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Jörg Frey

“Mystical” Traditions in an Apocalyptic Text?

The Throne Vision of Revelation 4 within the Context of Enochic and Merkavah Texts

Introduction: Apocalypticism and Mysticism as Contested Categories

The boundaries between apocalypticism and mysticism often appear unclear or blurred. This is not only due to the observation of mystical elements in apocalyptic texts and of revelatory experiences within the context of mystical religion. It is, even more so, due to the fact that the two terms are scholarly categories subject to definition, and depending on their respective definitions, the group of texts or textual elements attributed to each category varies considerably. Furthermore, both terms have a long history of reception in Christian theology and biblical exegesis, and both have been intensely rejected by certain theological traditions. The modern history of research on apocalypticism (starting with Friedrich Lücke in the early 19th century)¹ has suffered from a strong interest in rejecting or marginalizing those elements as “syncretistic” or foreign in New Testament thought. The majority of theological interpreters interested in the religious validity of the early Christian testimonies were more inclined to “rescue” Jesus, Paul, and the other apostles from the strange, speculative, or erroneous views of apocalypticism.² But the study of mysticism suffered no less from the thorough rejection of the term by the dominant

1 Cf. Jörg Frey, “Jesus und die Apokalyptik,” in *Von Jesus zur neutestamentlichen Theologie: Kleine Schriften 2*, ed. B. Schliesser, WUNT 368 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 85–158; here 89–117; see also idem, “Die Bedeutung der Qumrantexte für das Verständnis der Apokalyptik im Frühjudentum und im Urchristentum,” in *Apokalyptik und Qumran*, ed. J. Frey and M. Becker, Einblicke 10 (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2007), 11–62; here 11–22.

2 See the famous phrase by Klaus Koch in his pamphlet, *Ratlos vor der Apokalyptik: Eine Streitschrift über ein vernachlässigtes Gebiet der Bibelwissenschaft und die schädlichen Auswirkungen auf Theologie und Philosophie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1970), 55: “das angestrenzte Bemühen, Jesus vor der Apokalyptik zu retten.”

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tradition of Protestant theology in the early and mid 20th century, the “Dialectical Theology” for which mysticism was largely equal with the ungodly attempt at self-redemption.³ As a consequence, mystical elements in the theology of, e.g., Paul,⁴ were as strongly marginalized as were apocalyptic elements.⁵

Times have changed again, and pendulum has swung back⁶: Research in apocalyptic traditions has seen a strong revival since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the decline of the Bultmann school, and likewise, modern theology has developed a new enthusiasm for mysticism of various religious traditions, not least in the hope of overcoming religious struggles and diversities through the mystical idea of universal unity. In a postmodern context, “mysticism” sounds sympathetic while “apocalypticism” is still too easily linked with negative aspects such as fundamentalism, odd end-time speculation, and religious violence. The issue remains, however, to arrive at some clarity about what is meant by “apocalypticism” and “mysticism,” and the

3 Cf., programmatically, Emil Brunner, *Die Mystik und das Wort: Der Gegensatz zwischen moderner Religionsauffassung und christlichem Glauben dargestellt an der Theologie Schleiermachers* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1924).

4 For the earlier view of the History-of-Religions school, see Kurt Deißner, *Paulus und die Mystik seiner Zeit* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1921) and Albert Schweitzer, *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1930).

5 Thus in the majority of the Bultmann school. Cf., in particular, Jörg Baumgarten, *Paulus und die Apokalypik: Die Auslegung apokalyptischer Überlieferungen in den echten Paulusbriefen*, WMANT 44 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1975) and also – still skeptical – Hans-Heinrich Schade, *Apokalyptische Christologie bei Paulus: Studien zum Zusammenhang von Christologie und Eschatologie in den Paulusbriefen*, Göttinger Theologische Arbeiten 18 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981). For criticism, cf. Martin Hengel, “Paulus und die frühchristliche Apokalypik,” in *Paulus und Jakobus. Kleine Schriften 3*, WUNT 141 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 302–417.

6 Even in Pauline studies, the storm-center of Protestant theology, the term “mysticism” has been reestablished, albeit with varying meanings: While many interpreters, especially in the line of the “New Perspective on Paul,” now characterize Paul’s participatory Christology as “Christ mysticism,” others see the mystical elements in the account of Paul’s visions, his heavenly journey, and other experiences of the Spirit. On the reconsideration of Paul’s religious experience and even Paul as a mystic, cf. Bernhard Heininger, *Paulus als Visionär: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Studie*, HBS 9 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1996); Hans-Christoph Meier, *Mystik bei Paulus: Zur Phänomenologie religiöser Erfahrung im Neuen Testament*, TANZ 26 (Tübingen: Francke, 1998); more recently, see also Ulrich Luz, “Paul as Mystic,” in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Origins: Essays in Honor of James D. G. Dunn*, ed. G. Stanton, B. W. Longenecker and S. C. Barton (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004): 131–43; and G. Theissen, “Paulus und die Mystik: Der eine und einzige Gott und die Transformation des Menschen,” *ZTK* 110 (2013): 263–90.

task is no easier in the context of the present enthusiasm than in the earlier context of theological rejection.

With regard to “mysticism,” the warning in the new *Encyclopedia Religion Past and Present* should be noticed: the term which “is closely linked to the development of the history of religion in Europe ... must not be taken and applied uncritically as a general term for a phenomenologically determined group of phenomena in other religions.”⁷ Likewise, with regard to “apocalypticism” – a term originally coined from the opening of the biblical book of Revelation⁸ and subsequently applied to the traditions behind a growing body of “similar” writings in Judaism, Christianity, and other religious traditions – the Uppsala conference came to the conclusion in 1979 that it is more appropriate to describe the phenomena and their development than to fix a coherent definition (“contra definitionem pro descriptione”).⁹

Therefore, in the present context, we will not discuss the problems of definition further, but rather enter a textual tradition which has always been linked with the idea of mysticism, the tradition of the vision of God or his heavenly throne. The most extensive biblical example for this tradition is the extended vision of the open heaven with the throne and, most significantly, the slaughtered Lamb in Revelation 4–5 which extensively draws on biblical – and also, as we will see – post-biblical traditions, thus providing a link to the continuous stream of tradition of the vision of the throne or the “merkavah” in early Judaism that flows from Ezekiel through the centuries into late Rabbinic and Hekhalot texts.¹⁰

7 Thus, M. von Brück, “Mysticism I. The Concept,” *RPP* 8 (2010): 656.

8 For the first usage of the term, see Friedrich Lücke, “Apokalyptische Studien und Kritiken,” *ThStKr* 2 (1829): 285–320; idem, *Commentar über die Schriften des Evangelisten Johannes. Vierter Theil, erster Band: Versuch einer vollständigen Einleitung in die Offenbarung Johannes und in die gesammte apokalyptische Litteratur* (Bonn: Weber, 1832). See also Frey, “Jesus und die Apokalyptik,” 90–91.

9 Thus David Hellholm, “Introduction,” in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Ancient Near East*, ed. David Hellholm (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), 1–6; here 2. For early Jewish apocalypticism, see the survey by John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*. 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

10 On the history of Jewish mysticism, cf. the still indispensable study by Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941); on the impact, see Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan, eds., *Gershom Scholem’s Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993); furthermore, see Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, AGJU 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1980); and Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

In interpreting Revelation, we will have to look primarily for intertextual relations in order to get hold of the traditions the author draws on and combines when crafting his own fresh imagery.¹¹ Furthermore, we will have to discuss the function of the heavenly visions for the whole of Revelation and for conveying its distinctive message. From there, we can discuss how mystical elements are embedded in the work's apocalyptic context.¹²

The Quest for the Making of Revelation's Visions

But is Revelation “apocalyptic?” Or is it, as the church tradition has maintained for centuries, a “prophetic” book? Does it primarily draw on and combine biblical, prophetic traditions, or does it go beyond those traditions, adopting the views and even textual elements of “post-biblical”¹³ apocalyptic texts? Recently, Jan Doehorn has emphasized its prophetic character and rejected the history-of-religions approach, which is mostly based on extra-canonical apocalyptic literature. In Doehorn's view, Revelation is scripture-based prophecy, not an apocalyptic vision.¹⁴ The problem is, however, whether the categories are so clear-cut, and the question will be how prophetic texts and

11 On the making of Revelation's imagery, see Jörg Frey, “Die Bildersprache der Johannesapokalypse,” *ZTK* 98 (2001): 161–85; on the composition and function of the heavenly scenes, see in particular Franz Tóth, *Der himmlische Kult. Wirklichkeitskonstruktion und Sinnbildung in der Johannesoffenbarung*, ABG 22 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006).

