

Paul's Mosaic Ascent: An Interpretation of 2 Corinthians 12.7–9

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This essay offers a reading of 2 Cor 12.7–9 in light of a rabbinic story of Moses' ascent to heaven (*b. Šabb.* 88b–89a). After an exploration of Moses in 2 Corinthians the author argues that vv. 7–9, like vv. 2–4, constitute an ascent report (vv. 2–4). This ascent report, it is maintained, is structurally parallel to Moses' heavenly ascent in *b. Šabb.* 88b–89a. Early traditions of Moses' ascent to heaven and dominance over angels suggest that Paul knew a form of the Mosaic ascent, and parodied it to highlight his weakness and paradoxical authority in vv. 7–9.

Keywords: Moses, 2 Cor 12.7–9, heavenly ascent, Paul and Rabbinic literature, angel of Satan, parody

Introduction

Paul's account of his ascent to the third heaven (2 Cor 12.1–10) is a classic *crux interpretum*. The report, coming on suddenly and forcefully, raises critical questions. What does the report have to do with the broader issue of Paul's legitimacy as an apostle?¹ How does Paul's ascent demonstrate his weakness (11.30; 12.5, 9)?² How does one properly connect Paul's ascent experience with his 'thorn in the flesh' (vv. 7–9)?³

1 Paul's legitimacy as an apostle is widely recognized as the key issue in the 'Four Chapter Letter' (2 Cor 10–13). See, e.g., G. Strecker, 'Die Legitimität des paulinischen Apostolates nach 2 Korinther 10–13', *NTS* 38 (1992) 566–86.

2 Commentators recognize that Paul's ascent to paradise is not an instance of weakness and thus find difficulty integrating it into a speech whose overall aim is to demonstrate weakness. See, e.g., Margaret E. Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994) 2.773; Laurence Welborn, 'The Runaway Paul', *HTR* 92 (1999) 115–63 (122).

3 Thrall recognizes that Paul's ascent is 'integrally connected' with his experience with the thorn (*Commentary*, 2.784), but cannot explain the logic of the connection (2.806). Murray Harris notes a temporal link between the ascent (vv. 3–4) and Paul's reception of the thorn, but no logical link (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005] 855). For Frank Matera, the thorn is the 'result'

This essay will attempt to answer these questions with a proposed new reading of 2 Cor 12.7–9. After a brief exploration of Moses in 2 Corinthians (Part I), and a brief exegesis of vv. 7–9 (Part II), this essay will argue that Paul's ascent report follows a tradition of Moses' ascent preserved in rabbinic literature (Part III). Paul uses this tradition, it is proposed, to structure his ascent report in vv. 7–9, but parodies it to highlight his weakness (Part IV).

Part I: Moses In 2 Corinthians⁴

In 2 Corinthians 3, after comparing the significance of the old and new covenants (vv. 7–11), Paul contrasts Moses' timidity with his boldness as God's minister (vv. 12–13). His statements, despite their polemical character, indicate the pervasive importance of Moses for Paul. The Apostle's very attempt to outstrip Moses in glory assumes the glory of Moses' ministry (3.6–13).⁵ In other parts of 2 Corinthians, it seems, Moses continues to act behind the scenes. In 12.12, Paul claims that he has performed 'signs and wonders' (σημεῖα τε καὶ τέρατα) a phrase often designating the miracles of Moses (cf. Deut 34.11; Ps 105.26–27; Wis 10.15–16; Acts 7.36; Philo *Mos.* 1.95). In ch. 5, Paul's insistence on being clothed with a heavenly body recalls Moses stripping off his flesh at death (Philo *Virt.* 76).⁶ In ch. 13, the Christ speaking through Paul (v. 3) is reminiscent of Moses speaking as if with the voice of God (Josephus *Ant.* 4.328–29). Moreover, the whole emphasis in 1 Corinthians on wisdom and powerful speech (esp. chs. 2–4; 10–14) may partially be explained by devotion to Moses as a prophet of consummate wisdom and (rhetorical) power in Hellenistic-Jewish apologetic.⁷

The abundance of references—implicit and explicit—to Moses in the Corinthian correspondence (cf. 1 Cor 10.1–13) suggests that Moses was an important figure for Paul's opponents in Corinth. Although we cannot, like Georgi, determine the precise role of Moses for Paul's enemies, we can at least surmise

or 'outcome' of Paul's heavenly ascent, but he does not explain why (*II Corinthians: A Commentary* [NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003] 276, 282).

4 For Paul's depiction of Moses in general, see the recent article by Gerhard Dautzenberg, 'Mose und das Neue Testament. Zwischen Vereinnahmung und Abstossung?', *Studien zur paulinischen Theologie und zur frühchristlichen Rezeption des Alten Testaments* (ed. Dieter Sänger; Giessen: Selbstverlag des Fachbereichs, 1999) 201–4.

5 Cf. Carol K. Stockhausen, *Moses' Veil and the Glory of the New Covenant: The Exegetical Substructure of II Cor. 3,1–4,6* (Rome: Biblical Pontifical Institute, 1989) 154–6, 167–75.

6 Thrall, '“Putting On” or “Stripping Off”', *New Testament Textual Criticism* (ed. E. J. Epp and G. Fee; Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 221–37, esp. 234–36.

7 Apart from his devotion to the θεῖος ἄνθρωπος typology, Dieter Georgi's study of Moses in Hellenistic-Jewish apologetic remains valuable (*The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986] esp. 254–8).

that they appealed to him as a figure of impressive authority.⁸ Paul's opponents, it seems, negatively compared Paul with Moses' glory, wisdom, and power in order to expose Paul's lack of authority. Reading between the lines, then, it appears that Paul's problem in Corinth is a lack not only of qualifications, but of distinctly *Mosaic* qualifications. One of the keys to Paul's defense, then, is to show how he fits—and better fills—the Mosaic pattern of authority. Paul's culminating defense of his apostolic authority is his ascent report in 2 Cor 12.1–10. The possibility that Moses might lurk behind this passage as well is the central issue we will explore in this essay.

A full-blown comparison of Moses' and Paul's heavenly ascents would require a comprehensive exegesis of 2 Cor 12.1–10. Such a project exceeds the limits of this study. Our comparison between the Pauline and Mosaic ascents will focus on 2 Cor 12.7–9. Since these verses are not normally seen as an independent ascent report, my choice to see them as such must be justified. This is the task of Part II.

Part II: A Proposed Reading of 2 Corinthians 12.7–9

As an introduction to our discussion of vv. 7–9, I offer the following translation.

⁷And (καί) in the intensity of the revelations (τῆ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων), in order that I might not be lifted up higher (ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι), there was given to me (ἐδόθη) a thorn against the flesh (σκόλοψ τῆ σαρκί), an angel of Satan (ἄγγελος Σατανᾶ) to thrash me (κολαφίζῃ), lest I be lifted up higher. ⁸About him I begged (παρεκάλεσα) the Lord three times that he might get away from me (ἀποστῆ ἀπ' ἐμοῦ). ⁹Then he announced to me 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness'. Gladly, then, I will rather boast in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ might tabernacle over me.

It is generally thought that the episode related in these verses is not an ascent experience (as is vv. 2–4).⁹ The basis for thinking this is a putative difference in style and setting in vv. 2–4 and 7–9.¹⁰ Upon closer examination, however, the style and setting are not opposed. Verses 7–9 exude the same aura of mystery and obscurity as vv. 2–4. In both passages, Paul uses aorist main verbs to describe an event in the past (v. 4, ἠρπάγη, ἤκουσεν; vv. 7–8, ἐδόθη, παρεκάλεσα). The present subjunctives in v. 7 (ὑπεραίρωμαι, κολαφίζῃ) do not indicate time (as if

8 Moses as paradigm of religious authority and legitimacy for religious leaders is a pervasive theme in apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature (Scott Hafemann, 'Moses in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha: A Survey', *JSP* 7 [1990] 79–104, esp. 101).

