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Heavenly Ascension in Ancient Judaism: The Nature of the Experience

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... as to paradise, we have heard a lot about it from the priests. So we decided to find out for ourselves. First, we sent up our explorer, Yuri Gagarin. He circled the globe and found nothing in outer space. It's pitch dark there, he said, no Garden of Eden, nothing like heaven. So we decided to send another. We sent Gherman Titov and told him to fly for a whole day. After all, Gagarin was up there only an hour and a half. So he might have missed Paradise. . . . We told him to take a good look. Well, he took off, came back, and confirmed Gagarin's conclusion. He reported there was nothing there.

—Nikita Khrushchev, in an interview with C. L. Sulzberger
(*New York Times*, September 9, 1961)

In this paper, I will deal with certain psychological aspects of ancient Jewish accounts of heavenly ascent. I understand "psychological aspects" primarily to designate questions of what these accounts meant to the people who told them, and to those who read them or listened to them.

Some of the narrators of ascension stories seem to make the claim that they describe their personal experience. Many modern scholars have given some measure of credence to this claim. Until we have dealt with the question of the experiential component of ascension stories, any approach to their psychology will be blocked. The issue of "real ecstatic experience" therefore heads my agenda, and will dominate this paper.

I will suggest that modern discussions of this issue are normally bedevilled by three false dichotomies, which are in fact different aspects of the same one. These dichotomies are grounded in legitimate distinctions, but are exaggerated to the point that they distort our thinking. All involve one basic fallacy, unstated but influential: that "genuine" ecstatic experience somehow comes to the visionary from the outside.

It is hardly surprising that the visionaries themselves believed this, or that modern scholars may be tempted to follow them. Often enough, we have dreams so vivid that it seems to us on awakening as if we had watched a movie shown to us by some outside force. But, if we are to understand our dreams, we must never forget that, alien to us as they sometimes seem, they are truly ours. So the visions of the ancients.

I. Preliminary: The Jewish Ascension Literature

The potentially relevant sources may be divided into five groups. I arrange these groups, not chronologically, but in the order that is most convenient for my presentation.

(1) Rabbinic sources preserve legends of humans who travel to heaven or to paradise. The list of travellers includes Alexander the Great (BT *Tamid* 32b, PT *'Abodah Zarah* 3:1, 42c; Heller 1931:18–19) and R. Joshua b. Levi (BT *Ketubbot* 77b; *Himmelfarb* 1983:32–33). But its star member is Moses. *Pesiqta Rabbati* 20 and its parallels describe,

often in vivid and gripping detail, how Moses ascends to heaven, confronts the angels, and returns to earth with the Torah (Grözinger 1976). These stories are normally told in the third person, although one occasionally finds exceptions: in one brief text, which seems to be based on an earlier third-person narrative, Moses describes his own celestial adventures. (Jellinek 1967:5:165–166, based on 1:58–61; cf. Gaster 1971:1:124–164.) But the narrators are usually detached from the events they describe, and do not claim to have participated in them any more than the narrator of "Jack and the Beanstalk" claims to have shared his hero's ascent.

For this reason, these stories are seldom discussed in connection with the "reality" of the ascensions. But they nevertheless belong with our data. For it is at least thinkable that the satisfaction one gets from imagining someone else's ascension to heaven (either as narrator or as audience) is of the same kind and springs from the same motives as the satisfaction one gets from imagining or hallucinating one's own.

(2) Some Jewish apocalypses, from the centuries just before and after the turn of the eras, describe the heavenly ascensions of such Biblical figures as Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Levi, and Baruch. The essential difference between these narratives, and the ones in our first category, is that the apocalypses tell their stories in the first person. The ascending hero is also the narrator.

If we were to suppose that the use of the first person is a purely literary convention, like the first person in some modern historical novels, this difference would be of slight importance. But it is hard to read the apocalypses without having the impression that their authors claim something more by using the first person. The reader of the Enochian pseudepigrapha, it seems, is meant to believe that it is indeed Enoch's voice that he hears. It follows that the "I" of the fictional Enoch is in some way bound to the "I" of the real narrator. It is at least possible, therefore, that Enoch's ecstatic experiences are in fact those of the narrator, who describes them as he remembers them, in the first person.

The New Testament Book of Revelation¹ seems also to belong in this category, with the important distinction that it does not appear to be pseudepigraphic.

(3) The *Hekbalot* literature, now splendidly published by Peter Schäfer and his colleagues (1981), contains both descriptions of and prescriptions for heavenly ascent. The descriptions include several versions of the Talmudic story of the "four who entered a garden" (*pardes*), which the *Hekbalot* writers plainly understood as a heavenly journey. Some of these versions are in third person; others are in first, with R. Akiba as narrator (details in Halperin 1987b:199–210). R. Akiba and R. Ishmael are elsewhere made to describe or allude to their ascensions. The fullest of these accounts, which the text called "3 Enoch" puts into R. Ishmael's mouth, includes an ascension narrative within an ascension narrative: the angel Metatron, born the human Enoch, describes to R. Ishmael his ascension and transformation (Odeberg 1973, now in Charlesworth 1983).

