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0521831024 - Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions

Edited by Raʿanan S. Boustan and Annette Yoshiko Reed

Excerpt

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Introduction: “In Heaven as It Is on Earth”

Raʿanan S. Boustan and Annette Yoshiko Reed

The conquests of Alexander of Macedon radically expanded the horizons of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East, inaugurating an era paradoxically marked by the increased interpenetration of different cultures and the cultivation of self-conscious particularism within these same cultures. Although Alexander’s empire soon fragmented, the scope of his conquests sketched the boundaries of a new world. In the following centuries, Hellenistic, Roman, Sassanian, and Byzantine rulers would attempt to conquer and administer parts of this domain, and members of subject nations would circulate through it with increased ease, distributing economic goods and religious knowledge along its trade routes.

Cross-cultural contact was hardly unprecedented. New, however, was the emergence of a common cultural landscape and the growing sense – whether positive or negative – of living in a single *oikoumene*. Scholars have traditionally focused on the “hellenization” of conquered nations, but the “orientalization” of Graeco-Roman society was no less significant in shaping the culture of Late Antiquity.¹ Moreover, both trends continued to be characterized by the dynamic interplay between acculturation and anxiety about acculturation. Among conquered nations, we find zealous attempts to guard ancient traditions against perceived threats of contamination, alongside enthusiastic efforts to embrace a cosmopolitan identity, with all the economic benefits and social status that came with it.² In turn, the “alien wisdom” of

¹ Here we use the term *Late Antiquity* in its very broadest sense, to encompass the period between the conquests of Alexander the Great and the rise of Islam. In research on the political and social history of the eastern Mediterranean world, the term is often used to denote only the late Roman Empire (i.e., 250–800 C.E.). With regard to the topics discussed in this volume, however, texts, genres, ideas, and motifs in these centuries cannot be understood apart from formative developments in the Hellenistic age and the early Roman Empire.

² This dynamic has been studied – and debated – most intensely in the context of Judaism, particularly after the publication of M. Hengel’s classic *Judentum und Hellenismus: Studien zu*

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Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, and Jews attracted many Greek and Roman thinkers, and their fascination with the foreign facilitated innovations in religion, philosophy, science, and “magic,” thereby birthing traditions with uniquely late antique pedigrees.³

If late antique culture is best characterized as a unity predicated on diversity and actualized in dynamic hybridity,⁴ how can we describe its salient features? The present volume attempts to chart the religious landscape of this culture by following a single vital theme across social, regional, and credal boundaries: the fascination with heavenly realms. Our evidence suggests that the idea of heaven held a special place in the late antique imagination, shaped by a sharp sense of the relevance of otherworldly realities for earthly existence. Such concerns can be found not only in Jewish and Christian texts, but also in the literature of Graeco-Roman religions, the astrological and astronomical sciences, and the magical traditions that flowered during this era. Examples are as plentiful as our sources are diverse.

Perhaps the most striking development is the new sense of the possibility of movement between earth and heaven. In different literary discourses in a range of geographical, cultural, and religious milieus, we find descriptions of heaven from those who claim to have visited that realm. Heaven is not simply the distant abode of deities and souls of the dead, barred from invasion by human bodies, eyes, and minds. Rather, it is a locale frequented by patriarchs and prophets of the distant past and, in many cases, by martyrs, mystics, and magicians of the present age. Even when the essential inaccessibility of heaven is affirmed, our texts reveal heavenly secrets in surprisingly concrete terms; common topics of speculation include the topography of the starry heavens, the architecture of celestial structures, the identity and function of myriad angelic hosts, and the character of heavenly liturgies, rituals, and supernal objects such as tablets, scrolls, and books. The world above remains

ibrer Begegnung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung Palästinas bis zur Mitte des 2. Jh. v. Chr. (Tübingen, 1969). For a broader perspective see, e.g., A. Bulloch, E. Gruen, A. A. Long, and A. Stewart, eds., *Images and Ideologies: Self-Definition in the Hellenistic World* (Berkeley, 1993).

³ We do, of course, find Near Eastern influences in Greek culture long before the Hellenistic era. It remains, however, that Alexander’s conquests catalyzed a new type of contact; see the seminal discussion in A. Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge, 1971).

⁴ The generative tension between religious diversity and cultural unity is well described by G. Bowersock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar, eds., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, 1999), xi: “Whether they liked each other or not, they remained not only ‘Christians,’ ‘Jews,’ and ‘pagans,’ ‘orthodox’ and ‘heretics,’ ‘clergy’ and ‘laity’: they breathed the same heavy air of a common civilization – that of late antiquity.”

