

**From Seer to Saint:
The Psychotherapeutic Program of the Book of Revelation**
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Of Enoch, the great-grandfather of Noah, the Bible enigmatically relates: "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Gen 5:24). Retellings of the story in Jewish apocalyptic literature of late antiquity introduced the motif of Enoch's transformation. *The Similitudes of Enoch*, which occupies chapters 37-71 of *The First (Ethiopic) Book of Enoch (I Enoch)* and dates perhaps as early as 100 BCE, contains a passage in which Enoch ascended to heaven and was there transformed:

(Thus) it happened after this that my spirit passed out of sight and ascended into the heavens. And I saw the sons of the holy angels walking upon the flame of fire; their garments were white--and their overcoats--and the light of their faces was like snow....Then I fell upon my face before the Lord of the Spirits. And the angel Michael, one of the archangels, seizing me by my right hand and lifting me up, led me out of all the secrets of mercy, and he showed me all the secrets of righteousness....He carried off my spirit, and I, Enoch, was in the heaven of heavens....And I saw countless angels....With them was the Antecedent of Time. His head is white and pure like wool and his garment is indescribable. I fell on my face, my whole body mollified and my spirit transformed....Then an angel came and greeted me, "You, son of man, who art born in righteousness and upon whom righteousness has dwelt, the righteousness of the Antecedent of Time will not forsake you. (*I Enoch* 71:1, 2b-3, 5a, 8a, 10-11a, 14)

In keeping with the notion that angels serve God in heaven as priests serve God in the Jerusalem temple, the angels wore white garments, the priestly vestment that the high priest wore when entering the Holy of Holies, which he did once annually on the Day of Atonement (Himmelfarb, 1993, p. 18). This transformation of Enoch's spirit that entitled him to the designation "son of man" is the oldest extant version of the transformation motif (Black, 1952, p. 5).

The *Second (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch*, which is possibly as old as the first century CE, explains that the seer was transformed into an angel.

And Michael, the Lord's archistratig, lifted me up and brought me in front of the face of the Lord. And the Lord said to his servants, sounding them out, "Let Enoch join in and stand in front of my face forever!" And the Lord's glorious ones did obeisance and said, "Let Enoch yield in accordance with your word, O Lord!"

And the Lord said to Michael, "Go, and extract Enoch from [his] earthly clothing. And anoint him with my delightful oil, and put him into the clothes of my glory." And so Michael did, just as the Lord had said to him. He anointed me and he clothed me. And the appearance of that oil is greater than the greatest light, and its ointment is like sweet dew, and its fragrance myrrh; and it is like the rays of the glittering sun. And I looked at myself, and I had become like one of his glorious ones, and there was no observable difference. (2En 22:6-10)

Following his anointment and clothing in angelic vestments, Enoch was given a heavenly throne. "And the Lord called me; and he said to me, 'Enoch, sit to the left of me with Gabriel.' And I did obeisance to the Lord." (2En 24:1).

Other late antique instances of the motif of transformation into an angel after ascending to heaven occur in the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Ascension of Isaiah, and 3 Baruch (Murray-Jones, 1992; Himmelfarb, 1993, pp. 47-71). The texts regularly either assert or imply that transformation into an angel is the fate of the righteous after death (Himmelfarb, 1991, pp. 84-85). But some scholars believe that it was also an experience that could occur in the course of mortal life. Liturgy from Qumran imagined the community worshipping among the angels in heaven when they sang hymns on earth (Newsom 1985, 1990; Smith, 1990; Elior, 2004; Alexander, 2006). The communal rituals presumably accommodated worshipers for whom the exercise was an imagined hope, as well as those who, like Enoch, were able to achieve visions of their own transformations into angels.

The concept of transformation underwent a sea change when Philo of Alexandria, writing in the first decades of the first century CE, allegorized the motif. As Philo explained scripture, the transference of Enoch into heaven symbolized his repentance.

Transference implies turning and changing, and the change is to the better because it is brought about by the forethought of God....And the expression used of the transferred person, that he was not found, is well said, either because the old reprehensible life is blotted out and disappears and is no more found, as though it had never been at all, or because he who is thus transferred and takes his place in the better class is naturally hard to find. (*On Abraham*, 18-19; Philo, 1935, p. 13).