The *Hekbalot* prescriptions for the ascent, which often use the second person, are more detailed and vivid than the descriptions. Although neither prescriptions nor descriptions dominate the *Hekbalot* literature to the extent one might imagine from reading Scholem (1954 and 1965), there is no question they are an important element. The best-known of the prescriptive passages is the discourse of R. Nehuniah b. ha-Kanah in *Hekbalot Rabbati*, summarized in Scholem 1965:9–13. But another such passage, published from a Genizah manuscript by Ithamar Gruenwald (1969; summary in Gruenwald 1980), is even more impressive. The angel Ozhayah instructs R. Ishmael in "the descent to the

¹ I treat Revelation as a Jewish text, on the basis of the self identification implied in 2:9 and 3:9.

merkabab," and promises his protection to "you and anyone else who wants to descend to the *merkabab*, whether in your own generation or in future generations." R. Ishmael is not quite convinced until "the least of the students in our college" makes the hazardous journey successfully. (Translations from Halperin 1987b:368-372.) It is not easy to understand the point of these prescriptions unless we suppose that their authors sought, and expected others to seek, ecstatic experiences.

(4) Many scholars suppose that Talmudic references to *merkabab*, *ma'aseb merkabab*, and the "four who entered *pardes*," point to some sort of ecstatic mysticism. This is indeed the probable interpretation of two passages in the Babylonian Talmud. BT Hagigah 14b has R. Akiba warn his companions against saying "water, water" when they "draw near the stones of pure marble." This reference, and the subsequent account of how Elisha b. Abuyah saw Metatron (15a), strongly suggest that the Babylonian writers identified the *pardes* these rabbis entered as some celestial territory. In BT Megillah 24b, R. Judah b. Illai's colleagues remark that many hoped to expound the *merkabab*, yet never saw it; that is, their hopes were disappointed. It follows that expounding the *merkabab* is bound up with having a vision of it. I have argued that both of these passages are Babylonian reinterpretations of older Palestinian sources which originally intended nothing of the kind (Halperin 1980). *Ma'aseb merkabab*, as perceived by certain Babylonian Amoraim (and by the *Hekbalot*), has to do with ecstatic experience. As perceived by the Tannaim and Palestinian Amoraim, it does not.

(5) Paul's account of his heavenly ascent, in II Corinthians 12:1-10, belongs in a category by itself. It is, as Tabor says, a rare "case of a named and known individual who tells of his own experience" (1986:97). The closest thing to it, among the sources we have considered, is the Revelation of John of Patmos.

II. Dichotomy #1: Is the Vision "Real" or Not?

When modern writers discuss the visionary experiences described in ancient sources, they often raise the question of whether these experiences are "real," or "genuine," or "authentic."² What do these words mean, applied to a vision?

Unless we wish to appear naive, we must assume that these writers intend the *subjective* reality of the visions, their reality in the perceptions of the people who think they experience them. A journey through the seven heavens is "real" if it is real *to the visionary*. Its objective reality, which no post-Copernican can believe in anyway, is beside the point. Or so it seems.

When we look more closely at modern discussions of visionary "reality," however, we can hardly escape feeling that some authors are indeed flirting with the idea that this "reality" is in some degree objective.

Take, for example, Gershom Scholem's discussion of the Babylonian Talmud's account of the four rabbis' visit to the *pardes*, and Akiba's mysterious warning to them: "When you draw near the stones of pure marble, do not say, Water, water . . ." (Hagigah 14b):

Modern interpretations of this famous passage, which clearly enough refers to a *real* danger in the process of ascending to "Paradise," are extremely far-fetched and not a little irrational in their determination at all costs to preserve the characteristic essentials of rationalism. We are told that the passages (sic) refers to cosmological speculations about the *materia prima*, an explanation which lacks all plausibility and finds no support in the context or in the subject

matter itself. The fact is that later Merkabah mystics showed a perfectly correct understanding of the meaning of this passage, and their interpretation offers striking proof that the tradition of Tannaitic mysticism and theosophy was really alive among them, although certain details may have originated in a later period.

In *Hekbalot Zutarti*, Scholem points out, the traveller to the *merkabab* is tested at the gate of the sixth heavenly palace by being shown "the ethereal glitter of the marble plates with which the palace was tessellated." If he is foolish enough to ask, "What is the meaning of these waters?", the angels "began to stone him and said: 'Wretch . . . are you unworthy to see the King in his beauty?' . . . And he does not go until they strike his head with iron bars and wound him."

Thus the text. The authenticity of the story's core, the ecstatic's vision of water, hardly requires proof. Nothing could be more far-fetched than to treat it as a *post festum* interpretation of the Talmudic passage; there is no reason whatsoever to doubt that the mystical experience of the dangers of the ascent is really the subject of the anecdote. (Scholem 1954:52-53)

What does Scholem mean with his italicized "real"? If he means only subjectively "real," his explanation does not explain anything. The sixth palace, its marble plates, the angels, the iron bars with which they strike the visionary—none of these has any reality outside the imagination of the visionary himself. Curled up in his trance (cf. Scholem 1954:49-50), the mystic is exposed to no "real danger" whatever. What, then, leads him to imagine or hallucinate dangers; and, particularly, these specific dangers?