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shrouded in mystery, but more and more this mystery is cited for the sake of its revelation to those deemed chosen, pure, initiated, or wise.

As the limits of human knowledge expand to encompass exact knowledge about the world above, we also find an increased confidence in the human capacity to understand the influence of heavenly realities on earthly life. The widespread practice of astrology, for instance, simultaneously affirms the sway of the stars on the fate of humankind and empowers its practitioners to interpret their signs. The intimate relationship between heaven and earth similarly finds expression in the belief that our own realm swarms with otherworldly beings, whether angels, demons, or spirits of the dead. Whereas modern science conditions a sense of awe at the endless expanse of emptiness that stretches above us, late antique literature hints at a poignantly personalized view of heaven, charged with meaning for the individual and his or her community.

Scholars generally agree that Late Antiquity is marked by an intensification of interest in heaven. What is less clear, however, is how to explain this fascination with the space above and beyond this world. One of the most influential theories interprets the turn toward the otherworldly as a symptom of the alienation experienced by the rootless individual adrift in the vast imperial structures of the Hellenistic, Roman, Sassanian, and Byzantine worlds. Echoing the traditional characterization of the “postclassical” period as a trajectory of deterioration from “classical” ideals, this model assumes that people had once experienced the world as a coherent cosmic order, governed by enduring patterns of existence through which individual and society could maintain their harmonious relationship; after the conquests of Alexander the Great and the rise of the Roman Empire, however, imperial subjects increasingly saw themselves as living in an anonymous, cruel, and despotic system of capriciously imposed limitations and boundaries. In response, the disenfranchised individual could do nothing but “strive to return to the world-beyond-this-world which is his home, to the god-beyond-the-god-of-this-world which is the true god, to awaken that part of himself which is from the beyond and to strip off his body which belongs to this world.”⁵

⁵ J. Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion* (Chicago, 1978), 163–4. This emphasis on the collective religious experience of the post-Alexandrine age is particularly strong in H. Jonas, *Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 3d ed. (Boston, 2001) and E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge, 1963).

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[More information](#)

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This portrait of a society riddled with anxiety has a certain intuitive appeal, no doubt because it resonates with modern concerns about individuality and alienation. One might question, however, its heuristic as an historical model. Instead of allowing for multiple impulses and causes, it reduces all interest in otherworldly realities to an escapist effort to cope with a collective cultural malaise.⁶ By contrast, it is striking how often late antique authors use images of heaven to articulate their abiding commitment to this-worldly life and worship. Whereas some authors appear to project their earthly ideals into the skies above, poignantly evoking a sense of alienation from their mundane milieu, others construct radical images of heaven in order to critique their contemporaries on earth, undermining traditional structures of authority through appeals to a higher reality. Some sources do seem to be shaped by a yearning to abandon earthly thoughts entirely and participate in heavenly worship. But others tantalizingly suggest that the premundane or eschatological unity between earth and heaven can be actualized in the present, through religious rituals, magical practices, and/or liturgical performance.

No single attitude or disposition captures the disparate, often contradictory, aims of this literature. By positing a uniform narrative of disillusionment and alienation, we risk effacing the variety of conceptual valences and strategic aims found in our sources. Although the preoccupation with celestial realms transcends the boundaries between religious traditions, heavenly imagery serves different functions in different texts, communities, and cultures. As such, any attempt to survey this vast body of material must confront the paradoxical tension between cultural specificity and cultural hybridity so typical of an age in which a traditionalist impulse frequently served as the very ground of innovation.⁷ To map the late antique discourse about heaven, we must thus base our search for cross-cultural commonalities in careful analyses of the specific religious traditions, literary genres, and social worlds in which they are expressed.

We now find ourselves at an apt moment in the history of scholarship to take up this challenge because of converging developments in research on Judaism, Christianity, and Graeco-Roman religions. Our understanding of the imagined heavens of Late Antiquity has been immeasurably enriched by recent developments in the study of the “pagan” religions and cultures of this period. Since its inception under the sway of nineteenth-century

⁶ P. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 1–11.

⁷ A. Cameron, “Remaking the Past,” in *Late Antiquity*, 1–20.