12 The present investigation thus follows a line of research suggested by Gruenwald's study *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*. Cf. also the extended 2nd edition (*Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, AJECS 90 [Leiden: Brill, 2014]). In contrast with Gruenwald, however, I will not presuppose that all the texts discussed actually are part of the tradition of Merkavah mysticism as attested in the late hekhalot texts, but rather reckon with steps of an open development which then resulted in the literary products of the hekhalot texts in late antiquity. Thus, following the criticism in D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC 52 (Dallas: Word Publishers 1997), 279, I will not assume “a unity of tradition where none can be demonstrated.”

13 Of course, this category can only be used with great caution, in view of the fact that the “Bible” (as a closed collection of Hebrew or Greek writings) did not yet exist at the end of the 1st century. Furthermore, the origins and growth of apocalyptic traditions, e.g., in the Enochic corpus, begin before the composition of the last books of the Hebrew Bible (i.e., Daniel). The category “extra-biblical” is only slightly more useful. Though being independent from the date of the texts, it is also created from the anachronistic framework of the canon.

14 Jan Doehorn, *Schriftgelehrte Prophetie: Der eschatologische Teufelsfall in Apc Joh 12 und seine Bedeutung für das Verständnis der Johannesoffenbarung*, WUNT 268 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). From the earlier commentaries, Heinrich Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, HNT 16a (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1974) took a similar position.

apocalyptic visions, biblical images and their later reinterpretations fuse in the making of the visionary world of Revelation.

It is clear that the last book of the Bible extensively draws on Israel’s scriptures, and whereas there is not one explicit citation from the scriptures in the whole of the book, it actually draws on the scriptures in an unprecedented density. The numerous allusions to and the formative influence of certain prophetic books (especially Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah)¹⁵ and the impact of the biblical plague tradition (which is also mediated through prophetic reception)¹⁶ have been thoroughly investigated in recent scholarship.

But is this the only source of inspiration? It has widely been observed that the imagery of Revelation not only draws on biblical texts but also, to a considerable extent, on elements from the Hellenistic Roman world: Formulae, rituals, and practices known to the addressees from their daily life in the Hellenistic Roman world, from religious and political life, are also utilized in the imagery of the book,¹⁷ so that we can certainly not interpret the figurative world of Revelation as an enclosed scriptural reality. With regard to the enigmatic central image of the apocalyptic woman in chapter 12, for instance, scholars have observed that, although the text can be read as a web or mosaic almost completely composed from biblical phrases and elements,¹⁸ the resulting image is much closer to

15 Cf. generally Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, JSNT 115 (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1995) and Gregory K. Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998). On Isaiah, see Jan Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and their Development*, JSNTSup 93; Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1994). On Jeremiah, see Jörg Frey, “The Reception of Jeremiah and the Impact of Jeremianic Traditions in the New Testament: A Survey,” in *Jeremiah’s Scriptures: Production, Reception, Interaction, and Transformation*, ed. Hindy Najman and Konrad Schmid, JSJSup 173 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 497–522, and Adela Yarbro Collins, “Jeremiah in Revelation: A Response to Jörg Frey,” in Najman and Schmid, *Jeremiah’s Scriptures*, 523–31. On Ezekiel, see Beate Kowalski, *Die Rezeption des Propheten Ezekiel in der Offenbarung des Johannes*, SBB 52 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2004). On Daniel, see Gregory K. Beale, *The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of John* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984). On Zechariah, see Marko Jauhiainen, *The Use of Zechariah in Revelation*, WUNT 2.199 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

16 Cf. the lucid study by Michael Sommer, *Der Tag der Plagen: Studien zur Verbindung der Rezeption von Ex 7–11 in den. Posaunen- und Schalenvisionen der Johannesoffenbarung und der Tag des Herrn-Tradition*, WUNT 2.387 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

17 Cf. the observations by David E. Aune, “The Influence of the Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John,” *BR* 28 (1983): 5–26.

18 Cf. Michael Koch, *Drachenkampf und Sonnenfrau. Zur Funktion des Mythischen in der Johannesapokalypse am Beispiel von Apk 12*, WUNT 2.184 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 109ff. and the list on p. 304.

Greco-Roman mythology than to any biblical text: The plot of a woman giving birth to a child, which is then threatened by a dragon or adversary, and saved in a hidden place, can easily remind readers of the narratives about the birth of Zeus or Apollo, and the woman giving birth, though inspired from biblical texts about Zion, is also a transparent image of the female mother goddesses of the ancient world, such as Isis or Artemis.¹⁹

Is there a method in utilizing biblical mosaic-stones to put together an image of a non-biblical form? Can such observations shed light on the creative technique of the author of Revelation? Apart from Rev 12, a promising example for such an inquiry is the fundamental throne vision in Rev 4(–5), which provides the point of departure for the seal, trumpet, and bowl visions and also for the sequence of heavenly cult scenes. Those heavenly scenes interrupt the visionary narration of earthly events, providing a kind of “counter-world” which corresponds to and finally questions the earthly realities, the values, and powers in the world of the addressees.²⁰ Among those heavenly scenes, the vision of the throne in Rev 4–5 is the most diligently crafted key scene that sets the stage for the entire book. Here, we find the most extensive description of the Divine space and – at least in a veiled manner – a description of the invisible God, a feature that is unique in the New Testament.

The question is, “How is biblical imagery utilized in the composition of the vision of the throne, and in what way have other elements, from the Enochic tradition, or from later apocalyptic and Jewish mystical traditions, inspired the visionary image or aid in understanding its shape?”

The investigation is also important for understanding the image of God in Revelation.²¹ In a book in which almost everything is visual, it is a significant

19 Cf. Jörg Frey, “Die Himmelskönigin, die Sonnenfrau und die Johannesapokalypse,” *Wiener Jahrbuch für Theologie* 5 (2004): 95–112; here 105–110; see more extensively Harald Ulland, *Die Vision als Radikalisierung der Wirklichkeit in der Apokalypse des Johannes*, TANZ 21 (Tübingen: Francke, 1997); Craig R. Koester, *Revelation*, Anchor Yale Bible 38A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 126: “the vision . . . follows a plot drawn primarily from extrabiblical stories. . . .” See also Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion 9 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976) 61–76.

20 Apart from the commissioning scene in Rev 1:10–20, these are the scenes in Rev 4–5; Rev 8:1–6; Rev 11:15–19; and Rev 14:14–15:8. On the heavenly cult scenes in Revelation, see the extensive study by Tóth, *Der himmlische Kult*.

21 On this, cf. the recent volume by Martin Stowasser, ed., *Das Gottesbild in der Offenbarung des Johannes*, WUNT 2.397 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015). See further Anton Vögtle, “Der Gott der Apokalypse. Wie redet die christliche Apokalypse von Gott?,” in *La notion biblique de Dieu*, ed. J. Coppens, BETL 41 (Gembloux and Leuven: Peeters, 1976), 377–98; T. Holtz, “Gott in der Apokalypse,” in *L’Apokalypse johannique et l’Apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament*, ed.

question of how the image of the invisible God can be visualized. This is even more of a problem since Revelation stresses the distance between God and the world. God’s revelation is communicated by means of a long chain of figures (Rev 1:1): from God to Christ, from Christ to his angel, from the angel to the visionary, who finally writes down the vision into a book. This significant introduction points to the fundamental truth that God is basically invisible, and even within the visionary account, God, “sitting on the throne,” seems to be rather passive: There is no direct action of God, nor does he speak directly, at least before the final and climactic image in 21:3–5 where God opens his mouth for the very first time to pronounce his single direct word in the whole book: “I make all things new.”²² How is the realm of the distant God visualized?