If I go to Australia and come back with a report of a hopping pouched animal, my experience requires no explanation beyond that it was *real*: the animal was really there, I really saw it. But, if I dream of a weird creature in some faraway land, we cannot explain that creature's appearance by saying that my dream was subjectively real; that is, that I really dreamt it. I do not deny the possibility that *Hekbalot Zutarti's* account of the "water" test may reflect visionary experiences that were, like your dreams and mine, subjectively real. But I deny that, if this is so, it can stand as an explanation for the content of the experiences. If Scholem says that it does, we must suppose that he is claiming a reality for the experiences—and, indeed, for the things experienced—that goes beyond the subjective.

A second example: Johannes Lindblom includes chapter 12 of Revelation among those passages of the book that seem to describe genuine visionary experiences. When, therefore, John of Patmos sees a woman flee into the wilderness (12:6), we are not to rationalize this detail as a symbolic allusion to the Jerusalem Christians' flight to Pella. "Rather, it is a visionary detail, which requires no explanation beyond that the seer saw in the vision how the woman fled into a wilderness, in order there to bring herself to safety."³ Lindblom's treatment of the passage is not altogether consistent. But it is difficult to understand the quoted sentence unless we suppose it reflects a half-admitted belief in the vision's objective reality. John really saw the woman; therefore she must really have been there for him to see.

³ My translation of the German: ". . . sondern ist ein visionärer Zug, der keiner anderen Erklärung bedarf, als dass der Seher in der Vision sah, wie das Weib in eine Wüste floh, um sich dort in Sicherheit zu bringen" (1968:227n).

² The antonym of "real," as we will presently see, is "literary."

And a third: Martin Samuel Cohen offers the following as a possible solution to the problem of pseudepigraphy in the *Hekbalot* and the *Sbi'ur Qomab*: "If it was the author of the [Shi'ur Qomah] Urtext, himself, who experienced the mystic union of which the divine names and dimensions are the revelatory result, then perhaps it was also he who attributed the texts which presented them to R. Aqiba, R. Ishmael and R. Nathan. . . . Ultimately, the question rests on the obscure issue of the way in which the attributor understood his own creative process. If he was a *bona fide* mystic, who experienced visions and revelations of Metatron, who told him these teachings in the names of the tannaic authorities to whom they are attributed, then the question of pseudepigraphy is solved—the ascriptions are part of the revelation, not its frame. . . . As such, they need not be justified any further; the attributions may have been as mysterious to the author as they are to his readers, and have come from the same inner source as the rest of his mystic information" (1983:87). Despite his confusing reference to an "inner source," Cohen's argument seems to require that the author of *Sbi'ur Qomab* have been in contact with some real source other than himself, who reveals to him things he would not otherwise have known. Cohen elsewhere refers to "facts," "mystic data," and "real mystic revelation" underlying *Sbi'ur Qomab*, as if they had objective existence (*ibid.*, pp. 6, 19, 51, 80, 101, 168). Once again, a modern scholar talks as if he believes or half-believes that the visions he discusses are real in some objective sense, but does not quite want to say so.

I have quoted from these authors at some length, lest I be supposed to have set up a straw man for demolition. They seem to me to express a fairly widespread attitude, of half-belief in some sort of worlds that contain the things described in the apocalypses and the *Hekbalot*.

I would not dogmatically deny that such worlds exist, simply because none of the astronauts managed to see them. But I do need to know how they are to be fit into a scientific view of the universe. In the absence of such an explanation, I will stand on one premise: that the things described in an account of heavenly ascension (or of any other visionary experience), insofar as they are not ordinary objects in the material world, are the creations of the author of that account (or of his ultimate human source). It was *he* who shaped them, consciously or unconsciously. To ask what they mean is to ask what *he* meant by imagining them.

The dichotomy, then, of a "real" vision and one that is not "real," is misleading. The appropriate distinction is between *fantasy* and *hallucination*. In the former case, the originator of the account imagines something, consciously aware that it has no existence outside his imagination. In the latter, he constructs it in his unconscious, as we construct our dreams, and consciously misperceives it as something given him from the outside. Lindblom reminds us that there is a range of experiences between these two (1967:36–43). All have in common that the individual constructs them, out of his personal experiences and out of his cultural background.

I will presently take up the question of how we can distinguish fantasy from hallucination; and, once we have made our decision, what follows from it.

III. Dichotomy #2: Vision vs. Report of Vision

To illustrate the second dichotomy, I quote Morton Enslin's skeptical view of the ecstatic experience underlying the Book of Revelation:

Again, the book is solely the product of study and reflection. No living man, even in the wildest vision or nightmare, actually saw the things he describes. They are simply paper descriptions. Again and again the same event is portrayed in different visions—as is also notably the case in Daniel—or, as

has already been remarked, he *sees* it again in preparation. Nor is it out of place to remark that, even if he had actually *seen* them, the mind of man is such that he could not have remembered them all in this welter of detail. He may well have been an ecstatic. But his *seeing* is simply the conventional means of describing what he wants to represent. (Enslin 1938:363–364)

Enslin's italicized *seeing* reflects the same fallacy as Scholem's italicized *real*. After all, no one ever "actually *saw*" anything in a nightmare. But, when Enslin doubts whether John of Patmos could have remembered so elaborate a vision long enough to write it down, he raises a different issue. This is the split between the vision as *experienced*, the vision as *remembered*, and the vision as *reported*.