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[More information](#)

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Rationalism, the field of Classics had consistently disregarded the religious components of Greek and Roman life, privileging the philosophical and political works that modern western democracy claims as its heritage, while internalizing the theological dismissal of “paganism” as a primitive form of religiosity superseded by Judaeo-Christian monotheism. A new generation of classicists, however, has made startling progress in recovering the vitality of the Graeco-Roman religious tradition. Contrary to the traditional model of conflict and supersession, Greek and Roman forms of religious piety and ritual practice continued to flourish in a common sociocultural environment with Judaism and Christianity.⁸ The acknowledgement of the continued vitality of “paganism” has opened the way for fresh insights into the complex social and linguistic interactions that generated the hybrid forms characteristic of religious thought and practice in Late Antiquity. Most notable are the rituals and beliefs gathered under the rubric “magic,” which typically blurred cultural boundaries through the eclectic combination of elements from various traditions. The wealth of new research on this topic,⁹ so sorely neglected by earlier scholarship, has simultaneously helped to stimulate academic interest in ancient astrology,¹⁰ further illuminating the complex and multivalent conception of the heavens in the late antique imagination.

The past fifty years have also seen a paradigm shift in research on late antique Judaism and Christianity, spurred by the rediscovery of texts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi Library and by the progressive integration of the study of these religions into the secular, academic discourse on human history, society, and culture more broadly. Shedding the theological biases that shaped past scholarship, scholars have increasingly sought to locate both Judaism and Christianity within the Graeco-Roman cultural context(s) of Late Antiquity. Likewise, the traditional bias for now-canonical literature – the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, classical rabbinic literature, writings of the church fathers – has gradually given way to more inclusive

⁸ P. Chuvin, *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, trans. B. A. Archer (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); R. L. Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York, 1987); R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven, Conn., 1981), esp. 62–72; G. Fowden, “Bishops and Temples in the Eastern Roman Empire 320–425,” *JTS* 29 (1978): 53–78.

⁹ See most notably F. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, trans. F. Philip (Revealing Antiquity 10; Cambridge, Mass., 1997); C. A. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999); M. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London, 2001); R. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago, 1993).

¹⁰ For example, T. Barton, *Power and Knowledge: Astrology, Physiognomics, and Medicine Under the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1994).

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approaches, which also encompass “apocryphal,” “pseudepigraphical,” and even “magical” and “mystical” literature.

In the process, it has become more and more evident that the history of Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity is not merely the story of the triumph of the “Great Church” over “pagans” and “heretics,” the “Parting of the Ways” between Christianity and Judaism, and the rabbis’ establishment of a new, normative Judaism, isolated from the world at large. Rather, the social, cultural, and geographical spread of Jewish and Christian communities in the late antique world was matched by a previously unimagined range of belief and practice that we are only now beginning to recover. Moreover, contrary to the conventional narratives about credal self-segregation and interreligious conflict, it seems that Jews and Christians alike forged their religious identities and community boundaries through a dynamic process of dialogue and debate, which engaged differences within and between the two traditions, no less than the “pagan” cultures around them.¹¹

Among the many fruits of these developments is a richer understanding of how images of heaven functioned in the literature and lives of late antique Jews and Christians. The Dead Sea Scrolls, for instance, have provided exciting new evidence for the development of Jewish traditions about heaven and its hosts, ranging from the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*’s description of the angelic liturgy in heaven to the *War Scroll*’s vision of angelic participation in the eschatological battle on earth.¹² The discoveries at Qumran have simultaneously drawn attention to so-called “Apocrypha” and “Pseudepigrapha,” which contain a wealth of ouranological and angelological traditions. Perhaps most notable is the apocalyptic literature, which served as a literary nexus for Jewish and Christian speculation about the heavens, influencing mystical, magical, and even martyrological traditions in both religions.¹³ Research on these texts once privileged the historical and eschatological

¹¹ See D. Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, Calif., 1999) and, most recently, A. H. Becker and A. Y. Reed, eds., *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (TSAJ 95; Tübingen, 2003).

¹² On the Dead Sea Scrolls’ importance for the history of Jewish liturgy and mysticism, see, e.g., Elisabeth Hamacher, “Die Sabbatopferlieder im Streit um Ursprung und Anfänge der Jüdischen Mystik,” *JSJ* 27 (1996): 119–54; M. D. Swartz, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and Later Jewish Magic and Mysticism,” *DSD* 8 (2001): 182–93.