The Throne Scene and Its Background

The scene in Rev 4–5 is clearly structured. The author obviously intends to present a visually clear narrative image.²³ After the vision of the open door in heaven and the call for the seer to “come up,”²⁴ the visionary image first presents a throne in heaven (Rev 4:2), then the One sitting on the throne (4:3), and then

J. Lambrecht, BETL 53 (Gembloux and Leuven: Peeters, 1980), 247–65; Richard J. Bauckham, “God in the Book of Revelation,” *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 18 (1995): 40–53; Thomas Söding, “Heilig, heilig, heilig. Zur politischen Theologie der Johannes-Apokalypse,” *ZTK* 96 (1999): 49–76; idem, “Gott und das Lamm. Theozentrik und Christologie in der Johannesapokalypse,” in *Theologie als Vision. Studien zur Johannes-Offenbarung*, ed. K. Backhaus, SBS 191 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2001), 77–120; here 77–86; Christoph G. Müller, “Gott wird alle Tränen abwischen – Offb 21,4. Anmerkungen zum Gottesbild der Apokalypse,” *Theologie und Glaube* 95 (2005): 275–97.

22 All other words and voices are either from Christ, the angel, or other heavenly voices, or (as in the introduction in 1:8) they are sayings in which the words of the almighty and the exalted Christ are somewhat blurred.

23 On the visual clarity of Revelation’s images, see the recent monograph by Nils Neumann, *Hören und Sehen. Die Rhetorik der Anschaulichkeit in den Gottesthron-Szenen der Johannesoffenbarung*, Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte 49 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016). On Rev 4, see pp. 180–210.

24 Interestingly, it is not narrated that the seer *did* anything to follow the call to come up. It is mere stated that immediately after the call, he was “in the spirit.” This means the visionary is not actively seeking the vision, but it is presented to him while he is rather passive. The character of the revelation is not specified, but the language points to an ecstatic vision rather than to a bodily conceptualized heavenly journey. Nevertheless, in ch. 5, the seer participates in the heavenly scenery and even weeps (i.e., bodily reacts) about the unsolved problem.

twenty-four thrones and the “elders” sitting upon them (4:4). After that, the area surrounding the throne is described (4:5–6), then the four living beings, “in the midst of the throne and around” (4:7), before finally the doxologies of the four beings and the twenty-four elders are presented (4:8–11). After this, in chapter 5, the sealed scroll and its problem are presented (5:1–5), before the Lamb is introduced as the one who can provide the “solution” to the problem (5:6). Then the Lamb receives the scroll (5:7), before it is venerated by the four beings and the 24 elders (5:8–10) and praised by a vast multitude of angels surrounding the throne (5:11–12) and by the whole cosmos (5:13). After this heavenly and cosmic “liturgy” is verbally quoted, it is concluded by the “Amen” and the worship of the beings and the elders around the throne (5:14). The clarity of the structure clearly aims at transforming the readers and listeners into eye- and ear-witnesses who not only take notice of what happens but even get involved emotionally, thus becoming part of the otherworldly reality presented before their ears and eyes.²⁵ Ultimately, they are thought to join the universal choir of praise of God and the Lamb, which is again confirmed by the “Amen” from the heavenly center.

The vision aims at the whole universe but starts with the throne which marks the center of the whole vision. The throne motif is one of the most significant features in Revelation.²⁶ It is used in a quite distinctive manner: Unlike in the Hebrew Bible, the term is never used for the thrones of human rulers, but only with reference to God (and Christ), with the one exception of the “throne of Satan” in Pergamum (Rev 2:13). The term is primarily used to describe God as the one “sitting on the throne.” Thus, Revelation creates a unique and very significant linguistic image that represents God and his eternal kingdom. But where is the image taken from, and what has inspired the author in his visionary image? When looking at the biblical tradition, there are four throne scenes which serve, to various extents, as sources for the visionary imagery in Rev 4.²⁷ Without going into detail, we can mention the most important features of those visions and the similarities and differences in Revelation.

²⁵ This is rightly stressed by Neumann, *Hören und Sehen*, 208–10.

²⁶ The term is used forty-seven times in Revelation. In all other NT writings, there are only thirteen further passages using the word. Cf. Gottfried Schimanowski, *Die himmlische Liturgie in der Apokalypse des Johannes. Die frühjüdischen Traditionen in Offenbarung 4–5 unter Einschluss der Hekhalotliteratur*, WUNT 2.154 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 91.

²⁷ For a brief overview, cf. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 276–78; for the heavenly courtroom material, see Meira Kensky, *Trying Man, Trying God: The Divine Courtroom in Early Jewish and Christian Literature*, WUNT 2.289 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

Throne Visions in the Hebrew Bible

- (a) The first vision to consider is Isaiah’s temple vision in Isa 6:1–13. Before Isaiah is called and enabled to receive his message (vv. 4–10), he sees “the Lord” in his temple on a lofty throne with the train of his robe filling the Temple, and surrounded or rather overshadowed by six-winged flying beings called Seraphim singing the praise of the Trishagion.

Revelation 4 is inspired by Isaiah’s depiction of living creatures around the throne: The creatures in Rev 4 also have six wings, and the praise of the living creatures quotes exactly Isaiah’s Trishagion (Rev 4:8; Isa 6:3). Isaiah also makes clear that God himself is basically inaccessible, even in the Temple, an aspect which is also adopted in later visions in various ways.

- (b) The second throne scene is the very brief note about Micaiah ben Imlah (2 Kgs 22:19), who claims to have seen the Lord sitting on his throne with the host of heaven standing on his right and on his left. In this heavenly throne scene (conceived of like a heavenly court), God’s throne is located in heaven, and God is surrounded by a heavenly host of angels. Decisions made in the courtroom are then communicated by the prophet to the earthly world.

In Rev 4, there is also a heavenly host, a multitude of angels surrounding God’s throne, and in chapters 6–16, the visionary describes the interaction between the heavenly throne room and earthly history, thus proclaiming what he has been shown.

- (c) The third and perhaps most influential source is Ezekiel’s detailed throne vision in Ezek 1. Here, the heavens are opened, and the prophet sees “visions of God” (1:1). The appearance is linked with nature phenomena such as storm, a cloud, fire, lightening, and colors of glowing metal, or burning coals (Ezek 1:4, 13). Frequently, the author uses words of comparison (e.g., Hebrew *k^e*), indicating that the imagery is an inadequate representation of the heavenly sphere.

The vision presents four living creatures “in the midst” of the fire, each one with four different faces and four wings (1:5–6), but also four wheels full of eyes in order to move in all four directions, and their motion is accompanied by a loud noise (1:24). In Ezekiel, this “apparatus” of the four Cherubim with wheels functions to make God’s throne moveable so that his presence can depart from Zion and go to the people in their Babylonian exile. The firmament above the four beings is described as colored like crystal (1:22). Near the end of the vision, the throne is described above the firmament, colored like sapphire stone. On the throne sits a figure with the appearance of a man whose stature is described with the image of amber, fire, brightness (1:26–7), and with a rainbow expressing the *kabod*, the glory of the Lord (1:28).

Here we find an almost systematic description. This vision goes beyond Isa 6, not only in its wealth of details but also in its attempt to describe the figure of the Lord on his throne (as a human-like figure with light, colors, and the rainbow expressing his glory). A number of elements are important for Rev 4, in particular the four beings and some details of their description, especially the eyes. The wheels, however, are not needed in Revelation, and since the living creatures in Revelation have six, not four wings, they appear to be blended with the Seraphim from Isa 6. Ezekiel's vision also includes images of light and colored stones and a rainbow.