There is no doubt that we often forget our dreams or portions of our dreams, or that our memory may distort those dreams that we do remember (Freud 1965:550–571). But the process is very different from that of forgetting or misrepresenting the details of something that happens in the external world, such as a complicated auto accident. The extent to which I can describe the accident accurately will depend on the extent to which my senses can register the bewildering variety of stimuli, the extent to which my memory can preserve them, and the extent to which I can later verbalize my memories. At each stage there is a loss, and each loss makes it harder for me to put what I have seen into words.

A dream is different. Nothing has happened outside me; my senses have had to perceive nothing. Rather, I have made a pictorial representation from my own thoughts. The "I" who remembers this representation, and the "I" who describes it, are no other than the "I" who first created it. When I remember my dream, I am in a sense rethinking my own thoughts. Considered this way, "How can I remember my dreams?" is less a problem than, "Why should I forget them?" And the Freudian answer to the latter question, that I am repressing thoughts I have had but do not want to own up to, seems plausible to me.

This has an important implication for us. Where an external event is at issue, memory and verbalization are bound to be successive veils cloaking the reality of the event. But, in the case of a vision, there is no need to imagine a gap between the experience and the report of it, or to conceive the report as a barrier between us and the significance of the experience. Enslin may be right: what John of Patmos describes in Revelation may not have been a vision. But, if we choose to believe John's claim, we need not think it would have been any harder for him to remember his vision than to have created it in the first place. Nor have we any reason to believe that the language he chose to express his vision is a less reliable guide to its meaning than the (irretrievable) vision itself would be.

I am therefore wary of any treatment of apocalyptic visions that assumes a tension between the vision itself and the words chosen to describe it. I do not, for example, accept Lindblom's view that "inexpressibility" is a distinguishing mark of an authentic vision; that, "on account of the nature of the material, and on account of the unique nature of the experiences, the visionaries always have difficulty communicating what they have experienced. What they see and hear goes beyond all human understanding and resists all attempts to report it in human words" (Lindblom 1968:219, followed by Rowland 1982:235–236).⁴ The human mind itself created the vision. How then can it go beyond all human understanding?

⁴ "Unaussprechlichkeit: Wegen der Art des Stoffes und der Eigenart des Erlebens haben die Visionäre immer Schwierigkeiten, das Erlebte wiederzugeben. Was sie sehen und hören, geht über allen menschlichen Verstand und widerstrebt aller Nacherzählung mit menschlichen Worten."

As I put my trust in the language the visionary uses to describe his experience, I put a more qualified trust in the interpretation he gives to his experience. Not that I believe it is the only, or even the deepest, interpretation. We will see that visions, like dreams, can have meanings which the visionary himself gives no sign of being aware of. But, as long as I believe that the visionary is the author of the interpretation, I would not oppose vision and interpretation to one another.

I would thus disagree with Christopher Rowland; who, in a thorough and judicious discussion of the experiential basis of apocalyptic visions (1982:214-247), takes it as a sign that a vision is genuine if it does not quite jibe with the interpretation of it that the apocalypticist gives. This argument would be entirely plausible if we were to suppose that the vision is a prior source which lay before the apocalypticist, and which he cannot be supposed always to have understood correctly. Sometimes, of course, this may be the case: an apocalyptic writer may copy a vision from some older text, and then set about interpreting or misinterpreting it. But if, as Rowland assumes, the vision is the apocalypticist's own, I will assume that the interpretation he gives of it conveys at least part of what he intended when he created it.

Rowland at one point qualifies his position: "No doubt the visionary believed that the interpretation itself was just as much under the influence of divine guidance as the original vision. . . . Although the part which reflection played on the original vision was probably considerable, the evidence which we possess of the apocalyptic seer preparing himself to learn more about the vision which he has already seen suggests that he considered the reflective process itself and the answers which emerged equally the result of divine guidance" (ibid., 240). I agree entirely. I further believe that the visionary was objectively correct in seeing the same spirit behind the vision and its interpretation. Only, the spirit was his own.

IV. Dichotomy #3: "Real" vs. "Literary"

What is the opposite of a "real" vision or ecstatic experience? The antonym that most frequently occurs in modern discussions is "literary." (The opening sentence of Lindblom 1968:206 is one example out of many.)

This antithesis reflects two opposing images. In the first, the visionary goes into trance, sees what he sees; and, emerging from trance, hastily scribbles it down or relates it to his disciples. (Or, perhaps, his disciples take down the words he utters while he is still in trance; Scholem 1965:10.) This is a "real" visionary, who has "real" experiences. In the second image, the so-called "visionary" sits tranquilly at his desk, deliberately constructing his "visions" from bits and pieces of older sources and traditions. His Bible, and perhaps the writings of older apocalypticists, lie open before him. He ponders the words of the sacred text, combining and expounding them in ways he learned from his teachers, or perhaps has now devised himself. Out of this conscious intellectual process comes a "vision" which is nothing more than a literary creation.