9 The view is almost universal. A recent exception is Paula Gooder, *Only the Third Heaven? 2 Corinthians 12.1–10 and Heavenly Ascent* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2006) 171.

10 For this claim, see Victor P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (AB 32a; Garden City: Doubleday, 1984) 550; and Thrall, *Commentary*, 2.817.

Paul shifted from past to present), but aspect; in this case, continuous action in the past. Thus Paul neither assumes nor sets a new narrative context for vv. 7–9. Consequently, the interpreter is led to understand these verses as describing an event parallel to that in vv. 2–4, namely an ascent to heaven.

Furthermore, repetition of similar vocabulary indicates that vv. 1–5 and 6–10 are structurally parallel.

1 Καυχᾶσθαι δεῖ, οὐ συμφέρον μὲν,	6 ἐὰν γὰρ θελήσω καυχῆσασθαι ,
ἐλεύσομαι δὲ	...
εἰς ὄπτασις καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις κυρίου.	7 καὶ τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων .
...	...
5 ὑπὲρ τοῦ τοιούτου καυχῆσομαι , ὑπὲρ δὲ ἑμαυτοῦ οὐ καυχῆσομαι εἰ μὴ ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις .	9 ἥδιστα οὖν μᾶλλον καυχῆσομαι ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις μου, ἵνα ἐπισκηνώσῃ ἐπ' ἐμὲ ἡ δύναμις τοῦ Χριστοῦ.
	10 διὸ εὐδοκῶ ἐν ἀσθενείαις ...

As if framed in two corresponding panels, both vv. 1–5 and 6–10 begin with a reference to boasting in revelations, and end with a reference to boasting in weaknesses. What seems to be the case, then, is that vv. 6–10 (more narrowly, vv. 7–9) and vv. 1–5 (more narrowly vv. 2–4) recount two parallel revelations received in the same context: an ascent to heaven.

In both accounts, the subject of the ascent is Paul. In vv. 2–4, Paul objectivizes himself ('I know *a person* in Christ', v. 2), because he would not boast of his perceived strength (the attaining of paradise).¹¹ In vv. 7–9, he describes a weakness which he felt he could flaunt in the first person.

Verses 5–6 together serve as a transition from Paul's third-person (non-self-referential) boast to his first-person boast of his ascent. In v. 5, Paul refuses to take credit for a perceived strength (the great revelations), although he wants the Corinthians to know that his ascent experience was real (v. 6a). What he wishes to highlight about his ascent (i.e., the weakness he experienced in it), he insists on giving as a firsthand report (what is seen and heard '*from me*' [ἐξ ἐμοῦ], v. 6b). Verse 6b thus functions as a transition to v. 7, where Paul's first-hand (flagged by the first person) account of his ascent begins.

11 Michael Goulder's view, that the 'man in Christ' in vv. 2–4 is a missionary companion, does not take seriously enough Paul's exceedingly personal plea for his own authority, his rhetorical ability, and the ability of the Corinthians to understand this rhetoric ('Visions and Revelations of the Lord [2 Corinthians 12:1–10]', *Paul and the Corinthians: Studies on a Community in Conflict. Essays in Honour of Margaret Thrall* [ed. Trevor J. Burke and J. Keith Elliot; Leiden: Brill, 2003] 306).

The dative τῆ ὑπερβολῆ can express intensity or frequency. Intensity (as translated above) is the more common connotation of Paul's ὑπερ- compounds (see esp. 4.7, 17), and fits well here. 'Revelations' (ἀποκαλύψεις) is plural likely due to the multi-tiered structure of heaven. At each level of heaven, Paul was shown new mysteries, a frequent *topos* in ascent texts (e.g., *T. Levi* 2.7–5; 2 *En.* 3–22; *Ascen. Isa.* 7–9).

The διό ('therefore') launching v. 7b (left untranslated above) is not found in many important manuscripts (P⁴⁶ D Ψ 88 614 1881 it^{d,ar} syr^{p,h} cop^{sah} Ir^{lat} Or^{lat} Hier). The combination of P⁴⁶ with 'Western' witnesses (in particular D it^{d,ar} Ir^{lat}) is especially powerful, as Günther Zuntz has shown.¹² Transcriptionally, the διό seems to be a scribal addition attempting to divide Paul's precipitative discourse into distinct semantic units.¹³ Functionally, it makes what follows into a new sentence. Some scholars who accept the διό are inclined to take v. 7a with the last idea of v. 6 (what is 'seen and heard' from Paul), and understand the initial καί as specifying what is seen or heard,¹⁴ as introducing a concession (NRSV), or as introducing a reason.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is best, along with other exegetes,¹⁶ to understand v. 7a as introducing the following phrases (through v. 9).

The statement 'that I might not be lifted higher' is a literal translation of ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι. Most interpreters understand this phrase not spatially but attitudinally, as referring to Paul's high (i.e., prideful) state of mind. This understanding of ὑπεραίρωμαι has good lexical support. The verb, however, can also simply mean 'rise above' (in the middle voice) or 'be lifted up higher' (in the passive).¹⁷ This passive meaning would certainly fit the context of an ascent report. It would signify that Paul is literally ascending to an incredible height.¹⁸

12 *The Text of the Epistles: A Disquisition Upon the Corpus Paulinum* (London: Oxford University, 1953) 158–9.

13 Murray Harris asserts that διό is the harder reading (*Commentary*, 829). As he notes, however, it is only harder if one assumes that v. 7a begins a new sentence. For those who see v. 7b as beginning the new sentence, the διό presents a smoother, stylistically improved text. Likely, then, the scribes who produced the more polished Alexandrian text saw v. 7b as beginning a new sentence, and inserted the διό to make this clear.

14 Ralph P. Martin, 2 *Corinthians* (WBC 40; Waco: Word, 1986) 388.

15 Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 513; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (ed. Henry Chadwick; New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 314.

16 Rudolf Bultmann, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976) 226; A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915) 347; Barrett, *Commentary*, 305. See also Thrall, *Commentary*, 2.803 n. 240.

17 LSJ 'ὑπεραίρω' suggests 'to be lifted up' as the meaning of ὑπεραίρωμαι in 2 Cor 12.7 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950) 1858. This meaning would be parallel to the passive uses of ἀρπάζω ('to be snatched up') in vv. 2, 4. Gooder sees a double entendre in the verb: Paul becomes elated as he was literally lifted up (Gooder, *Third Heaven*, 200).

18 LSJ 'ὑπεραίρω', II.3.

To prevent the Apostle from ascending too high (and thus becoming elated), the Lord gave him (ἐδόθη is most likely a divine passive) a σκόλοψ τῆ σαρκί. This phrase, usually translated into English as 'thorn in the flesh' (locative dative), is probably better translated 'thorn for (or against) the flesh' (dative of disadvantage). Since the 'angel of Satan' is in apposition to the thorn, one is probably meant to understand them as identical. Accepting this point allows one to bypass the massive speculation about the thorn as something other than or caused by the angel.¹⁹ Most importantly, it allows one to see that when Paul talks about his thorn, he is talking about what happened to him *in the context of his ascent* described in vv. 7–9. In short, the thorn *is* the angel he encounters *in* an ascent to heaven.

That in a journey to heaven Paul would have met with a hostile angel is not a strange idea, as David Abernathy has shown.²⁰ He points out that Paul did not ask to be healed from the thorn/angel, but that the thorn/angel *depart* (ἀποστῆ) from him.²¹ Moreover, Paul did not employ ὡς with ἄγγελος Σατανᾶ to signal a simile or metaphor ('like an angel of Satan'); he simply said ἄγγελος Σατανᾶ, 'angel of Satan'.²² If Satan masquerades as a literal angel of light in 2 Cor 11.14, there is little reason to view the 'angel of Satan' metaphorically in 12.7.