- (d) The fourth biblical pattern comes from Dan 7. After the vision of the four beasts which symbolize empires, thrones are set up, and God, called "the Ancient of Days," takes his seat (7:9). Here we have a court scene rather than a description of God's eternal kingdom. Nevertheless, the vision includes the most detailed image of God in the Old Testament, wherein his vesture, hair, and head are described. The appearance is characterized by white color and by flaming fire. As in Ezekiel, the throne has wheels of burning fire, and as in the vision of Michah ben Jimla, God's throne is surrounded by myriads of angels. Moreover, the scene includes the opening of books, which provides at least a certain analogy to the mention of the book in Rev 5.

We can see that the biblical tradition provides a great number of elements which are adopted and combined in Rev 4–5: heaven opening (Ezekiel), visions of the throne (Isaiah, 2 Kings, Ezekiel, Daniel), or a figure sitting on the throne (Ezekiel, Daniel), a host of angelic beings around the throne (2 Kings, Daniel), four particular beings next to the throne or carrying it (Ezekiel), with wings (Ezekiel, cf. Isaiah), radiance of light (Ezekiel, Daniel), white (Daniel) or shining colors (Ezekiel), a rainbow (Ezekiel), loud noise (Ezekiel), angelic praise (Isaiah), court scenes (2 Kings, Daniel), with books opened (Daniel), and the linguistic use of comparative particles (like; as) to indicate the inadequacy of the images (Ezekiel, Daniel).

However, none of the biblical scenes combines all those elements. In Isaiah, the four creatures are missing, and there is no attempt to describe the appearance with colors or even to grant a glance at the figure of the Lord himself. In the short account in 2 Kings, there is no detailed description of the throne. The multitude of angels is unmentioned in Isaiah and Ezekiel, and the Trishagion is only quoted in Isaiah, though it is missing in all other biblical throne scenes. On the other hand, Revelation does not systematically combine the four biblical scenes but omits what is unimportant here, e.g., the wheels, and focuses on what the vision aims at, the Lamb and the universal veneration.

The Throne Vision in 1 Enoch 14

There are, however, texts that demonstrate how other extra- or post-biblical ideas and descriptions could inspire such a combined visionary image of the heavenly throne.

The most important visionary text which seems to go further toward a systematic vision of the heavenly world and thus show a more advanced development of the heavenly vision is Enoch’s throne vision in 1 En. 14:8–16:4 (in particular 14:8–23) in the *Book of Watchers*, probably from the 3rd century BCE, i.e., possibly even earlier than Dan 7.²⁸

Here, we have a visionary ascent to the heavenly world and a systematic description of the throne area within the framework of a more extensive “biblical call narrative.”²⁹ The visionary Enoch is taken up by clouds and winds and flashes (14:8), doors are opened (14:15), and in the end, after crossing a first “house,” the visionary sees the throne, guarded by Cherubim (14:18) with God, called the “Great Glory,” sitting upon the throne (14:20) and myriads of angels before him (14:22). Here, it is repeatedly said that the vision makes the visionary tremble, that he is physically unable to see the things shown to him (14:8, 13, 18, 21), and even no angel can approach the throne (14:21), except the holy ones of the watchers (14:23). The heavenly world is repeatedly described by frightening tongues of fire, flashes, shooting stars (14:9, 11, 17), and – at the same time – by snow or ice (14:10, 13). Thus, the vision is marked as a paradoxical image. At the climax, Enoch is addressed by the Lord himself and entrusted with a revelation, in answer to his petition on behalf of the watchers (14:24 – 16:4).

Like Rev 4, the great throne vision in 1 En. 14:8–23 synthesizes elements of various biblical call scenes, in particular Ezek 1–2 and Dan 7.³⁰ Although the focus is ultimately on the fate of the watchers, the vision – at the narrative climax of the tale about the watchers (1 En. 6–16) – presents Enoch as the paradigmatic visionary and the recipient of a heavenly revelation. He is granted the ability to ascend to God’s heavenly sanctuary and is finally commissioned to pronounce judgment against the watchers.

28 A date of the *Book of Watchers* in the 3rd century BCE is suggested by the discovery of the Aramaic manuscripts of all parts of 1 Enoch except the part of the *Similitudes* (ch. 37–71) in the library from Qumran. One of those manuscripts (4QEn^a ar) is paleographically dated to the first half of the 2nd century BCE (cf. J. T. Milik, *The Books of Enoch: The Aramaic Fragments from Qumran* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1976], 140; cf. also G. W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch, Chapters 1–36; 81–108*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001], 9).

29 Thus Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1*, 30.

30 See the synopsis *ibid.*, 254–56.

The vision is designed climactically, from earth to heaven, from the outside to the inside, around the sanctuary, which is structured like the earthly temple. Thus, Enoch moves from the outer wall and court into the holy room, to the door of the holy of holies where he can see the enthroned Deity.³¹ Various narrative elements, such as the spatial structure and size, the excess of superlative similes and negative expressions, the expression of fear, the mention of the human incapability to see the glory, or the paradoxical combination of elements such as fire and ice emphasize the transcendence of God and the “paradox of Enoch’s ascent into his presence.”³²

From the biblical traditions adopted, the vision seems to build most strongly on Ezek 1–2, together with elements from Ezek 40–44 – a text which is also important for the book of Revelation.³³ There are a number of important parallels³⁴: (a) Both visions are “set by a stream of water.”³⁵ (b) In both cases, “the narrative moves climactically inward toward the throne and to God,”³⁶ who then addresses the visionary. (c) In both cases, “the narrative is introduced with reference to cloud(s) and wind(s)”³⁷ (Ezek 1:4; 1 En. 14:8). (d) The throne and its surroundings “have the following elements in common: ice/hailstones and snow, fire, lightning, wheels, cherubim.”³⁸ (e) The motif of God’s “glory” is common to both (Ezek 1:28; 1 En. 14:20, where God is called “the Great Glory”), and (f) “the reactions of the two seers and their restoration parallel one another point for point. Only in his reference to the “lofty” throne of God does Enoch break with Ezekiel and agree with Isaiah”³⁹ (cf. 1 En. 14:18). (g) Furthermore, the paradox of fire and ice may be created from the mention of fire and the crystal firmament in Ezek 1:13, 22.

But the Enochic vision also differs from Ezekiel in various aspects⁴⁰: (a) The seer is actively carried to heaven, whereas in Ezekiel the chariot

31 Ibid., 259.

32 Ibid.

33 Ezekiel 40–48 is structurally important for Rev 21:1–22:5, and the measurement of the Temple in Ezek 40:3 42:20 and 43:13, 17 is particularly adopted in Rev 11:1–14; cf. Kowalski, *Die Rezeption des Propheten Ezechiel*, 345–58 and 408–26. See also Nickelsburg *1 Enoch 1: In Ezekiel 40–44*, “the prophet is taken in a vision to Jerusalem, where an angel accompanies him on a tour of the temple premises.”

34 See the list in Ibid., 256.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Cf. Ibid., 259.

approaches the prophet, and all the activities take place on earth, at the river Chebar. (b) In this vision, the seer is much more personally involved; he is moved, frightened, prostrates himself, and finally has to write. He does not merely see, but rather experiences the heavenly world. (c) Enoch not only contemplates the throne, the Cherubim, and a humanlike figure, but he is much more clearly granted a vision of the Deity and its glory. He is even addressed by God himself. Thus, in spite of the awareness of the ultimate invisibility of God, we have the most detailed description of God and his glory, which even goes beyond the somewhat later, shorter vision in Dan 7. This access to the transcendent Deity is granted to an exceptional figure. Historically, 1 En. 14 marks the transition from the older prophetic (or Ezechielic) tradition to the later Merkavah texts⁴¹ in which – based on this tradition – visions of the throne are frequently mentioned, hymns and praise of heavenly beings are reported, or – as in the later Hekhalot Rabbati – the throne itself can become a symbolic replacement of God himself.