Imagine, for example, John of Patmos writing what is now the tenth chapter of Revelation. He remembers an episode from one of his favorite prophets, Ezekiel, in which the seer eats a scroll which God has handed to him (2:8-3:3). He thinks: That's a fine detail for my own vision! But wait: Ezekiel says that the scroll was *in my mouth as sweet as honey* (3:3); yet, a little later on, *I went in bitterness in the beat of my spirit* (3:14). Why should he be *bitter*, if he had eaten a *sweet* scroll? But, on the other hand, how could the scroll be *sweet* if it had *written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe* (2:9)? This consideration will explain what any midrashic thinker would perceive as a problem, the otiose *in my mouth* in 3:3. The solution: it was only *in my mouth* that the scroll was as

sweet as honey; somewhere else, presumably in the prophet's stomach, it was *bitter*. Satisfied, John of Patmos turns his midrash into first person: "And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter" (10:10).⁵ Thus a "literary" vision is created.

We might imagine from this that an apocalyptic writer's heavy use of literary texts, notably the Hebrew Bible, would betray that his visions are "literary." But modern scholars do not seem to find this a very useful criterion. Lindblom, for example, observes that Revelation 16:1-19:8 is saturated with Biblical allusions, and seems to think this indicates that this section is "literary" (1968:234). But the heavy use of Biblical images in 1:9-20 and chapter 4 does not prevent Lindblom from regarding these passages as genuinely visionary. "The visionaries," he observes, "do not create *ex nihilo*. Their visions are always to a great extent constructed from traditional material, material which had a latent existence in their inner selves, before it was objectified in ecstasy."⁶

Rowland goes further. He sees meditation on the text of Scripture as a way in which real visions were generated (1982:215-218). If he is right—and experiences claimed by the mystics of sixteenth-century Safed (Werblowsky 1977:50-55) confirm that his view is at least plausible—we can imagine an alternative account of the formation of Revelation 10, this time conceived as a "real" vision.

Rowland formulates the alternatives as follows: ". . . whether the vision of God in the apocalypses is merely a description of God which is a repetition of material in Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6 or shows signs of being a subject of interest in its own right which may have involved the writer in actually seeing again the vision of Ezekiel" (1982:218-219). At first sight, this seems fair enough. But cross out the meaningless pejorative "merely"; cross out the misleading "actually" (the writer "actually" saw nothing)—and what exactly is the difference between Rowland's alternatives? Either way, the author has taken material left him by Isaiah and Ezekiel, and made something of his own out of it.

Indeed, I question whether the ingredients that go into a "real" vision are in any way different from those that go into a "literary" one. I would recall, too, that there is such a thing as "literary inspiration," which may be claimed by people who have never gone into a trance in their lives. The "inspired" writer, hardly less than the visionary, perceives his inspiration as something outside his control, and perhaps outside himself altogether (Merkur 1985:58-63, cf. Lindblom 1967:2-4). These points considered, the gulf between "real" and "literary" visions shrinks dramatically.

It does not vanish altogether. We are right to put the third-person rabbinic accounts of Moses' ascent in a distinct category from the first-person apocalyptic accounts of Enoch's ascent, and from the instructions for ascent that *Hekhalot Rabbati* puts in the mouth of R. Nehuniah b. ha-Kanah. The Moses stories are plainly "literary"; there is little evidence that anyone ever claimed them as his own experience. But we will also be right if we treat the three categories of evidence in the same framework, suppose that they share common understandings of the significance of the ascent, and attach only secondary

⁵ So Charles 1920:1:267-268. The parallel exegesis of Ezekiel 3, by the twelfth-century French-Jewish commentator Eliezer of Beaugency (ed. Poznanski 1913:7-8), persuades me that Charles has correctly understood the exegetical process behind Revelation 10:8-11.

⁶ "Die Visionäre schöpfen nicht aus dem Nichts; ihre Visionen sind immer zum grossen Teil aus herkömmlichem Material aufgebaut, einem Material, das latent in ihrem Innern existierte, ehe es in der Ekstase objektiviert wurde" (1968:221-222).

importance to the question of whether the authors know they have imagined what they describe or think they have experienced it. The distinction between "real" and "literary," between hallucination and fantasy, is a matter of shading rather than opposition. Whichever side we take on the question of the "reality" of the ascensions in the apocalypses and the *Hekbalot*, the essential difference between these passages and the Moses legends lies in the degree of conviction claimed by their originators.

V. How To Tell Fantasy From Hallucination

Can the decision between hallucination and fantasy, "real" and "literary" visionary experience, be made at all?

Lindblom, discussing the visions of the Book of Revelation, proposes eight indicators of the "genuine" vision: spontaneity; simplicity; dreamlike quality; freshness; concern with the supermundane; inexpressibility (see above); emotional side effects; and notation of date or locality (1968:219). Rowland accepts all of these indicators except for spontaneity and concern with the supermundane (1982:235-236).

