".[41] This transformation would seem to be linked with the need to shed one's earthly body in order to survive in the heavenly realms.

Conclusions

Heaven is not like earth. On that Philo and the heavenly ascent texts agree. Philo uses philosophical, apophatic statements, arguing that heaven represents the world of ideas, the "the unseen, invisible, incorporeal and archetypal essence of existing things" (*Mos.* 1.158). He still, however, superimposes cosmological and spiritual heavens; and, according to Winston, his stars and angels have unearthly bodies of pure ethereal fire or air. He draws upon biblical imagery of glory, darkness and the cherubim chariot. The heavenly ascent texts enlarge upon that imagery, producing fantastical descriptions, in order to convey heaven's strangeness. Philo and the ascent texts also agree that human beings can venture into heaven, but not in their normal earthly, bodily existence. Ascent is a state of ecstasy – it requires being taken out of oneself. For Philo, it is the soul that makes the journey. But even in a state of "God-inspired ecstasy" (*Fug.* 168), the human mind can only get so far:

38 *Hekhalot Rabbati* §102; Scholem, Gershom G.: Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition. New York 1960, p. 60.

39 Scholem: Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition, p. 60.

40 Morray-Jones, Christopher R. A.: Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition. In: Journal of Jewish Studies 43 (1992), pp. 1–31, p. 25.

41 Rowland and Morray-Jones: The Mystery of God, p. 334.

> "The man that wishes to set his gaze upon the Supreme Essence, before he sees Him will be blinded by the rays that beam forth all around Him." (*Fug.* 165)

Heavenly ascent texts do not function with an explicit soul/body anthropology, but some talk of dreams or visions, implying that the body does not ascend. Others involve the whole person, but a person who undergoes a radical transformation. Earthly bodies become fiery, or, using slightly different imagery, material garments are replaced with luminous ones. Travelling to heaven involves becoming more like the divine, whether that is seen as becoming pure spirit (Philo), or as being clothed with a glorious body (heavenly ascent texts). Philo works with a different anthropology, and can call upon Platonic philosophical resources as well as biblical imagery; and yet not only because of their common biblical heritage but also because they are defending similar theological positions – that earthly beings cannot ascend to heaven as they are, and that God is beyond human sight – Philo and the heavenly ascent texts are not as far apart as might first appear.