The tendency of systematically describing the heavenly realm, the excess of images, and the strong involvement of the visionary, including his reactions and emotions, are common features of Rev 4–5 and 1 En. 14 which go beyond the biblical throne visions. And in the quotation of heavenly praise, using a language that creates an impression rather than conveys rational information, Rev 4 comes close to later texts of the Enochic and Hekhalot tradition. Thus, Revelation appears to be inspired by tendencies in the tradition that go beyond the biblical throne visions and can be observed for the first time in 1 En. 14. But Revelation 4 also differs from 1 En. 14 in various aspects: The heavenly realm in this vision does not have a sanctuary structure (although elements of the sanctuary are supplemented in later heavenly visions of Revelation), and the vision is not from the outside to the inside but from the center around the throne outwards toward the whole universe. And of course, the vision in Revelation has a different climax: While 1 En. 14 is focused on Enoch’s vision of the invisible God and finally on his commissioning, Rev 4–5 aims at the climax of the presentation of the Lamb, the exalted Christ. Can we also consider this next example to be a parallel between both texts: the commissioning of Enoch to proclaim the judgment on the Watchers and the installation of the Lamb, the exalted Christ, to open the seals and to initiate acts of “judgment” over the earth? In any case, Revelation’s focus on the enthroned Christ goes beyond all parallels from the biblical and Jewish tradition.

⁴¹ Ibid.; cf. also Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 32–40.

Other Throne Visions in the Enochic Tradition

Apart from 1 En. 14, there are other throne visions that deserve to be briefly discussed⁴²:

- (a) An important continuation of the tradition of throne visions can be found in the latest part of the Enochic “Pentateuch” (1 Enoch), the *Similitudes* (1 En. 37–72). Here we can find an interesting development of the Danielic Son of Man tradition according to which this figure, as an “individual,” is considered an eschatological agent, the Chosen One who will sit on the throne of glory (1 En. 45:3), who is endowed with particular judicial functions (1 En. 49:3; 51:2–3).⁴³ The texts are clearly dependent on the earlier Enochic tradition and thus presuppose the Watchers episode and the throne vision from 1 En. 14.

In 1 En. 47:3, there is a brief “Merkavah-like”⁴⁴ vision in which the visionary (Enoch) contemplates God (called “the Ancient of Days”; cf. Dan 7:9–10) taking “his seat on the throne of his glory, and the books of the living were opened in his presence, and all his host which was in the heights of heaven, and his court, were standing in his presence.”⁴⁵ The brief vision combines elements from Dan 7 and 1 Kgs 22; it presents a courtroom scene, in which there is a brief reminiscence on the visions of Dan 7 and 1 Kgs 22 that contain a courtroom scene, the presence of a heavenly host around the throne of glory, and the opening of books. In a previous vision 1 En. 46:3, Enoch is shown “the Son of Man” in the presence of the Lord of Spirits. Such a scenario comes close to the vision in Revelation with the throne, the various groups of heavenly

⁴² The text is adopted in Levi’s vision of the heavenly temple in *T. Levi* 2–5 and also in the Greek Additions to Esther (LXX Esth 15); see Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch* 1, 256.

⁴³ Cf. Kensky, *Trying Man*, 133. There is no need to discuss here whether these ideas were already in the background of Jesus’s usage of the term “Son of Man.” The Enochic *Similitudes* are certainly not a Christian text, and they do not adopt the Jesus tradition. Rather, they can show the possibilities of development within a Jewish context and thus provide an illuminating analogy for the early development of the Jesus tradition, cf. Daniel Boyarin, “How Enoch Can Teach Us about Jesus,” *EC* 2 (2011): 51–76. Regardless of their date in the late 1st century BCE or the early decades of the 1st century CE (cf. George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch 2: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch Chapters 37–82*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012], 62–63), they probably existed at the time of the composition of Revelation, and it is also likely that, e.g., the author of Matthew knew the *Similitudes* (cf. Nickelsburg and VanderKam, *1 Enoch* 2, 72). On Revelation and Enoch, see also Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Mark D. Mathews, “The Apocalypse of John, 1 Enoch, and the Question of Influence,” in *Die Johannesapokalypse: Kontexte – Konzepte – Rezeption*, ed. J. Frey, J. A. Kelhoffer, and F. Tóth, WUNT 287 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 191–234.

⁴⁴ Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*. 2nd ed., 80.

⁴⁵ Translation according to Nickelsburg and VanderKam, *1 Enoch* 2, 162.

beings, the opening of a book, and the enthroned Messiah in the image of the Lamb. In 1 En. 60:1–4, there is another vision with the Ancient of Days sitting on the throne of his glory with angels standing around the throne,⁴⁶ but now the visionary is afraid and trembles before he falls on his face and is raised by one of the angels.

- (b) The most impressive vision of the throne, however, is presented in the climactic part of the *Similitudes*, with the enthronization of the “Son of Man” (1 En. 69:26–29), Enoch’s journey to the Paradise (1 En. 70) and his ascent to heaven (1 En. 71).⁴⁷ Here, we come even closer to the world of Revelation. There is joy in heaven about the fact that the name of the Son of Man Messiah is revealed (1 En. 69:26), he takes a seat on the throne of glory, and the judgment is given to him (cf. Dan 7:22). Then Enoch, the visionary, is lifted up on the chariots of the wind (in analogy with Elijah) and ascends to heaven to see the heavenly secrets (1 En. 71:4). He even ascends to the heaven of heavens, the house of fire, encircled by Seraphim and Cherubim and Ophanim, who do not sleep but guard the throne of glory, and by myriads of angels. Finally, in the vision of the Ancient of Days, Enoch is directly addressed by God and identified as “the Son of Man who was born for righteousness” (1 En. 71:14). Here, Enoch, as the Son of Man, arrives in an elevated eschatological or “Messianic” function, which provides the closest parallel to the views of the exaltation of the Messiah Jesus on the throne of glory in the early post-Easter Jesus movement.⁴⁸

This ultimate throne vision of 1 Enoch summarizes and intensifies elements from 1 Enoch 14 and from the body of the *Book of Similitudes*.⁴⁹ The imagery of the heavenly temple encircled by an immense multitude of various heavenly beings, the paradox of fire and snow (or ice), lightening like precious stones, the vision of God being described as “indescribable” (1 En. 70:11) though adopting elements from Dan 7, and the transfiguration of the visionary (or rather: his identification with the Son of Man) present a visionary world that comes close to Revelation 4–5.

- (c) The motif of the heavenly throne and the ascent to the heavenly throne is even further developed in 2 Enoch where the pattern of seven heavens is presupposed, and Enoch, as visionary, is enabled to reach the presence of God even

⁴⁶ The majority of manuscripts read “angels and the righteous,” which would make a further analogy with Revelation 4–5 (thus Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*. 2nd ed., 81), but cf. Nickelsburg and VanderKam, *1 Enoch* 2, 236.

⁴⁷ Cf. also Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 1.

⁴⁸ Cf. Martin Hengel, “‘Sit at My Right Hand’: The Enthronement of Christ at the Right Hand of God and Psalm 110:1,” in *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 119–225.

⁴⁹ Cf. the lists in Nickelsburg and VanderKam, *1 Enoch* 2, 323, 325.

before his transfiguration (2 En. 22:6).⁵⁰ Much more extensively than the earlier tradition, 2 Enoch describes the seven heavens and Enoch's ascent through them until he arrives in the seventh heaven (2 En. 3–20). Enoch sees Paradise in the third heaven (2 En. 8–9),⁵¹ which is already said to be guarded by many angels “with incessant sweet singing and never silent voices” (2 En. 8:8).⁵² When Enoch arrives at the seventh heaven, he becomes afraid and trembles, he then sees the Lord from afar, sitting on a high throne (2 En. 20:3). The world around the throne is clearly structured, with immeasurable light and fiery armies of various groups of angels that cause Enoch to fear and tremble. Cherubim and Seraphim, six-winged and many-eyed beings, steadily stand in front of the Lord continually singing the Trishagion (2 En. 21:1; cf. Isa 6:3). Here, we are again close to the world of Revelation 4–5. More than in 1 Enoch, 2 Enoch presents lengthy and repetitive descriptions with numerous nouns or adjectives – a style which resembles that of Rev 4–5, in particular in the hymnic praise of the various groups of beings.