That this 'angel of Satan' designates a literal angel is also supported by comparison with ancient Jewish literature.²³ In the Septuagint, angels are regularly sent to punish the wicked (Gen 19; Num 22.33; 2 Sam 24 = 1 Chron 21; Ps 35.5–6; 78.49). Yet they also attack the righteous. For instance, an angel attacked Jacob at the Jabbok (Gen 32.22–32), and Moses on his way from Midian to Egypt (Exod 4.24–26).²⁴

In the eighth century B.C.E., Isaiah had a vision of fiery angels protecting God's temple from defilement. When he confessed himself to be 'a man of unclean lips', a seraph swooped down to the prophet and purified his mouth by fire (Isa 6.5–6). The pain this would have (presumably) caused Isaiah's flesh indicates that the seraph's action may not have been purely benevolent. At this stage, however, angelic animosity is muffled if present at all. Only in 2 Maccabees do the

19 The literature on the thorn is endless. For the main viewpoints, see Thrall, *Commentary*, 2.809–18.

20 'Paul's Thorn in the Flesh: A Messenger of Satan?', *Neot* 35 (2001) 69–79. The idea was first proposed by Robert Price, 'Punished in Paradise (an Exegetical Theory on II Corinthians 12.1–10)', *JSNT* 7 (1980) 33–40.

21 Plummer points out that ἀφίστημι in the New Testament is always used of persons (*Second Epistle*, 353). See esp. Luke 4.13; Acts 22.29.

22 Abernathy, 'Paul's Thorn', 77.

23 See in general on this topic Johann Maier, 'Das Gefährdungsmotiv bei der Himmelsreise in der jüdischen Apokalyptik und "Gnosis"', *Kairos* 5 (1963) 19–22; Joseph Schultz, 'Angelic Opposition to the Ascension of Moses and the Revelation of the Law', *JQR* 61 (1971) 282–307.

24 In *Jub.* 48.1–4, it is Mastema who is said to attack Moses. In *b. Ned.* 31b–32a, it is said that Satan attacked Moses on his return to Egypt.

angelic guards of the temple first openly attack. In ch. 3 of this work, they lash Heliodorus, official of King Seleucus, for attempting to enter the temple (vv. 25–26; cf. 3 *Macc.* 1.8–2.24). The taint of (Gentile) impurity is likely in view here. Yet such attacking angels are, it seems, far from being ‘angels of Satan’.

The exegetical origin of the adversarial angel may lie in the J source of Genesis. Paradise was guarded by a cherub with a swiveling, fiery sword (Gen 3.24). This cherub, clearly a servant of God, would presumably destroy anyone who sought to reenter Eden.

Later in the Pentateuch we have reference to an angel who opposed Balaam three times as ‘a satan’ (לשׂטן—here meaning ‘adversary’; Num 22.22–27).²⁵ Here ‘the satan’ is no apostate demon, but the ‘angel of YHWH’ (מלאך יהוה), or in Greek ‘the angel of God’ (LXX ὁ ἄγγελος τοῦ θεοῦ; Num 22.22). It is possible that Paul weaved Gen 3.24 and Num 22.22–27 together to arrive at an account in which he was blocked from paradise by a ‘satanic’ (= adversarial) angel.

It is also possible that Paul wove in an exegetical strand from Job, where ‘the satan’ (השׂטן) appears as a character with new independence and personality. In Job 1, the satan presented himself to the Lord as one of the ‘sons of God’, i.e., one of God’s angelic chiefs of staff (Job 1.6). His charge, it seems, was to discover the sins of human beings and to expose them on high. The accuser attacked both Job’s property and his person. In the *Testament of Job*, Satan (now apparently a personal name) likened himself to a wrestler who pinned Job to the ground and bruised his limbs (27.1–5).

Job was attacked on earth, but attacks of the accuser were later thought to occur in heaven. In the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, a work likely dating before 70 C.E.,²⁶ Zephaniah goes on a heavenly journey which leads him to Hades (6.16).²⁷ There he is confronted by the accuser, called ‘the great angel’ (6.8, 17) whom Zephaniah at first mistakenly thinks is God (6.4–5). The accuser unfurls a manuscript which contains a full list of Zephaniah’s sins (7.1–2). Terrified, the prophet prays to the Lord for deliverance from the accuser (6.8–10), and forgiveness for his sins (7.8).²⁸

Accuser angels in the heavens are also found in the *Parables of Enoch* (1 *En.* 37–71). In his first parable, Enoch ascends to the celestial throne room. There he sees angelic accusers, literally ‘satans’. They do not accuse Enoch in heaven,

25 V. Jegher-Bucher, ‘The Thorn in the Flesh/Der Pfahl im Fleisch. Considerations about 2 Corinthians 12.7–10 in Connection with 12.1–13’, *The Rhetorical Analysis of Scripture* (ed. Stanley Porter and T. H. Olbricht; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 388–9, 96–7.

26 O. S. Wintermute dates the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* between 100 B.C.E. and 175 C.E. If the pro-Edomite tradition in 3.2 derives from the author, Wintermute is inclined to assign the work a date before 70 C.E. (*OTP* 1.500–501; see also 510 n. 3b).

27 For the place of punishment as situated in heaven, see, e.g., *Apoc. Abr.* 15.5–6.

28 Cf. *Apoc. Abr.* 13.5; *PGM* 4.555–60.

since apparently he is pure. To prevent them from accusing those on earth, they are expelled by the voice of the angel Phanuel (1 En. 40.7–10).

An accuser figure also appears in the *Ascension of Isaiah* (early second century C.E.). As Isaiah mounts to the highest heaven, the angel in charge of the praise of the sixth heaven cries out. 'How far is he who dwells in the flesh²⁹ to go up!?' This angel, implicitly charging Isaiah with impurity, is clearly eager to guard against the defilement of God's heavenly temple (9.1–2; cf. 7.9; 10.31).

A similar pattern occurs in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.³⁰ In a preparatory ritual of ascent, 'an unclean bird' flies down to Abraham and asks 'What are you doing...on the holy heights, where no one eats or drinks...?' (13.5). The bird is identified as the evil angel 'Azazel'.

Angelic hostility occurs again in early rabbinic literature. In the Baraita deRabbi Ishmael (attached as a prologue to *Sifra*),³¹ R. Yose the Galilean understands God's declaration to Moses on Sinai, 'I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by' (Exod 33.22), to teach that 'power was given to the destroyers to destroy (יניתנה רשות למחבלים להבל) (Pereq 1.9).³² A variant reading of 'destroyers' is 'angels' (מלאכים), and this is most likely how the passage is to be understood.³³ Here God's hand does not protect Moses, but refers to the angels who can destroy him.

Attacking angels are also part of the story of the four rabbis who journeyed to paradise³⁴ (*t. Hag.* 2.1; *y. Hag.* 77b; *b. Hag.* 14b–15b; *Cant. R.* 1.28 [= 1.4.1]; *m. Meg.* 4.10). In the rabbinic and Hekhalot literature, Paradise (פֶּרֶדֶס) became a technical term for the Holy of Holies in the highest heaven.³⁵ As in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, it was the duty of the priestly angelic ministers (מלאכי השירות) to keep impure beings out of God's sanctuary. When these 'ministering angels' want to attack R. Akiva, God warns them, 'Leave this elder alone, for he is worthy to make use of my glory'. This text, reminiscent of *Ascen. Isa.* 9.1–2, is from the Bavli (*b. Hag.* 15b).