My own view is that Lindblom's criteria, though including some useful observations, are arbitrarily conceived and indeed self-contradictory.⁷ I have the impression that Lindblom, and other modern writers, are working from one other, unstated, criterion: If it is vivid, exciting, and moving, it is likely to be "real." This criterion may have some value when we are talking about accounts of objectively real experiences in the material world, and asking whether they are true or not. But, applied to experiences which are on no account objectively real, which are on any hypothesis products of the human mind—whether fantasy or hallucination—it is bound to be ineffective. The fantasies of science-fiction writers are often enthralling. And, it has been said, nothing is duller than other people's dreams.

Only one criterion seems to me to have the slightest validity in distinguishing consciously created fantasy from unconsciously created hallucination. It is this: Do the images used by the writer have symbolic meanings which, when deciphered, yield a more or less coherent and convincing interpretation, but which the writer gives no indication he is consciously aware of? To the degree to which the symbols of the vision are outside the writer's conscious control, we may assume that the vision itself is outside his conscious control.

This distinction is not quite the same as the one implied by Rowland, which I earlier criticized, between the vision itself and the visionary's interpretation or elaboration of it. For one thing, I stress the word *conscious*: the visionary creates the vision himself, at all its levels, out of his own background and needs; but he is not necessarily conscious of all the needs that impel him. Second, I do not suppose that the visionary's understanding is false to the vision's meaning. But it may be incomplete: his conscious understanding may not embrace the totality of what he wanted to convey.

The literary artist, too, does not always consciously understand the full meaning of

everything he writes. This criterion, therefore, has only relative validity. It is a matter of degree: If I am a fiction writer, I *normally* understand what I mean to convey in the stories I write. I *normally* do not understand my dreams.

Enoch's second dream vision, in 1 Enoch chapters 85-90, seems to me a particularly clear example of a symbolic vision whose author is in complete conscious control of his symbols. (I use the translation in Sparks 1984; cf Charles 1913, Charlesworth 1983.) The author describes a long series of dream-events involving animals, all of which represent figures of Biblical and contemporary history. A white bull and heifer appear first, and beget three bulls, black, red, and white. Plainly enough, these are Adam, Eve, and their sons. The bulls' offspring tend to degenerate into other animals. At one point, a white bull (Isaac) begets a black wild boar and a white sheep, and that white sheep begets twelve more sheep. The vision then traces the adventures of the sheep descended from those twelve, and their relations with "the Lord of the sheep." At the very end, a ram with a great horn, helped by "the Lord of the sheep" and his deputy, defends the sheep against predatory birds who menace them. There follows a judgment, the building of a new house for "the Lord of the sheep," the gathering of all birds and animals to that house. Finally, "I looked until all their species were transformed, and they all became white bulls. . . . And the Lord of the sheep rejoiced over them and over all the bulls" (90:38).

Not all of these details are clear to us. (Does the ram with the great horn represent Judah the Maccabee?) But we have no reason to believe that any of them was unclear to the writer, or involves layers of meaning which he did not consciously grasp. One part of Enoch's dream is openly sexual: stars fall from heaven, "let out their private parts like horses and began to mount the cows of the bulls, and they all became pregnant and bore elephants and camels and asses" (86:4). But nothing about this leads me to suspect the author is expressing unconscious sexual impulses. The fallen stars are the fallen angels of Genesis 6:1-4; this passage, like the rest of the dream, is a symbolic recapitulation of Biblical history. The fiction of a "dream" notwithstanding, I see no reason to believe the author does not know exactly what he is doing with his images.

But now consider a passage from *Hekbalot Rabbati*, one of the prescriptions for ascent that I mentioned earlier.⁸ When the traveller to the *merkabab* enters "the gate of the seventh palace," R. Nehuniah b. ha-Kanah explains, the "holy *hayyot*" will "look at him with their five hundred and twelve eyes."⁹ Each one of the eyes of the holy *hayyot* is split open, the size of a large winnowers' sieve; and their eyes look as if *they race like lightnings*.¹⁰ Besides them, there are the eyes of the mighty cherubim and of the *ofannim* of the Shechinah, which look like torches and flaming coals. The man shudders and trembles and recoils; he faints in terror and collapses.

The visionary's affect is connected with one specific feature of the celestial beings: their eyes. When they turn their eyes upon him, he faints in terror. When, in the sequel, they cover or turn away their faces (and hence their eyes), he can recover. We must ask if there is something inherently terrifying about these eyes. And we must complement this question with the observation that the eyes are in fact very odd. Not only are they

⁷ A vision must be spontaneous, yet may be to some extent prepared for (criterion #1). Visions "will never have the appearance of being creations of the visionary himself" ("werden sie niemals als Schöpfungen des Visionärs selber angesehen," #1); yet their perceived material "is drawn from the experience and knowledge of the visionary" ("[d]er Wahrnehmungstoff der Visionen ist der Erfahrung und dem Wissen des Visionärs entnommen," #3).

⁸ Paragraphs 241-250 of Schäfer's edition (1981), chapters 23-24 of Wertheimer's edition (1968) and Grodner's translation (Blumenthal 1978). I here summarize my full discussion of the passage (1987a).