Other Merkavah Texts

Another text discussed by Gruenwald as an example of Merkavah mysticism within apocalyptic traditions is the throne vision of Apoc. Ab. 9–19, a retelling of the story of the making of the covenant in Gen 15.⁵³ When preparing his pure sacrifice to God, Abraham is called to ascetic practices, then his spirit is amazed, his soul flees from him, and he falls on the ground (Apoc. Ab. 10:2–3). Then, the angel Iael addresses him, his body is like a sapphire, his face like a chrysolite, and his hair like snow (Apoc. Ab. 11:2).⁵⁴ Abraham is taken to the holy mountain, where he has to recite a song taught to him, a very long hymn with almost endless predications (Apoc. Ab. 17). Under the fire, he sees a throne of fire, with many-eyed beings round about, and under the throne four fiery living creatures (cf. Ezek 1) with four heads, sixteen faces and, as in Isa 6:2, six wings each (Apoc. Ab. 18:5–6). Abraham realizes that he is on the seventh firmament (Apoc. Ab. 19:4),

⁵⁰ Cf. Christfried Böttrich, *Das slavische Henochbuch*, JSHRZ 5,7 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1995), 815. In 2 En. 22:1, there is mention of a tenth heaven, but according to Böttrich (*ibid.*, 890), this is a secondary change, dependent on a probably interpolated section on the eighth and ninth heaven (1 En. 21:6).

⁵¹ Cf. also *Apoc. Mos.* 38:4 and 2 Cor 12:2–4.

⁵² Cf. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 50.

⁵³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 50–57.

⁵⁴ Cf. also Rev 1:12–20.

then he receives an extensive apocalyptic prophecy with which the book comes to an end. It is obvious that this vision is closely related to Ezekiel, but differs in that it connects elements from Ezekiel with the six wings of the Seraphim from Isaiah and focuses on a very extended song of praise. With these elements, the throne vision is also closer to Revelation 4 than the biblical throne visions.

A similar vision of an ascent to the seventh heaven is presented in the *Ascension of Isaiah*. Here, Isaiah hears “a door which had opened and the voice of the Holy Spirit” (Ascen. Isa. 6:6; cf. Rev 4:1). As Isaiah falls into a trance, an angel, who does not reveal his name, comes from the seventh heaven and shows him a vision in which he ascends through the heavens, each of which is equipped with a throne. In the seventh heaven, Isaiah sees the righteous, stripped of their garments of the flesh (Ascen. Isa. 9:9). He himself is transformed into an angel, hears the celestial songs of praise, but does not see God himself. Instead, he sees the descent and ascent of the Messiah, which makes it clear that this writing is a Christian text that makes extensive use of Merkavah traditions.

There are more apocalyptic texts that could be mentioned here. A description of the Great Glory dwelling in the highest heaven with the archangels, thrones, and authorities is also given in the Testament of Levi (T. Levi 3:4–9); an ascent to five heavens is described in the whole Greek book of Baruch (3 Baruch); and the Ladder of Jacob (Lad. Jac. 2:7–22) provides a hymnic prayer venerating God sitting above the cherubim on the fiery throne of glory.

Of course, the texts assembled under the name 3 Enoch or Sefer Hekhalot are much later in their present literary form, and many of their literary features differ strongly from the earlier apocalyptic tradition. However, in the vision of the throne of Glory, they build upon the traditions described here, and thus 3 En. 28:7–10 (= § 45 Schäfer)⁵⁵ presents the impressive image of the Holy One sitting on the throne of judgment, with white garments, hair like pure wool (Dan 7:9), and the watchers and holy ones standing before him. Another description uttered by the angel Metatron, Prince of the Divine Presence, mentions fire and flames as the means of judgement (3 En. 32:1–2 = §50 Schäfer), and a further passage describes the myriads of myriads of angels with faces of lightning and fire and the sound of a multitude (3 En. 35:1–2 = §54 Schäfer.) The description ends with a repeated mention of a thousand thousands (3 En. 35:6 = §54 Schäfer) as a means of presenting the uncountable multitude in the most impressive way. We can skip the texts here, as they cannot provide an immediate background for understanding

⁵⁵ For the editions of 3 Enoch, see Philip Alexander, “3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch,” in *OTP* 1.223–315; and Peter Schäfer and Klaus Herrmann, eds., *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur 1: § 1–80*, TSAJ 46 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), with a new numbering of the parts of the text.

Revelation, although a number of motifs still provide interesting parallels and confirm that Rev 4–5 is a part of a Merkavah tradition that finally leads to texts such as the Hekhalot literature.⁵⁶

Revelation 4 and post-Biblical Traditions

Against the background of the development from the biblical throne visions to the more extensive visionary descriptions in 1 En. 14 and the later apocalyptic traditions, the combination of various elements from the biblical texts, and the inclusion of some kind of “mystical” material calling for the emotional participation of the readers and thus the evocation of some kind of “experience,” we can now discuss a few exemplary elements in Revelation 4. We will see how this section of Revelation goes beyond the biblical traditions and seems to be inspired by or at least in line with some of the post-biblical developments sketched above.

The Opening of Heaven and the Emotional Involvement of the Visionary

The setting of Rev 4 already goes beyond every biblical tradition. A door is opened (cf. Ezek 1:1), and the visionary is called to come up. Although the setting of the biblical throne visions (especially of the brief vision of Micaiah) is not altogether clear, none of the biblical prophets ascend to heaven. Here, 1 En. 14 marks a change, as the first text of a longer tradition of heavenly or cosmic journeys in which the visionary himself is transferred to an otherworldly space. From all the various examples, some of which also antedate Revelation, 1 En. 14 is the only text in which the narrative elements of an open door as a passageway to heaven (1 En. 14:15) and a sound from above encouraging the visionary to come (1 En. 14:8) are directly linked.⁵⁷

However, Revelation’s rapture ἐν πνεύματι (Rev 4:2) is even unparalleled in 1 Enoch and also differs from the tendencies of later Hekhalot texts: Whereas Enoch and most of the later visionaries have to undertake a frightening and painful journey to approach the presence of God, the visionary of Revelation is immediately transported to the throne, and there is no mention of difficult steps or frightening borders.

⁵⁶ Cf. the thorough investigation by Schimanowski, *Die himmlische Liturgie*, passim.

⁵⁷ Thus, Stuckenbruck and Mathews, “The Apocalypse of John, 1 Enoch, and the Question of Influence,” 204. Cf. also *T. Levi* 2:5–6 and the *Aramaic Levi Document* 4Q213a 2.16–18.

In this context, it is also noteworthy that Revelation does not adopt the idea of three or seven heavenly spheres, although it is quite plausible that the author was aware of those ideas, as was Paul (2 Cor 12:2–3). There is no particular interest in the architecture of the heavens, nor in the difficulty of the ascent which is so characteristic for later Hekhalot texts. Thus, there is no particular interest in the experience of the human visionary (or his followers), although some knowledge about such experiences might be concluded from the text, instead, the only focus is on the revelation the seer is called to communicate.

The Presentation of the Throne, and the Background of the Colored Stones

Most interesting is the presentation of the throne. Whereas the primary focus is on the chariot and its wheels in Ezekiel, and 1 En. 14 presents the throne’s appearance in great detail, Rev 4:2 only briefly mentions the throne and then quickly passes on to the One sitting on the throne. But in its presentation of God, Revelation fully respects the invisibility of God. Unlike in Ezekiel, Daniel, and the majority of the Merkavah visions, the figure of the One sitting on the throne is not described, not even in the pattern of the angelic appearance (cf. Dan 10) used in Rev 1:13–16.⁵⁸ He is only compared with phenomena of shining colors of some stones: “The one seated there was like jasper and carnelia in appearance.”