29 Other MSS read 'among aliens'.

30 R. Rubinkiewicz dates this work to the interval between 70 and 150 C.E., *OTP* 1.683.

31 The Baraita is of course only attributed to R. Ishmael. The source could be late Tannaitic (Menahem Kahana, 'The Halakhic Midrashim', *The Literature of the Sages* [ed. Shmuel Safrai et al.; 2 vols.; Assen: Royal Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 2006] 2.16) or Amoraic (Gary G. Porton, *The Traditions of Rabbi Ishmael* [4 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1977] 2.7).

32 Louis Finkelstein, *Sifra on Leviticus according to Vatican Manuscript Assemani 66 with Variants from the Other Manuscripts, Genizah Fragments, Early Editions and Quotations by Medieval Authorities* (5 vols.; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1983) 2.11.

33 Finkelstein, *Sifra on Leviticus*, 3.39.

34 C. R. A. Morray-Jones, 'Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12.1–12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate. Part 1: The Jewish Sources', *HTR* 86.2 (1993) 177 n. 1.

35 C. R. A. Morray-Jones, *Transparent Illusion: The Dangerous Vision of Water in Hekhalot Mysticism—A Source-Critical and Tradition-Historical Inquiry* (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 20. But the association of Eden, the future paradise of the righteous, and the heavenly temple is found as early as *Jub.* (3.9–13; 8.19; Morray-Jones, 'Paradise, Part 1', 204–7).

An earlier account of Akiva's ascent is told in *Hekhalot Zutarti* (HZ).³⁶ Here the 'ministering angels' who want to do Akiva harm are called 'angels of destruction/violence' (מלאכי הבלה).³⁷

In a recent study on Paul's ascent, Paula Gooder agrees with the present author that Paul met a real angel in heaven, whom Paul calls a 'thorn'.³⁸ In this context, she points out Paul's possible assimilation to the prophet Ezekiel, who, after receiving a vision of the Lord, was told not to fear 'briers and thorns' (ויסלונים; Ezek 2.6).³⁹ Regrettably, she says nothing about Moses, the greatest of prophets with whom Paul directly compared himself in 2 Corinthians.⁴⁰ It is my contention that Moses provides the best background for understanding what Paul means by the thorn/angel of Satan.

Part III: The Story of Moses' Ascent to Heaven

The story of Moses' ascent to heaven at Sinai seems to have been well known in first-century Judaism. It is told, for instance, by Ezekiel the Tragedian (*Exagoge*, lines 68–89), and Philo (*Mos.* 1.158; *QE* 2.40). These Alexandrian traditions could have come to Paul's (and the Corinthians') attention through Apollos, the learned Alexandrian preacher (Acts 18.24). Besides these Alexandrian traditions, Moses' heavenly ascent is also presumed in a Palestinian source, Ps.-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (*L.A.B.*, traditionally dated to the first century C.E.). This is indicated by the fact that when Moses descends from Sinai, 'he went down to the place where the sun and the moon are (*descendit in locum ubi lumen solis et lune est*); and the light of his face surpassed the splendor of the sun and moon' (12.1). The light on Moses' face exceeded the

36 For HZ as the earliest version of the *pardes* story, see Morray-Jones, 'Paradise, Part 1', 195–208.

37 *Synopse* §346, München 22. For 'angels of destruction', note 1QS 4.12; 1 *En.* 53.3; 56.1; 62.11; 63.1; Philo *Abr.* 28, 145; *t. 'Abod. Zar.* 1.17–18; cf. *b. Šabb* 119b. James Davila has argued for the presence of hostile angels in the 'Hymn of the Garden' in the Hodayot hymns of Qumran (1QH^a col. 16.4–26), where the sword of the cherub in Paradise (Gen 3:24) becomes a bevy of 'holy spirits and blazing fire that turns from side to side' (16.12; 'The Hodayot Hymnist and the Four Who Entered Paradise', *RevQ* 17 [1996] 457–78, esp. 474–6). For later Christian material on adversarial angels, see, e.g., Ps. Clem. *Rec.* 10.61 = *Hom.* 20.19; Eus. *E.H.* 5.28.12; Barn. 18.1. Note also the Coptic *Apocalypse of Paul* (NHL V/2) which pictures Paul encountering punishing angels at the fourth and fifth gates of heaven.

38 Gooder, *Third Heaven*, 197–200.

39 Insightfully, Gooder also points out that the King of Tyre, who lives in the luxury of God's paradise (παροδείσος, ערך גן־אל־הים, Ezek 28.13) was also called a 'piercing thorn' (v. 24, סלון, LXX σκόλοψ; Gooder, *Third Heaven*, 202).

40 In HZ, Moses is immediately invoked as the prototypical mystic who learns the name of God which secures full remembrance of the Torah (*Synopse* §§336, 340; cf. Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism* [Albany: State University of New York, 1992] 67).

celestial bodies because Moses had been bathed in the glory of the heavenly courts, 'whose "invisible light" was higher than the visible luminaries of this world'.⁴¹ Paul, who was putatively educated in Palestine (Acts 22.3), could well have learned such a tradition there.

Although Moses' ascent was known to first-century Jewish authors, the tradition was more fully developed in rabbinic aggadot. Of chief importance is the story we find in the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Šabb.* 88b-89a):

R. Joshua b. Levi also said: When Moses ascended on high (למרם), the ministering angels spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Sovereign of the Universe! What business has one born of woman (ילוד אשה) amongst us?' 'He has come to receive the Torah', answered He to them. Said they to Him: 'That secret treasure, which has been hidden by You for nine hundred and seventy-four generations before the world was created, You desire to give to flesh and blood (לבשר ודם)! *What is man, that You are mindful of him, And the son of man, that You visit him? O Lord our God, How excellent is Your name in all the earth! Who has set Your glory [the Torah] upon the Heavens!*' 'Return them an answer', bade the Holy One, blessed be He, to Moses. 'Sovereign of the Universe' replied he, 'I fear lest they consume me with the [fiery] breath of their mouths'. 'Hold on to the Throne of Glory', said He to him, 'and return them an answer', as it is said, *He makes him to hold on to the face of His throne, And spreads His cloud over him*, whereon R. Nahman observed: This teaches that the Almighty spread the luster of His *Shechinah* and cast it as a protection over him (trans. H. Freedman, modified).⁴²

The story goes on to tell how Moses, using great boldness (cf. *παρρησία* in 2 Cor 3.12), argued why the Torah ought to be given to human beings rather than to angels. The angels then befriend Moses, allowing him to take the Torah as booty. As signs of reconciliation and submission, they give him additional gifts (a midrash on Ps 68.18 [Heb 19], 'You ascended on high... You took gifts').

In the Talmud, this story is fifth in a series of eight homiletic narratives attributed to the famous aggadist Joshua ben Levi (*b. Šabb.* 88b-89a).⁴³ The story is left

41 Mark Stephen Kinzer, ' "All Things under His Feet": Psalm 8 in the New Testament and in Other Jewish Literature of Late Antiquity' (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1995) 190. Interestingly, Moses, before his death, is taken on a cosmic journey in which he sees 'the paths of paradise' (*L.A.B.* 19.10; cf. 2 Cor 12.4).

42 Peter Schäfer is inclined to treat the parallel account of this story in *Midrash ha-Gadol* as more original since it is anonymous (*Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen. Untersuchungen zur rabbinischen Engelvorbildung* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975] 129).