⁹ The number derives from an exegetical tradition based on Targ. Ezekiel 1:6, developed in the *Hekbalot* (details in Halperin 1987a, 1987b).

¹⁰ Nahum 2:5; cf. Ezekiel 1:13-14.

enormous, as one might perhaps expect from the enormous angels of the *Hekbalot*; they are *split open*. What can this mean? Why is a *sieve* specifically chosen to compare with them? If we can provide an answer to these questions that will simultaneously answer the question of why the eyes are terrifying, we may suppose that we have correctly understood the dynamics that underlie this passage.

I believe this can be done. Another passage of *Hekbalot Rabbati*, which uses similar language in a different context, suggests that the "split open," sieve-like eyes are representations of female genitals. Evidence from rabbinic and classical sources supports this view. (Details in Halperin 1987a.) Once this is supposed, the visionary's reaction becomes wholly intelligible. Myths, legends, and folk customs from a wide variety of cultures point to a widespread male terror of the female genitals, for which psychoanalytic writers have offered various explanations (Freud 1955:273-274, Slater 1968:16-23, 317-324, Spiro 1982:113-10). We do not normally find that males are conscious of this fear; or that, when they use representations of the genitals as fear-inspiring (often apotropaic) images, they are consciously aware of what they are doing. I see no reason to suppose that the *Hekbalot* writer was different in this respect. His representation of the female genitals and of his dread of them, which we must presume him to have shaped unconsciously, contrasts sharply with the conscious representation of the male genitals in 1 Enoch 86:4.

We perhaps have another example of unconscious sexual symbolization in Revelation 12:13-18:

¹³And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had borne the male child. ¹⁴But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. ¹⁵The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. ¹⁶But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river which the dragon had poured from his mouth. ¹⁷Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring [*spermatos*, literally "seed"], on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus.

The image of verses 15-16, like the rest of chapter 12, is surely rich in mythological resonances of the most varied kinds (Collins 1976). But, when I hear of a dream or vision or fantasy in which a snake chases a woman and squirts water at her out of his mouth, I cannot doubt that one of the things the dreamer or visionary has on his mind is sex.¹¹ The earth's opening its mouth, to swallow the dragon's water, confirms this understanding. And it is perhaps in this connection that we can understand verse 17's puzzling reference to "the rest of her seed"; conceivably, the seed with which the woman is now impregnated.

What might be the role of these sexual images in the visionary complexes in which they occur? I can answer only very tentatively. I have suggested (1987b and forthcoming) that

¹¹ *Drakōn* and *opbis* both mean "serpent." It is curious, however, that the author uses *drakōn* throughout the chapter, *opbis* only in verse 15 and the very end of 14 (in the Greek; RSV changes the word order)—plus verse 9, where, as in 20:2, *drakōn* and *opbis* are equated. Perhaps *opbis* has a more clearly phallic association than *drakōn*? The article "Schlange," in Pauly-Wissowa (1923:495), claims that Aristophanes uses *opbis* for a limp penis, in *Lysistrata* 759 and *Ecclesiazousae* 909.

the theme of heavenly ascent is bound up with what Ernest Jones has called "the world-old conflict between father and son, between the younger and the older generation, the favourite theme of so many poets and writers, the central *motif* of most mythologies and religions" (1949:75-76). The child climbs from the ground to the heights of the adult world, and, at the end of his climb, grasps at the power (sexual and otherwise) that once belonged to the adult alone. His body is transformed in the process. (The paradigm for this ascension and transformation in the *Hekbalot* is Enoch-Metatron; who, significantly, is regularly given the title "youth.") If, now, the ascension in *Hekbalot Rabbati* reflects, at least in part, a child's fantasy of climbing to the lofty and forbidden realms of adult sexuality, it makes sense that the visionary would unconsciously expect to meet obstacles in the form of his sexual fears.

The Book of Revelation states fairly explicitly the theme of the son's struggling for and finally grasping a share of his father's power. "He who conquers," Jesus promises, "I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne" (3:21). The Lamb's progress reflects this achievement. At first he stands before his father's throne, bloodily slaughtered (5:6, 9, 12). At the end of the book, joined with his bride (21:9), he shares that throne (22:1-3). If generational conflict is one of the motifs underlying the Book of Revelation—naturally, I do not suggest that it is the only or even the primary motif—it may perhaps provide a context for the vivid sexual image of 12:15.

In both *Hekbalot Rabbati* and the Book of Revelation, we may imagine that unconscious images, perhaps originally created in dreams, found their way into the authors' conscious fantasies. But *Hekbalot Rabbati's* explicit claim, to prescribe a method for an ecstatic journey to the *merkabab*, suggests another model. Some men, perhaps, believed that ecstatic techniques would give them the power to act out early fantasies of growth, transformation, and sexual achievement—fantasies which they consciously held only in a much disguised form. Some of them managed to do so, in trance-induced hallucinations. Primitive sexual fears found their way, again in disguise, into these hallucinations. Terrifying visions resulted. Over the years, these were shaped into a mythology of celestial dangers, ultimately recorded in the *Hekbalot*. If this is true, we at last can fathom "the mystical experience of the dangers of the ascent" (Scholem 1954:53), and can understand in what ways it is and is not "real."