However, the use of precious stones as metaphors for God’s throne or even for God himself are not very common in Jewish apocalypses. Ezekiel 1 mentions chrysolite and sapphire (Ezek 1:16, 26) as the appearance of the wheels and the throne, and the Testament of Abraham describes the throne by “the appearance of terrifying crystal” (T. Ab. A 12:4).⁵⁹ The most extensive description of the throne with precious stones is found in the late text Hekhalot Rabbati §166.⁶⁰ But the description of God himself by the appearance of colors of precious stones departs from Ezekiel and is closer to 1 En. 14, where God’s glory is also symbolized by an appearance of colors, namely a rainbow.⁶¹

⁵⁸ On the description in Rev 1:13–16, see Frey, “Die Bildersprache der Johannesapokalypse,” 170–74.

⁵⁹ Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 285.

⁶⁰ See Schimanowski, *Die himmlische Liturgie*, 98, 101.

⁶¹ This might also be an argument for the textual originality of ἵρις in Rev 4:3, but cf. the undecided considerations in Martin Karrer, *Johannesoffenbarung* (Offb 1,1 – 5,14), EKK 24/1 (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2017), 415–18.

The precious stones here correspond to the stones in the description of the New Jerusalem (Rev 2:10–11, 18–19; 22:1). With regard to the New Jerusalem, there is a precedent in Isa 54:11–12 (which is also adopted in the Peshar 4QpIsa^d from Qumran) and in Tobit 13:16–7.⁶² But the colors of precious stones in the appearance of God also have a precedent in the Enochic literature: In 1 En. 18:6–9, in the course of Enoch’s cosmic journey, mountains are compared with colored stones, and the middle one of them, which is said to be like the throne of God, is described by reference to a precious stone, and the peak of the throne is – according to the Greek text – like sapphire (18:8).⁶³ From the description of the throne of God as a blue shining sapphire in Ezek 1:26 and 1 En. 18:8, it is only a small step to the cautious comparison of the appearance of the Deity itself in a rainbow (1 En. 14) or in shining colors of precious stones (Rev 4:3).

The Cherubim-Beings

The most interesting combination of elements can be found in the description of the four living creatures. They ultimately draw on the Cherubim that overshadowed the ark of the covenant in the Jerusalem Temple, which is adopted in the hymnic expression about God sitting upon a throne above the Cherubim (Ps 80:1; 99:1; Isa 37:16). From a decorative object in the Temple, the Cherubim developed into a part of the throne, bearing the throne (2 Bar. 51:11). If the presence of God is about to move – as in Ezekiel – they are even developed into a technical apparatus that allows a movement into all four directions, with wheels, different faces facing every direction, and an abundance of eyes all around, which is probably a symbol of their permanent alertness in God’s realm.

In Ezek 10:20 and then also in Apoc. Ab. 10:9, the “living beings (*chayyot*)” are explicitly identified as Cherubim.⁶⁴ But these two ideas are not fused in all texts. Some texts prefer or limit themselves to one of the terms, thus the Qumran *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* only mention the Cherubim, whereas the *chayyot* are unmentioned or not considered a part of the lively heavenly liturgy. Revelation, on the contrary, only uses the term ζῶα, a rendering of Hebrew *chayyot*, but never mentions Cherubim in the heavenly realm. In contrast with those texts, the later hekhalot literature still keeps the two traditions distinguished within their “system” of angels, and apart from the Seraphim and

⁶² Cf. David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, WBC 52C (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 1164.

⁶³ The Ethiopic text reads here “*Lapis Lazuli*.” Cf. Schimanowski, *Die himmlische Liturgie*, 100; Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1*, 286.

⁶⁴ Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 297.

Cherubim, even the Ophanim (originally the Hebrew term for “wheels”) are considered a separate class of angels.⁶⁵

In Revelation, the wheels can be omitted since there is no need to keep the mobility of the throne from Ezekiel, but with the omission of the wheels the eyes “in front and behind” (Rev 4:6) become an immediate feature of the living creatures or ζῳα. Most interestingly, the number of wings is changed: In contrast with the four-winged *chayyot* from Ezekiel, the ζῳα in Revelation now have six wings (Rev 4:8), which shows that the Cherubim-beings adopted further features from Isaiah’s Seraphim (Isa 6:2). This is confirmed by the fact that the four beings are now said to sing the steady praise, day and night: “Holy, holy, holy . . .” – as do the Seraphim in Isa 6:3. Thus, Cherubim and Seraphim are merged in the four beings of Revelation, as they are in the Apocalypse of Abraham.

The spatial arrangement, however, provides difficulties: The ζῳα are said to be “in the midst of the throne and round about the throne.” This is logically problematic, as it is unclear how beings that are around the throne might, at the same time, be “in the midst of the throne.” It is possible that this is not merely sloppiness or a mistake of the author but an intentional hint at the “surrealistic” character of the description.⁶⁶ The expression seems to convey a greatest closeness to the throne, a closeness which is only surpassed by the intimacy which is expressed for the Lamb, the exalted Christ, “in the midst of the throne and the four living beings” (Rev 5:6).⁶⁷ But while the Lamb is presented as a companion of God, even on the throne, the ζῳα are considered vivid parts of the throne of glory. Most significantly, the four ζῳα do not have separate thrones, unlike the twenty-four elders sitting around the throne.

A finally feature of the beings deserves consideration. Whereas in Ezekiel each one of the four beings has four different faces, Revelation simplifies the image slightly with the result that there are four different beings, each one having a different face. But while the appearances of *human, lion, ox, and eagle* are frequently adopted, their sequence changes. Revelation has the sequence *lion, ox, human, eagle*, and other texts present even more varied sequences, such as the Pseudo-Ezekiel text from Qumran (4Q385 frg. 4:5–9) with the sequence *lion, eagle, ox, human*. A Hexapla-Version mentioned by Origen even replaces the ox by a cherub, so that the sequence is *cherub, human, lion, eagle*. Later, Hekhalot

⁶⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 297.

⁶⁶ Cf. Frey, “Die Bildersprache der Johannesapokalypse,” 176.

⁶⁷ On this, see Martin Hengel, “Die Throngemeinschaft des Lammes mit Gott in der Johannesapokalypse,” *ThBeitr* 27 (1996): 159–75.

texts push the human to the end (*lion, ox, eagle, human*).⁶⁸ Thus, Revelation adopts the tradition from Ezekiel but shares the variability of the series in the post-biblical period.

Again, it is clear that Revelation not only combines the Cherubim or *chayyot* from Ezekiel and the Seraphim from Isaiah, but that it is part of a vivid tradition of combining and variegating elements as is evident from a great number of post-biblical Jewish texts.

The Praise of All the Heavenly Beings

The closest step towards the later Hekhalot literature can be seen with regard to the hymns of the heavenly beings quoted in Rev 4–5. These hymns provide the climax of the vision, starting with the Trishagion of the beings in Rev 4:8, through the praise of the twenty-four elders in Rev 4:9–11, until the universal praise of the Lamb at the end of chapter five. Apart from the Trishagion, all the hymns are formed as “worthy” acclamations,⁶⁹ introduced by ἄξιός (Rev 4:11; 5:9, 12), and the praise of the enthroned Christ in 5:9–12 (“Worthy is the Lamb . . .”) clearly marks the climax of the whole scene. These hymns – giving “glory, honor, and thanks” (Rev 4:9) first to the creator God and then likewise to the Lamb – are shaped by growing length and repetitive terms and are formally unique in the New Testament.

The earliest roots of this praise are most probably in the doxologies of the Temple liturgy.⁷⁰ This is shown in the quotation of the Trishagion or *qedusha* in Isa 6:3, which “may have been part of a hymn regularly chanted in the temple liturgy or at least a cultic liturgical formula.”⁷¹ But the history of the Trishagion and its usage is complicated.⁷² As a part of Jewish liturgy,

⁶⁸ Thus also Midrash Tanchuma §16 on Lev 22:27 (Tanchuma ed. Buber, Emor §23); see Schimanowski, *Die himmlische Liturgie*, 124–25.

⁶⁹ Cf. Klaus Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1984), 242; Gerhard Dellling, “Zum gottesdienstlichen Stil der Johannesapokalypse,” in *Studien zum Neuen Testament und zum hellenistischen Judentum. Gesammelte Aufsätze 1950–1968*, ed. Ferdinand Hahn (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 425–50; here 426, 428, uses the term “Würdig-Rufe” or “Würdig-Akklamationen.”