43 Each homiletic narrative uses bits of scripture to generate the storyline and fill in dialogue. The stories are exegetically and thematically linked. The third, fourth, and fifth story interpret bits from Ps 68. The fifth, sixth, and seventh story underscore Moses' humility before God. The fifth, sixth, and eighth story depict hostile angels or the figure of Satan.

in Hebrew, which suggests that the redactors of the Bavli took it complete from an Amoraic source.⁴⁴

The story in the Talmud can be broken down into six discrete units, each centered around a particular scriptural text. The first unit focuses on Ps 8.1 [Heb 2], where God's glory (i.e., the Torah) is set in the heavenly world. The angels use this text to keep the Torah for themselves. The second unit cites Job 26.9, explaining it to mean that the glory cloud enveloped Moses when he seized God's throne. In the third unit, Moses lists commands from the Decalogue (Exod 20.1–17), proving to the angels that the Torah was meant for human beings. The angels concede Moses' point in unit four, using the words of Ps 8.9 [Heb 10]. The fifth unit spotlights Ps 68.18 [Heb 19], interpreting Torah as the 'spoils' Moses received on high. In the sixth and final unit, Moses receives other gifts from the angels, including the Angel of Death, who reveals how to stop a plague (Num 16.47–48 [Heb 17.12–13]).

The connection of Moses' ascent on Sinai with Psalm 68 (in unit five) is important since it helps us to date the story. During the ancient festival of *Shavuot*, David Halperin argues, Jews were already reading the Sinai pericope (Exod 19), and the Chariot vision (Ezek 1) along with Psalm 68 (which mentions Sinai and chariots, v. 17 [Heb 18]). Signs of reading these passages together are already found in the LXX translation of Ezek 43.2.⁴⁵ Halperin thus traces the 'Sinaitic' reading of Psalm 68 to a pre-Christian Alexandrian Jewish community.⁴⁶ The words of Ps 68:18, 'You ascended *on high*', were taken to refer to Moses' heavenly ascent at least as early as the first century C.E. This is indicated by Eph 4.8–12, which quotes Ps 68:18, but replaces the ascent of Moses with that of Christ.⁴⁷ It is not unrealistic to suppose, then, that the story of Moses' heavenly ascent at Sinai was known to Paul in the first century.

Evidence of Moses encountering angels in heaven is also attested in literature prior to or contemporaneous with Paul. In Ezekiel's *Exagoge*, for instance, Moses dreams that he is crowned and enthroned on Sinai. Viewing the world below, he sees 'a host of stars' (τι πλῆθος ἀστέρων) fall prostrate at his feet 'like a squadron of soldiers' (ὡς παρεμβολὴ βροτῶν, lines 86–88). The 'stars' which prostrate themselves before Moses are a common poetic designation for angels (Job 38.7

44 The Amoraic period is usually thought to run from ca. 200–450 C.E.

45 David Halperin, 'Merkabah Midrash in the Septuagint', *JBL* 101 (1982) 351–63, esp. 359.

46 Halperin, 'Merkabah', 353, 355–9. For the connection of Ps 68.17–18 with *Shavuot* and the Sinai pericope at Qumran, see C. R. A. Morray-Jones, 'The Temple Within', *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism* (ed. April D. DeConick; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006) 158–62.

47 See W. Hall Harris, *The Descent of Christ: Ephesians 4:7–11 and Traditional Hebrew Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) 64–122. The argument is based partly on the (late) Targum on the Psalms which paraphrases Ps 68.19: 'You ascended to the firmament, O prophet Moses (בִּיָּיָא סְלִיקְתָּא לְרִיקֵעַ מִשָּׁה)'.

[LXX]; 1 En. 104.2–6). These angels are in battle formation as they are depicted in Judg 5.20. Moses' ability to count them assimilates him to God (Ps 147.4; cf. Isa 40.26), and signifies his rulership over them. Indeed Moses, it is not a stretch to say, is here depicted as the 'Lord of (angelic) hosts'.⁴⁸

A like tradition of Moses' encounter with, and dominance over angels is found in *L.A.B.* 32. Here Deborah sings a victory hymn in which she puts the defeat of Sisera at the hands of the 'stars' (again, Judg 5.20) in the context of Moses' ascent at Sinai. As Moses lay dying, God says to him: 'Let the heaven in which you entered (*celum in quo ingressus es*)⁴⁹ and the earth on which you walk until now be a witness between me and you and my people. For at that time the sun, and the moon and the stars were servants to you' (*ministri enim erant vobis sol et luna et astra*, 32.9). The 'stars' in this passage are very likely thought to be angels (cf. 11.5; 31.1–2), as is indicated by the parallel in 30.5: God 'led you [Moses and the Israelites] into the height of the clouds and *set the angels beneath your feet* and established for you the Law'.⁵⁰ As Mark Stephen Kinzer notes, '[t]he subjugation of the angels and of the luminaries to Israel is thus equated, and they are both tied to the ascent to heaven'.⁵¹

The angels beneath Moses' feet seems to have derived from a midrashic reading of Psalm 8. Verse 6 [Heb 7] of this psalm puts 'all things' under the feet of 'man' (שׂוֹמֵר, v. 4).⁵² The 'all things' would include those mentioned in Ps 8.3 [Heb 4]: 'moon and stars'. If the 'stars' are read as angels, and the 'man' as Moses, then the angels fall before Moses' feet.⁵³ This image is essentially what we find in the *Exagoge* and *L.A.B.*, suggesting that this 'Mosaic' reading of Psalm 8 predated Paul.

48 Even if Moses' dream vision in the *Exagoge* is a mere parable of mundane realities (as suggested by Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 166–9), the contents of the dream still give the historian access to ancient traditions of Moses ruling angels at Sinai. The thickness of biblical and extrabiblical allusion in Moses' dream indicates that Ezekiel was handling traditional material (Howard Jacobson, *The Exagoge of Ezekiel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1983] 90–4).

49 D. J. Harrington mistranslates the Latin perfect (*ingressus es*) as if it were future: 'the heaven that you are to enter' (*OTP* 2.346).

50 Here, subjected angels sandwiched between an ascent and the giving of the Law suggest a context at Sinai. For possible angelic opposition at Sinai, note *L.A.B.* 23.10: 'I [God] brought them [the Israelites] to the foot of Mount Sinai, and I bowed the heaven and came down... and impeded the course of the stars...and interrupted the storm of the heavenly hosts so that they would not ruin my covenant' (*suspendi tempestatem militiarum, ut non corrumperem testamentum meum*, trans., Howard Jacobson).

51 Kinzer, 'All Things Under His Feet', 202.

52 The language here is deliberately politically incorrect to highlight the fact that the 'man' could be read as a singular, particular man. See below.

53 For Moses as the subject of Ps 8, see Kinzer, 'All Things Under His Feet', 150–208.

If Ps 68:18 is the exegetical origin of Moses' ascent, and Psalm 8 the exegetical origin of his dominance over angels, the text most generative for 2 Cor 12.7–9 is Job 26.9 (unit two in the Bavli account above). The core of R. Joshua's midrash on Job 26.9 is Moses' divine protection in heaven. The first part of the verse speaks of one grasping the face of a throne (בסה, NRSV 'full moon'). The next word, פרשו (BDB pil'el of פרש, NRSV 'spreads'), is treated as a notarikon: פרש (he spreads); רחם (being merciful), שדי (the Almighty); זיו עננו (his glory cloud), or 'The Almighty, being merciful, spreads his glory cloud'. The tradition presumes that Moses ascended to heaven, encountered angelic hostility (the link with the Ps 8.1 unit), and was subsequently protected by grasping God's throne.

In what follows I will argue that this homiletical expansion of Job 26.9 presents a story of Moses' ascent which is structurally parallel to Paul's experience in 2 Cor 12.7–9.⁵⁴ This structure has two basic elements (1) the presence of angelic hostility in heaven, and (2) God's overshadowing protection.

Comparison of the Pauline and Mosaic Ascent Reports

1. In the Job 26.9 midrash, hostile angels attack Moses in his ascent. Paul's encounter with an 'angel of Satan' in 2 Cor 12.7, I propose, can be interpreted along the same lines. The immediate difficulty for this view is a seeming difference in type of angels. In *b. Sabb.* 88b–89a, Moses' opponents are the 'ministering angels' (מלאכי השרת). For Paul, however, it is a singular ἄγγελος Σατανῶν, who is either one of Satan's angels (genitive of possession) or Satan himself (appositive genitive).⁵⁵ Are these two sorts of angels really comparable?