VI. What Does It Profit?

In the preceding section, I have shown how we can sometimes decide whether a vision is likely to be "real" or "literary." But, earlier on, I argued that the importance of this distinction is very far from crucial. What, then, do we gain from making the choice?

We do *not* gain any fuller understanding of the vision's meaning. I have indicated the fallacy of supposing that, by saying that the *Hekbalot* "water" test reflects some "real" ecstatic experience, we have done anything to explain it. True, by postulating a bona fide hallucination behind a visionary account, we may make ourselves more sensitive to any unconscious material that account may contain, and our understanding of it will gain thereby. But this postulate will be only a heuristic device that encourages us to do what we ought to be doing anyway.

Ecstatic trance has implications, not only for the psychology of the individual who practices it, but also for his society and his relation to it (Lewis 1978). If we could show that some Jews in antiquity used certain techniques to achieve hallucinatory experiences, and that they made claims to religious authority on the basis of those experiences, we would have made a valuable contribution to the social history of early Judaism. Given,

however, that there are other ways beside ecstatic trance for unconscious material to make its way into visionary reports—most obviously, through dreams—it is risky to deduce the practice of visionary ecstasy solely from the presence of such material. Where, as in the *Hekhalot*, we have explicit evidence for ecstasy outside the visions themselves,¹² we can use unconscious material in the visions to confirm this evidence. But where such evidence is missing, as in the apocalypses (except, perhaps, for Revelation), unconscious material in the visions cannot take its place.

The consequences of distinguishing "real" from "literary" visions, then, are rather meager. Nevertheless, the question of the place of the heavenly ascent and other visionary experiences in the psychic lives of the people who imagined them—were they fantasies? dreams? hallucinations?—retains the greatest inherent interest.

Our ancient predecessors, living in a time and place remote from us, shaped by a culture alien to us, were nevertheless our fellow-creatures; not least in that they, like us, had hidden selves to which they had only occasional access. No one who cares about their experience can be indifferent to the question of what their modes of access were.¹³

That is why the experiential questions bound up with the heavenly ascension remain, for all the reservations I have expressed here, topics of substantial importance and continuing fascination.

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¹² I have, however, noted some reservations (1984, 1987b).

¹³ Erwin R. Goodenough has some marvellously eloquent observations on the difficulty, and the necessity, of understanding people of the past (1962:22–29).

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The Transformation of the Spectator: Power, Perception, and the Day of Salvation

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The present study explores the role of the cultic, epiphany-type procession¹ as the mediator of salvation in the Greco-Roman world. It focuses on two texts, each of which link the occurrence of a procession with "the day of salvation:" 1) Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* 11 which describes an Isis procession and 2) an independent letter fragment found in 2 Corinthians (2 Cor. 2:14-6:13; 7:2-4)² in which the apostle Paul metaphorically depicts his missionary activities with images drawn from the cultic processions of the Greco-Roman world.

Despite their obvious differences, these two texts contain a surprising number of common themes, all revolving around the phenomenon of the procession. In each text, the procession is viewed as a vehicle for the propagation of the cult. As such, the procession presents an epiphany of the deity, described as the "power of the god," to the general public. Both authors entertain the possibility of either a positive or a negative response to the epiphany. A positive response from those viewing the epiphany insures

¹ This type of procession featured the visitation of the deity in any number of ways: 1) The deity could appear in person a) represented by a statue (O. Nussbaum, "Geleit," *RAC* 9 [1976], col. 984) as in the Attic Anthesteria (see Ludwig Deubner, *Attische Feste* [Berlin: H. Keller, 1932], p. 139; A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens* [Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1953], pp. 59-60; Herbert William Parke, *Festivals of the Athenians* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977], p. 127) or the City Dionysia (Deubner, pp. 102-11; Pickard-Cambridge, pp. 12-13; Parke, p. 109) or b) an individual representing the deity (Nussbaum, col. 984) as in the Isis procession described by Apuleius 11. 11 (274, 14ff), in the Theban Daphnephoria (see Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985], pp. 100-101) or in the procession for Artemis Laphria in Patrai (Paus. 7. 18. 11; See S. Eitrem, *Beiträge zur griechischen Religionsgeschichte III Die Prozessionen*, *Skrifter utg. av Videnskapsselskapet i Kristiana. Hist.-Phil. Klasse*, 1919), p. 88.); 2) The deity could be represented by sacred objects or symbols as in the Dionysus processions where the deity was represented by the phallus (see Bömer, "Pompa," *PW* 21.2 [1952], cols. 1900-1901; Nussbaum, col. 985); or even scenes from the life of the deity (see Ptolemy's Dionysus procession in Athen. 200B-C).

² This study presupposes the division of 2 Corinthians as hypothesized by Günther Bornkamm in "Die Vorgeschichte des sogenannten Zweiten Korintherbriefs," in *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse*, 1961, 2 (A shorter English version of this study has been published in *NTS* 8 [1962], pp. 258-264 and reprinted in *The Authority and Integrity of the New Testament* [London: SPCK, 1965]).