¹³ On the reception of apocalyptic literature in Late Antiquity, see esp. J. VanderKam and W. Adler, eds., *Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity* (Assen, 1996); I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (AGAJU, 14; Leiden, 1980).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

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concerns that dominate the only two canonical apocalypses, the book of Daniel and Revelation. Yet, the discovery of fragments of 1 Enoch at Qumran exposed the special significance of two noncanonical writings therein, the *Astronomical Book* (1 Enoch 72–82) and *Book of the Watchers* (1 Enoch 1–36), for the early history of the genre. Now known to predate Daniel by some decades, these apocalypses conceive of heavenly secrets in a primarily spatial, rather than temporal, sense: In place of the eschatological timetables traditionally associated with apocalypses and apocalypticism, we here find an interest in topics like the gates of the winds, the paths of the sun, the prisons of the stars, and the supernal Temple, thus demonstrating the importance of ouranography and cosmology within the development of the apocalyptic literature.¹⁴

Although scholars had traditionally studied these and other noncanonical texts as part of the Jewish heritage of early Christianity and dismissed their relevance for our understanding of the allegedly this-worldly religion of the rabbis, recent research has revealed that many prerabbinic Jewish traditions – including those about the heavenly realms – enjoyed lively *Nachleben* in talmudic and post-talmudic Judaism.¹⁵ At the same time, the study of early Jewish mysticism, which has flowered in the years since Peter Schäfer’s 1981 publication of the Hekhalot literature,¹⁶ has helped to illumine the wide range of ideological and theological perspectives still encompassed within late antique Judaism, even long after the rabbinic movement had more or less successfully extended its hegemony over most of Jewish life. Some scholars situate the Hekhalot literature in “mainstream” rabbinic circles, suggesting that the rabbinic movement was itself more diverse than previously imagined; others cite these writings to argue that the rabbis were unable (or unwilling) to police the boundaries of Jewish religious expression.¹⁷ In

¹⁴ For example, J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* 2d rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1998); M. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York, 1993); M. E. Stone, “The Book of Enoch and Judaism in the Third Century B.C.E.,” *CBQ* 40 (1978): 479–92; C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London, 1982).

¹⁵ For rabbinic innovations on early Jewish angelology, for instance, see P. Schäfer, *Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen: Untersuchungen zur rabbinischen Engelvormstellung* (SJ 8; Berlin, 1975).

¹⁶ P. Schäfer, ed., *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen, 1981).

¹⁷ Recent attempts to situate the Hekhalot literature vis-à-vis rabbinic culture include D. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot* (Tübingen, 1988); M. D. Swartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and*

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

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either case, this literature has served to shed doubt on the monolithic portrait of post-70 Judaism painted in the classical rabbinic literature.¹⁸

The discovery and publication of the Nag Hammadi Library has had a similar impact on the study of early Christianity. The research of an entire generation of scholars has been shaped by the challenge of integrating both canonical and noncanonical materials in its account of developing Christianity, thereby transcending the simplistic dichotomy of “orthodoxy” and “heresy.”¹⁹ Our understanding of the specific sociological, regional, and literary trends within late antique Christianity has also been enriched by the research framework articulated by scholars such as Helmut Koester and James Robinson, who have stressed the tensions among multiple, often competing, “trajectories.”²⁰ Whereas earlier treatments of church history tended to draw a straight line of evolution from apostolic age to the Holy Roman Empire, recent scholars have succeeded in tracing the numerous ideological and intertextual strands that weave their way throughout late antique Christianity, even broadening the project to embrace questions concerning the place of gender and ethnicity in the construction of Christian identity.²¹

Here, too, a more inclusive approach to our sources yields a plethora of traditions about otherworldly realms. New research on the texts in the Nag Hammadi Library and so-called New Testament Apocrypha has allowed scholars to situate the images of heaven in the New Testament and patristic literature within a broader continuum that encompasses noncanonical gospels, acts, martyrologies, apocalypses, and so on. The acknowledgement of the diversity within late antique Christianity has also facilitated research into the interaction between Christians and their contemporaries, both Jewish and “pagan.” Once we begin to read the Christian rhetoric of supercessionism as rhetoric, we are able to see the degree to which Christian authors

Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism (Princeton, N.J., 1996); J. R. Davila, *Descenders to the Chariot: The People Behind the Hekhalot Literature* (SJSJ 70; Leiden, 2001).

¹⁸ So, too, with the extensive material and artistic remains of ancient synagogue life; see L. I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven, Conn., 2000), and the ample bibliography cited there.

¹⁹ See, e.g., H. Koester, “Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels,” *HTR* 73 (1980): 105–30, and the essays in R. Williams, ed., *The Making of Orthodoxy* (Cambridge, 1989).

²⁰ J. M. Robinson and H. Koester, *Trajectories Through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1971).