The differences between the angels, at first glance, are weighty. It seems as if the ministering angels in the aggada are celestial priests solely concerned about the purity of the heavenly sanctuary. They refer to Moses as the 'one born of woman' made up of 'flesh and blood'. Paul's Satan, on the other hand, is a tempter, accuser, and prosecutor of moral offenses. Furthermore, the ministering angels must be seen as on the side of God, whereas Satan, as is commonly supposed, is incorrigibly pitted against God.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, the nature of angelic opposition in rabbinic aggadot indicates that Paul's 'angel of Satan' is indeed like unto the 'ministering angels' of rabbinic lore. As already mentioned above, the ministering angels who attack Akiva in the Hekhalot are called 'angels of destruction/violence' (מלאכי הבלה). This is also their designation in three other parallel accounts of Moses' ascent at Sinai, each of which contains the Job 26.9 midrash (*Exod. Rab.* 41.7, *Tanh.* *Buber* Ki Tiśśa

54 When I discuss structural parallels, I mean to illuminate one text by another, not to suggest any genetic relationship(s).

55 Perhaps the former should be preferred since 'the angel Satan' would require the definite article (ὁ ἄγγελος Σατανῶν; Plummer, *Commentary*, 352). The translation 'an adversarial angel' is also possible.

56 H. A. Kelly, *Satan: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006).

§13, and *Pesiq. Rab.* 20). That the Bavli account uses ‘ministering angels’ is probably redactional. As Christopher Morray-Jones points out, the designation is ‘deliberately “softer” and reflects a concern to guard against the possibility of association between the demonic principle and God’.⁵⁷ In the writings of the Dead Sea sectarians, the neat distinction is absent. The ‘angels of destruction’ (מלאכי הבל) are instruments of God’s wrath (CD 2.6), even though they are explicitly aligned with ‘Belial’ (1QM 13.11–12; cf. 14.10). In later rabbinic literature, these angels act as accusers (קטיגורין) before God, pointing out the moral offenses of Israel (*Midrash Tehillim* 8.2). Objectively, such angels represent the punishing righteousness of God (מדת הדין). Subjectively, these angels are jealous of Israel, to the point of being malicious.⁵⁸ Their capacity to be cruel and destructive is well shown by how they treat those unworthy to see ‘the king in his beauty’. In *Hekhalot Rabbati* (HR; *Synopse* §§258–59; cf. HZ §§407–408), the angelic guardians of the sixth palace hurl upon ascenders ‘a thousand thousand waves of water when there is not so much as a single drop there’.⁵⁹ Their trick of illusion serves as an ordeal. If the ascender sees the water, the angels know that he is impure. Consequently, ‘they run after him to stone him and say to him, “Worthless one! Perhaps you are one of the calf-kissers’ seed and unworthy to see the king and his throne!”’⁶⁰

Like the angels of destruction, Paul’s Satan is a tempter (1 Thess 3.5; 1 Cor 7.5) who uses deception to achieve his ends (2 Cor 11.3, 14; cf. Gal 1.8). He is constantly seeking an opportunity to take advantage of God’s elect to lead them into sin (2 Cor 2.11; 1 Cor 7.5). When people sin, they fall into his power so that he can destroy their flesh (1 Cor 5.5). In his capacity as destroyer, Satan executes the strict justice of God.

The association of Satan with destruction in 1 Cor 5.5 helps interpret Paul’s reference to ‘the destroyer’ (ὁ ὄλοθρευτής) in 1 Cor 10.10. Here ‘the destroyer’ (cf. המשחית in Exod 12.23 [LXX τὸν ὄλεθρεύοντα]; 1 Chron 21.12, 15) destroys the grumbling Israelites in the desert. The reference is probably to the plague which broke out against the people in Num 14.37 or 16.41–50 (cf. Wis 18.20–25). Martin Dibelius thought that the definite article (ὁ ὄλοθρευτής) pointed to one particular destroyer—the one who destroys in 1 Cor 5.5—namely

57 Morray-Jones, ‘Paradise, Part 1’, 202. Notably, in *Pesiq. Rab.* 20, the ‘angels of destruction’ (מלאכי הבל) are identified with the ‘ministering angels’ (מלאכי השרת). See §§11.7 and 11.8 in Karl-Erich Grözinger, *Ich bin der Herr, dein Gott! Eine rabbinische Homilie zum Ersten Gebot (PesR 20)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1976) 298.

58 Schäfer, *Rivalität*, 221–2.

59 Trans. Morray-Jones, *Transparent Illusion*, 56.

60 This is not to say that all angels are unfriendly in the Hekhalot literature. The redactors of these texts have finely interwoven traditions of angelic opposition with the motifs of angelic guidance and revelation (Schäfer, ‘Engel und Menschen in der Hekhalot-Literatur’, *Hekhalot-Studien* [Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1988] 253–4.

Satan.⁶¹ J. Schneider pointed out that in Rabbinic literature, the מַשְׁחִית was one of the angels of destruction (מלאכי הבלה). Schneider identified these angels with the 'angels of Satan'.⁶²

The destruction of a person's flesh by Satan (ὄλεθρον τῆς σαρκός, 1 Cor 5.5) is reminiscent of an angel of Satan attacking Paul's flesh as a thorn (σκόλοψ τῆ σαρκί, 2 Cor 12.7). In both passages, the flesh seems to refer to the part of human nature associated with sin and uncleanness. Flesh is offensive to the angels because of its association with impurity.⁶³ Recall the outcry in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, 'How far is he who dwells among flesh to go up?!' (9.1).⁶⁴ The same complaint is lodged against Moses when he is called 'one born of woman' (יליד אשה; birth and women both thought of as impure), as well as 'flesh and blood' (בשר ודם) in the Bavli. Here, בשר seems to be the conceptual equivalent of Paul's σάρξ in 2 Cor 12.7.

Paul's thrice repeated petition that the angel depart may indicate that the angel attacked him three times. If so, this angel of Satan would appear similar to the angel who opposed Balaam three times as 'a satan' (לשטן, Num 22.22–27). If Paul is in any way echoing this text, it seems likely that he would view his 'angel of Satan' as God's angel as well (note again that God appears to send the angel, v. 7). The angel is God's minister, no less spiteful and destructive than the 'ministering angels' who stand before God in the midrashim.⁶⁵

2. The second structural similarity between the Pauline and Mosaic ascent reports is the presence of God's overshadowing protection. In *b. Šabb.* 88b–89a, when God bids Moses to answer the opposing angels, Moses cries out that they will destroy him. Although not stated in the form of a request, Moses' plaintive cry functions as a plea that God deliver him from the violence of the angels. Paul's petition that the angel might depart from him has essentially the same function.

God's response to Moses' plea throws considerable light on how Paul wishes God to respond to him. In the Talmud, God tells Moses to grasp the throne of

61 Martin Dibelius, *Die Geisterwelt im Glauben des Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909) 44–5.

62 *TDNT*, 'ὄλεθρος', 5.170.

63 *Pesiq. Rab.* §11.2; 3 *En.* 6.2.

64 It appears that Paul's flesh must be stripped away in order for him to have access to Paradise, which is probably the location of God's throne room (cf. *Ascension of Isaiah* 9.8–9; 2 *En.* 22). In the Coptic *Apocalypse of Paul*, Paul reaches the tenth heaven as pure spirit (24.8). Cf. C. R. A. Morray-Jones, 'Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 43.1 (1992) 1–31, esp. 10–31.