⁷⁰ Cf. Reinhard Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit. Untersuchungen zu Form, Sprache und Stil der frühchristlichen Hymnen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 50.

⁷¹ Thus Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 303.

⁷² Cf. the overview in Pierre Prigent, *Apocalypse et liturgie*, Cahiers Théologiques 52 (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1964), 56ff.

it is not explicitly mentioned before in the late Tannaitic period (t. Ber. 1.9).⁷³ So we cannot presuppose that Revelation draws on an already established Jewish liturgical usage, although the early appearance of the Trishagion in Christian texts (as in 1 Clem. 34:6, roughly contemporary with Revelation) might also point to such a background.⁷⁴ As part of the heavenly praise, however, the *qedusha* is mentioned in a number of texts from the Second Temple period, e.g., in *Par. Jer.* 9:3–4 and, most importantly, in the opening of the Parables of Enoch (1 En. 39:12). This passage is even more important since the idea of a continuous praise around the heavenly throne is not mentioned in the biblical throne visions, neither in Isaiah nor in Ezekiel. Such an “uninterrupted continuity of worship” (as stated in Rev 7:15 and 14:11) is only attested in the Enochic literature, where a group of angelic beings, distinguished from the four Cherubim (1 En. 40:2), steadily says, “Holy, holy, holy!” (1 En. 39:12).⁷⁵ The idea that “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” (Rev 5:11) stand around the throne is also most distinctively presented in 1 Enoch, where first only “myriads of myriads” are mentioned (1 En. 14:22), but in the later parts of the book the full expression is also used (1 En. 40:1 and 78:1), with further parallels in Daniel (7:10 Theod.), the Book of Giants (4Q530 2 ii + 6–7 i + 8–12 lines 16–20), and the Apocalypse of Zephaniah (4:1; 8:1).⁷⁶

Without entering the wide field of the doxologies, I will just focus on one last point, the address Ἄξιός ἐῖ (Rev 4:11; 5:9; cf. 5:12 Ἄξιόν ἐστιν τὸ ἄρνιον), which is quite unusual.⁷⁷ The only parallel in Greek is, according to Klaus-Peter Jörens, a later Greek hymn which is probably dependent on Revelation.⁷⁸ Since the History of Religions School, scholars have often tried to explain the *axios*-acclamations from the situation of Hellenistic plebiscites or later Christian elections of bishops.⁷⁹ Eusebius thus mentions that the Roman bishop Fabianus was elected

73 Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 303; cf. Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*, SJ 9 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977), 230–32.

74 Cf. also the *Martyrdom of Perpetua* (12:1), the *Apostolic Constitutions* (7.35.3), and Tertullian (*De oratione* 3). The *qedusha* is very frequent, then, in the prayers of hekhalot literature, e.g., 3 *En.* 1:12 (§2 Schäfer).

75 Stuckenbruck and Mathews, “Apocalypse of John,” 204–5.

76 *Ibid.*, 205; cf. also Schimanowski, *Die himmlische Liturgie*, 149–50.

77 Cf. Schimanowski, *Die himmlische Liturgie*, 162; Delling, “Zum gottesdienstlichen Stil,” 431.

78 Klaus-Peter Jörens, *Das hymnische Evangelium: Untersuchungen zu Aufbau, Funktion und Herkunft der hymnischen Stücke in der Johannesoffenbarung* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1971), 34–35, mentions the Hymnos Epilychnios 3:9–10. Cf. *ibid.*, 56–73.

79 Erik Peterson, ΕΙΣ ΘΕΟΣ: *Epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, FRLANT 24 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926), 176–80, 313, 318;

by all the people shouting *axios*.⁸⁰ Other scholars explain the wording merely from the opposition to the acclamations in the ruler cult⁸¹ or from the responses in the Eucharistic liturgy “*axion kai dikaion*,”⁸² while again others dismiss these proposals and suggest that the author has formed his *axios*-acclamations freely for his own purposes.⁸³

But again it is helpful to look at the Enochic literature. R. H. Charles had already pointed to a number of doxologies in 1 Enoch, e.g., 1 En. 9:4f., “You are the God of gods and Lord of Lords and King of kings and God of the ages . . . , for you have made all things . . . ,” which can explain the structure and language of the angelic praise. So it might be interesting also to look for parallels to the *axios*-acclamation in the Enochic tradition. Following a hint by Martin Hengel, we can look to the later texts from the Hekhalot literature where we do find parallels in the usage of the Hebrew “*raui*,” which is quite frequent in Jewish mystical texts but unattested in the Hebrew Bible and in Qumran.⁸⁴ The “worthy”-acclamations in those texts may not account for the acclamation of God but for the use in Rev 5:2, 4 with reference to the Lamb, i.e., to Christ, who is found “worthy” to open the book.

As in Rev 5, the later Hekhalot texts mention figures who are tested and found “worthy” to ascend to the heavenly realm, to contemplate the Merkava. Enoch is found “worthy to contemplate the Merkavah” (3 En. 2:4), as well as Rabbi Aqiva in Hekhalot Zutarti (§346) of whom God himself says, “He is worthy to contemplate my glory.” Of course, the aspect of the dangerous ascent, so prominent in the Hekhalot texts, is absent from Revelation, as Christ’s enthronement is presupposed from the very beginning. But the acclamation of Christ being “worthy” to open the book and to receive heavenly veneration comes quite close to the wording of later hekhalot texts.⁸⁵ In spite of the late date of those texts, they should not be dismissed for the understanding of the image of heavenly praise of God and the Lamb in Rev 4–5.

Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, HNT 16 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1926), 50. Cf. also Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments*, 231: the acclamation “worthy” is a “Kennwort aus dem Abstimmungsverfahren der hellenistischen Volksversammlung.”

⁸⁰ Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 6.29.4; cf. Thomas Klausner, “Akklamation,” *RAC* 1 (1950): 216–233; here 225; see also Schimanowski, *Die himmlische Liturgie*, 163.

⁸¹ Thus Jürgen Roloff, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*. ZBK 18 (Zürich: TVZ, 2001), 70.

⁸² Pierre Prigent, *L’Apocalypse de Saint Jean*, CNT 14 (Lausanne: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1981), 90–1.

⁸³ Thus Ulrich B. Müller, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, ÖTBK 19 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1984), 157, and Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 102.

⁸⁴ Hengel, “Die Throngemeinschaft Gottes,” 164 n. 19. For the following see Schimanowski, *Die himmlische Liturgie*, 243–46.

⁸⁵ Schimanowski, *Die himmlische Liturgie*, 245.

Conclusion

This brief and necessarily superficial survey can be concluded by a few insights concerning Revelation’s method of composition.

1. Revelation neither simply adopts a biblical image in its entirety nor creates a “typical” Merkavah scene in the form of the later Hekhalot literature.⁸⁶ The making of the visionary images are, instead, an active combination of various biblical and post-biblical elements in order to create effective images that serve their own theological purposes. In particular, the focus on the exalted Christ and the universal praise marks a difference from all the earlier Jewish throne visions.
2. It has been shown that, apart from the biblical accounts, texts from the Enochic tradition, especially 1 En. 14, but also texts from the Parables of Enoch and other apocalyptic texts about the throne of God, can help to explain the combination of traditional motifs. Revelation thus appears to be inspired from a multifaceted tradition of throne visions. It shares tendencies in interpretation which cannot be found in the biblical writings but only in the traditions of Jewish apocalypticism from the late Second Temple period or even later.
3. Revelation 4–5 can hardly be considered an example of Merkavah mysticism.⁸⁷ Its features, however, point in the direction of those later texts. Thus Revelation can be considered part of a developing tradition about the Divine throne and the heavenly world. Whether this development of traditions is called mysticism or merely apocalypticism is a matter of definition. Attributing the “correct” category is, perhaps, less important than understanding the merging and growth of tradition.

⁸⁶ Cf. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 62–72, and Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 278–79, where the differences are discussed.

⁸⁷ Thus Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 279, in his critical evaluation of Gruenwald’s approach.