²¹ For example, E. A. Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1986); P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988); S. Elm, *Virgins of God* (Oxford, 1994); D. K. Buell, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* (Princeton, N.J., 1999); M. Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 2001).

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strove to delineate a unique religious identity by distinguishing their own ritual practices, literary traditions, and communal institutions from the (often uncomfortably similar) forms in Judaism and Graeco-Roman culture. This, for instance, is clear in the constant refashioning and redeployment of Jewish and “pagan” images of heaven, which exemplifies the interplay between a resolute drive to unity and an enduring multiplicity in late antique Christianity.

These scholarly developments take on particular significance for those who wish to recover a more comprehensive understanding of the religious history of Late Antiquity. The study of the diverse religious phenomena of the postclassical world owes much to the work of Peter Brown.²² Like E. R. Dodds before him, Brown recognizes the distinctive characteristics of late antique society, which made it so seminal for the history of Mediterranean and Near Eastern civilizations – as well as for the modern Western culture that they birthed. Brown, however, rejects Dodds’ naive quest to reduce distinct social and intellectual movements to one determinative *Zeitgeist*. Paradoxically, in constructing a historiographic framework that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries, Brown offers an expansive perspective on late antique society that calls attention to the generative tension between cultural commonality and local variation. His work has shown how the creation of a cosmopolitan intellectual *koine* was uniquely predicated on regional, social, and linguistic specificity. In Brown’s account, the innovations that constituted the shared culture of Late Antiquity did not merely radiate out from its imperial center; rather, every periphery constituted a center with a distinctive social and cultural logic of its own.²³ Accordingly, this new approach to the “postclassical” world has paved the way for dialogue among specialists in quite diverse aspects of late antique religion.

The present volume is a product of such dialogue. Although no single book could cover all the relevant literature, we here attempt to provide a sampling of late antique literature that reflects the dazzling variety both within and between religious traditions. To emphasize the recurring themes, cross-cultural

²² Although the study of religion in the late Roman Empire had never been fully neglected, its emergence as a major area of growth, at least within English language scholarship, can be traced directly to the appearance of Brown’s *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750* (New York, 1971) and the detailed social-historical account of late Roman life in A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire: A Social Economic and Administrative Survey*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1964).

²³ See esp. Brown’s account of the complex negotiations between imperial power and local elites in *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, Wisc., 1992).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Raʿanan S. Boustan and Annette Yoshiko Reed

motifs, and shared notions of the sacred in texts from different religious traditions, we have adopted a thematic arrangement that highlights the various ways in which late antique authors conceptualized the relationship between heaven and earth.

We begin with traditions that articulate the possibility of movement across the two realms. The articles in the first section, “Between Earth and Heaven,” survey the range of attitudes toward the humans, angels, and souls that traverse this boundary, focusing on three themes: liminality, transgression, and transformation. In “The Bridge and the Ladder: Narrow Passages in Late Antique Visions,” Fritz Graf challenges the pervasive tendency to harmonize the diverse images used to describe the passage from earth to heaven. In their quest for a single, unified history of the notion of the otherworldly journey, many scholars have simply smoothed over the fundamental structural difference between the vertical ladder and the horizontal bridge. By contrast, Graf’s culturally and historically specific analysis succeeds in illuminating the process whereby each image gave rise to novel symbolic idioms within the Latin Christian literary tradition.

The ladders and bridges of Graf’s article resonate intriguingly with a related metaphor from the scientific study of the stars, as analyzed in the next piece: “‘Heavenly Steps’: Manilius 4.119–121 and Its Background.” Here, Katharina Volk argues that the description of the heavenly staircase in the Latin didactic poetry of Manilius draws on astrological motifs similar to those found in other contexts, such as the Hermetic corpus and Mithraism. When this Roman astrologer describes the heavenly heights that he himself climbs in his capacity as poet, he forges a parallel with the arc of the zodiac, thereby legitimating his authority with appeal to the cosmic order that binds together celestial and earthly realities.

In “Heavenly Ascent, Angelic Descent, and the Transmission of Knowledge in 1 Enoch 6–16,” Annette Yoshiko Reed explores the transgression of the boundaries between heaven and earth by considering the epistemological ramifications of the descent of the fallen angels in the *Book of the Watchers*. Reed suggests that the redacted form of this early Jewish apocalypse cautions its readers against overzealous speculation into heavenly secrets by juxtaposing the fallen angels’ corrupting teachings of humankind with Enoch’s reception of divine wisdom after his ascent to heaven. As with the sources considered by Graf and Volk, this work presupposes the possibility of passage, both from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth. Here,