65 It is worth pointing out that in the Bavli, the story which follows the account of angels threatening Moses depicts Satan as searching for the Torah that Moses took from heaven. After confronting God, the Deep, Destruction, and Death (following Job 28.23, 14, 22), Satan confronts Moses with the accusation. 'Where is the Torah which the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to you?' Moses claims that he does not have it, a lie which he (humbly) justifies by reasoning that such a great treasure was not given to him alone.

Glory. This command is explained in light of Job 26.9. 'He makes him to hold on to the face of his throne, and spreads his cloud over him'. 'R. Nahman' explains that the cloud is the cloud of glory (נִי), or God's 'Shekinah' cast as a protection over Moses.

Above I have translated Paul's word ἐπισκηνώω (12.9) as 'tabernacle over'. This term does not appear in the LXX, Philo, or Josephus. Its only other use is in Polybius (*Histories* 4.18.8) when he speaks of enemy troops 'quartered' in the houses of a conquered city. Paul's usage, however, is probably based on the combination of the preposition ἐπί and the noun σκηνή in the LXX.⁶⁶ Numbers 9.19, for instance, talks of the pillar of cloud (representing God's presence) as being drawn 'over the tabernacle' (ἐπὶ τῆς σκηνῆς) in the wilderness. If Paul combined the word σκηνή with the ἐπι- prefix based on LXX usage, his verb probably means something roughly equivalent to κατασκηνώω, which in the LXX and Josephus is used of the glory cloud overshadowing the Tent of Meeting (Num 35.34; *Ant.* 3.202).⁶⁷ Thus Paul desired Christ's power to 'tabernacle over' him like God's Glory over the Tent of Meeting (cf. Rev 7.15). Just as Moses was enveloped in God's glory cloud, so Paul wished to be overshadowed by divine power.

But can 'the power of Christ' (ἡ δύναμις τοῦ Χριστοῦ, v. 9b) truly be compared with the glory cloud of the Job 26.9 midrash? The terms 'power' (δύναμις) and 'glory' (δόξα) could both refer to God's presence in ancient Jewish writings. In Ps 62.3 (LXX), δύναμις and δόξα refer to God's presence in the temple. In the book of *Wisdom*, Sophia is said to be the 'breath of God's δύναμις and a pure efflux of the Almighty's δόξα' (7.25). Δόξα in Paul can have the sense of God's presence (2 Cor 3.18a; Rom 9.4), which can also be the sense of δύναμις. In 1 Cor 5.4, for instance, Paul says that his spiritual presence and the power (δύναμις) of Jesus Christ are present at the judgment of a sexual offender. 'Power' here is a synonym for Christ's glorious attendance in judgment. Likewise, in Mark 13.26, the Son of Man reveals himself upon the clouds 'with great δύναμις and δόξα'. The author of Matthew, who evidently understands δύναμις and δόξα as roughly equivalent terms, can change the phrase to 'with δύναμις and great δόξα' (24.30; so also Luke 21.27). In Rev 15.8, the temple of God is filled with smoke 'from the δόξα of God and from his δύναμις'. Both terms describe God's glorious presence. Paul could thus use δύναμις and δόξα as roughly equivalent terms. He probably used δύναμις instead of δόξα in 2 Cor 12.9 to contrast with his ἀσθένεια, mentioned twice in that verse.⁶⁸ I conclude that Christ's overshadowing δύναμις in 2 Cor 12.9 is conceptually akin to

66 We know that Paul elsewhere combined two LXX terms into one: ἀρσενοκοίτης (1 Cor 6.9) from ἄρσην and κοίτη in Lev 18.22.

67 Cf. Thrall, *Commentary*, 2.828 n. 449.

68 See further Helge K. Nielsen, 'Paulus' Verwendung des Begriffes Dynamis. Eine Replik zur Kreuzestheologie', *Die Paulinische Literatur und Theologie* (ed. Sigfred Pedersen; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980) 137-58, esp. 141-2.

the glory of God's presence (= the Shekinah) protecting Moses from the angels in the midrash on Job 26.9.⁶⁹

These basic similarities shared by the Pauline and Mosaic ascent reports should not be taken to mean that Paul knew the story later told in the Talmud. The Talmudic narrative, essentially constructed out of midrashic biblical exegesis, merely indicates the basic *structure* of Mosaic ascent traditions with which Paul may have been familiar. Paul need not have known about every detail in the Talmudic story to have shaped his ascent report to conform to the basic structure of an earlier Mosaic ascent tradition. The structural similarities I have pointed out between Moses' and Paul's ascent reports, in fact, make all the more interesting the differences between them. This is the subject of Part IV.

IV. Paul's Ascent as Mosaic Parody?

The most striking difference between the ascents of Paul and Moses is the outcome of the angelic attack. Whereas Moses receives divine deliverance from angelic power, Paul is left to be beaten. Indeed, the fact that Paul was struggling and seemingly resourceless on high appears to be the emphasis of 2 Cor 12.7–8. One is thus led to inquire: If Paul's ascent report has a Mosaic form, what is the rhetorical function of Paul's heavenly helplessness? What I wish to propose is that Paul not only knew a tradition of Moses' heavenly encounter with angels, but that he subtly parodied it in his own ascent report in 2 Cor 12.7–9.

The idea of parody has become important in recent research on Paul's *Narrenrede* (2 Cor 11.1–12.10).⁷⁰ Lawrence Welborn, developing an insight from Hans Windisch, argues that Paul plays the part of a mime in 2 Cor 11.32–12.10. The specific mimic role Paul played in 2 Cor 12.7–9 was that of the 'learned imposter'.⁷¹ A special manifestation of the learned imposter is the 'quack holy man' who boasts of his supernatural healings. The failed healing in vv. 7–9, Welborn argues, is a parody of this boast.⁷² Employing Welborn's analysis (though leaving aside his interpretation of the thorn), I wish to suggest an even more specific object of parody in 2 Cor 12.7–9—someone closer to Paul's heart than the quack holy man—namely Moses.

69 For ἐπισκηνοῶ as an allusion to the Shekinah, see Thrall, *Commentary*, 2.827–8. For the Shekinah resting on Moses due to his meekness, see *b. Ned* 38a.

70 The first to use the term 'parody' with reference to 2 Cor 12.7–9 was Hans Dieter Betz ('Eine Christus-Aretalogie bei Paulus [2 Kor 12.7–10]', *ZTK* 66 [1969] 288–305; cf. *Der Apostel Paulus und die sokratische Tradition. Eine exegetische Untersuchung zu seiner 'Apologie' 2 Kor 10–13* [Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1972] 92–100). Betz asserted that Paul was parodying a healing oracle. His interpretation assumes that the 'thorn' refers to a physical malady, a judgment with which I cannot concur.

71 Welborn, 'Runaway Paul', 137.

72 Welborn, 'Runaway Paul', 150–1.

Above I argued that the tradition of Moses' ascent to heaven and encounter with angels dates to Paul's time. It is more difficult to determine, however, whether Paul knew a tradition of Moses meeting angelic *hostility* in heaven. Indeed, Gal 3.19 ('[I]t [the Torah] was ordained through angels by a mediator', cf. Acts 7.53 and Heb 2.2) indicates that the angels, far from opposing Moses on Sinai, nicely cooperated with him! Nonetheless, Paul did not need to know a tradition of angels opposing Moses in heaven to create a Mosaic parody. He only required familiarity with a tradition of Moses' *dominance* over the angels in his Sinaitic/heavenly ascent. Early evidence attests to the fact that Moses did in fact undergo a heavenly ascent at Sinai in which angels submitted to him. We have already seen evidence of this in Ezekiel's *Exagoge* and *L.A.B.* Further, Mosaic dominance is clearly a theme in *b. Šabb.* 88b-89a, where Moses immediately receives the overshadowing protection of God's Shekinah. Safely grasping God's throne, he is filled with boldness to respond to his angelic opponents. The angels are utterly conquered by the force of Moses' oratory. They quickly become obliging to Moses and give him gifts.

More colorful narratives of Moses' dominance over the angels in the context of the Sinai ascent are found in later rabbinic collections. In *Pesiqta Rabbati*, for instance, Moses meets the angel Qemuel, who is set over the angels of destruction (מלאכי הבלה). When Qemuel threatens Moses and will not depart, Moses strikes him and drives him 'out of the world'. Later angels in this midrash prove more formidable, but God promptly delivers Moses from them all.

In *Qoh. Rab.* 4.1 §3, Moses is confronted by five angels of destruction, who are personifications of God's indignation: Rage, Corrupter, Destroyer, Wrath, and Anger (cf. Deut 9.19). When Moses prays to God to remember the patriarchs, three of the angels fall away, but Wrath and Anger remain. Moses asks God to remove Wrath, while he manhandles Anger alone.

An especially important tradition of Moses' dominance over the angels is found in *Exod. Rab.* 43.1. The context of this midrash is Moses' intercession for Israel on Sinai after the sin of the Golden Calf. Satan appears to accuse Israel, and Moses stands to oppose him. R. Judah the Prince (ca. 200 C.E.) likened the situation

to a king who was sitting in judgment on his son, while the accuser was indicting him. When the instructor of the prince saw that his charge was being condemned, he thrust the accuser outside the court and placed himself in his stead in order to plead on his behalf. Similarly, when Israel made the Golden Calf, Satan stood within [before God] accusing them, while Moses remained without. What then did Moses do? He arose and thrust Satan away and placed himself in his stead, as it says, '*Had not Moses His chosen stood before Him in the breach, [to turn away the wrath of the destroyer (מישחית)]*' (Ps 106.23).⁷³

73 Trans. S. Lehrman in *Midrash Rabbah Exodus* (ed. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon; London: Soncino, 1939) 494.

In this text, Moses is depicted as the protector and defender of Israel, who defeats Satan by his own power. In this story, far from fearing angelic attack, Moses pushes Satan away and secures the reception of the Torah for Israel.

Moses' ability to beat off his angelic enemies results in some astounding boasts in the late compilation *Deuteronomy Rabbah*.⁷⁴ The boasts occur in the account of Moses' death. The angel Sammael is sent to take the soul of Moses, but proves powerless to do so. Before dismissing Sammael, Moses boasts about his ascent to receive the Torah. 'I ascended and trod a path in the heavens. I engaged in battle with the angels, I received the Law (תורה) of fire, and sojourned under [God's] Throne of fire, and took shelter under the pillar of fire, and spoke with God face to face; I vanquished the celestial *Familia*, and revealed unto humans their secrets; and received the Law from the right hand of the Holy One, blessed be he, and taught it to Israel' (11.10). Moses speaks of his ascent to heaven like a veteran general speaks of his bygone victories. When Sammael returns again to Moses, Moses beats him with his staff which bears the name of God.

Paul's Parody?

In the face of Moses pummeling angels, Paul in 2 Cor 12.7 turns out to be a striking figure of contrast. Instead of beating off the angels, Paul is helplessly punched and cuffed. Instead of showing off his oratorical prowess, Paul can only cry out for deliverance. Instead of being answered with divine protection, Paul is told that he can bear the suffering. Meanwhile, the Apostle is left hovering black and blue in heaven, making his whole ascent appear less tragic than comic. Far from being dominant over his angelic opponent, the angel starkly exposes Paul's weakness. Yet in his debility Paul is confident that the power of Christ will envelop him. Consequently, Paul boasts—not of his victories—but of his weaknesses (2 Cor 12.9). 'Exhibit A' of his weakness is his bumbling encounter with the satanic angel.

The contrast with Moses at just this point is so striking it seems hardly coincidental. While Moses easily glides to victory over his angelic opponent(s), Paul suffers a degrading defeat. The combination of structural similarity and material incongruity leads me to propose that Paul, in constructing his own ascent report, may have parodied a tradition of Mosaic ascent.

Paul as 'Mosaic fool' would fit nicely as the crowning bit of sarcasm in Paul's fool's speech. In a letter vigorously attempting to reclaim lost religious authority, a parodic reference to Moses (perhaps Israel's greatest authority) would have a powerful effect. If Moses' ascent was the supreme demonstration of his power, so—paradoxically—was Paul's. Moses received power directly from God, whereas Paul manifested God's power through weakness.

74 The text is late, but based on earlier traditions. See, e.g., *ARN* 12 (version A), *ARN* 25 (version B). For a pre-200 C.E. date of *ARN*, see Anthony J. Saldarini, *The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan* (Leiden: Brill, 1975) 12–16.

This implicit contrast with Moses, if present, would indicate that Paul's rhetorical strategy in 2 Corinthians had changed. In ch. 3, Paul outstripped Moses by being bolder and more glorious. His ministry brought greater benefits (life, the Spirit, righteousness), and Paul felt no need to hide the glory of these gifts. In essence, Paul in 2 Cor 3 boasted of being *ικανότερος* ('more capable') than Moses. In 2 Cor 12.7–9, by contrast, Paul outstripped Moses by being *weaker* and more *inglorious* than Moses, as demonstrated by his encounter with the angel.

By changing his strategy, however, Paul did not need to discount Moses—only re-envision him. The raw material for such a re-visioning was not wanting. The Philonic picture of Moses at the burning bush, for instance, shows a Moses who is cautious (*εὐλαβής*) and shamefaced (*αἰδοῖος*) in part because he is ineloquent and tongue-tied (*ἰσχνόφωνος καὶ βραδύγλωσσος*, *Mos.* 1.83–84). Interestingly, Philo makes a point here that sounds like the oracle received by Paul. The very image of the 'most weakly' (*ἀσθενέστατον*) bush which withstood the fire, Philo says, communicated a divine message, namely that '*your weakness is your strength*' (*τὸ ἀσθενὲς ὑμῶν δύναμις ἐστίν*, *Mos.* 1.69; cf. 'my power [*δύναμις*] is perfected in weakness [*ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ*]', 2 Cor 12.9). Although this message was meant for the suffering Israelites, it had obvious relevance for Moses who actually beheld the bush. It is perhaps not coincidental that a like statement appears in Paul when Paul himself appears like Moses (2 Cor 12.9). Yet Paul did not have to borrow the vision of a weak Moses from Philo. He could have understood from the Torah itself that God transformed Moses' weakness and ineloquence into impressive strengths. (Nowhere is it said that Moses lacked words when appealing to Pharaoh.) At the end of his life, Moses experienced the great limitation of not being able to enter the Promised Land. After begging the Lord (*ἐδεήθην κυρίου*) to reverse his decision, God answers, 'Ἰκανούσθω σοι, 'Let it be sufficient for you' (Deut 3.23–36; cf. Ἄρκει σοι, '[My grace] is sufficient for you', 2 Cor 12.9). Moses, Israel's greatest authority, also had to accept weakness and limitation.

In one respect, then, Paul remained perfectly consistent in his presentation of Moses. Just as in 2 Corinthians 3, Paul did not have to become something different than Moses to be superior to him. (Such a move would be counterproductive since Paul wanted to show the continuity of his authority with that of Moses.) Nevertheless, Paul's rhetoric about his ministry being more glorious than Moses' had to change. Paul had to become not *ικανότερος* than Moses, but *ταπεινότερος*. Paul had to become, so to speak, a Christ-like Moses, a Moses whose power was proved in weakness. Why Paul changed his rhetorical strategy about Moses can probably be inferred. Repulsed by the unmeasured boasting of his enemies (2 Cor 10.12–13), Paul was content to be meek *just as Moses was* (Num 12.3) in conformity to the 'meekness and gentleness of Christ' (2 Cor 10.1).