Where the apocalyptic literature portrayed transformation as the manifest content of visionary experiences that were exemplified the fate of the soul post-mortem, Philo described a process of psychological change. Although Philo depended directly on the biblical text and did not refer to its expansions in the apocalypses, his concern with repentance is coherent as a functional interpretation of the apocalyptic motif. A seer who envisioned his transformation into an angel, and so became convinced of the importance of behaving in a manner that would make his soul eligible for a heavenly afterlife, was thereby motivated to repent.

Philo's treatment of Enoch's angelification as an allegory of moral transformation was further developed, I suggest, in early Christianity. C. H. Dodd (1935) famously suggested that Jesus' parables of the kingdom of God regularly pertain to a kingdom that can be entered in the present. Although Jesus used images that ordinarily pertained to the end-times, that is, the "last things" or *eschaton*, he invested eschatological language with an existential significance. He used popular images of the end of the Age as symbols that signified the end of inner demons' possession of the individual. Dodd introduced the phrase "realized eschatology" (p. 41) to designate Jesus' theological position, that the kingdom of God is to be sought in the present.

The "eschatological" Kingdom of God is proclaimed as a present fact....This declaration that the Kingdom of God has already come necessarily dislocates the whole eschatological scheme in which its expected coming closes the long vista of the future. The *eschaton* has moved from the future to the present, from the sphere of expectation to that of realized experience. (Dodd, 1935, pp. 36, 40-41)

Because Dodd advanced his theory of "realized eschatology" as a theological claim, and not only as a historical one, it led to overstatements and his thesis's defeat. Some of the

sayings attributed to Jesus can be interpreted persuasively in terms of “realized eschatology.” Indeed, some cannot persuasively be read in any fashion other than as metaphoric appropriations of language about the heavenly realm and its inhabitants. However, other sayings are not metaphoric, and a Christian who believes that all of the sayings come from Jesus must reject Dodd’s thesis that Jesus consistently taught a realized eschatology. In contrast with theological opinion, however, historical scholarship can accept Dodd’s thesis in reference to some of the sayings that the gospels attribute to Jesus and conclude that early Christianity accommodated both points of view. Some sayings that are attributed to Jesus reflected belief in a heavenly future, but others used kingdom language in an allegorical manner that pertained to spiritual experiences of God’s presence in the here-and-now.

The biblical book of Revelation is a work of eschatology that asserts the allegorical character of many of the images in its visions. For example, the first vision concludes with the statement: “As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches” (Rev 1:20). Further images are explicitly interpreted as symbols in Rev 1:8; 1:13ff.; 10:1-11; 11:7; 13:6; 13:18; 14:14-20; 17:9-15; 18:21; and 19:11-16. Implicit interpretations occur at 4:1-11; 5:6; 6:1-8, 12-17; and 12:1 (Barr, 1984, p. 40 n. 5).

Barr (1984) drew attention to “the rather pedestrian nature of the prosaic reality” (p. 40) that John’s interpretations disclosed.

We are not talking about stars but about churches (1:20). We are not really eating books; we are prophesying (10:9-11). It would never have occurred to me to picture a prayer meeting as an angel with a golden censer before the throne of God suddenly throwing it on the earth with thunder, lightning, and earthquake ensuing (8:3-5); but perhaps John’s prayer meetings were more lively than those I have seen. There is something maliciously appropriate to symbolizing the grandeur of Rome as a gaudy prostitute riding on a scarlet beast, at least from the provincial perspective of John (17:3-14). But it is late first century Roman culture that is being discussed, not gaudy prostitutes. The first point, then, is to keep our heads in the midst of all this exotic symbolism and remember we are hearing about quite common, everyday realities. (pp. 40-41)

Neither explicit nor implicit interpretations are provided, however, for the vast majority of the images in the text. Because any attempt to interpret these images as allegories must be speculative, critical scholars have avoided the project. Even though we know that Revelation’s use of heaven language is allegorical, scholars limit their remarks to the manifest contents of the imagery, as though John had intended nothing more than a mythological text about heaven and the many things to be seen there. The problem is that we do not know what “everyday realities” John’s allegories were about, and scholars are reluctant to discuss what they cannot demonstrate persuasively.

Dodd’s concept of “realized eschatology,” the application of kingdom language to spiritual experiences of God’s presence in this world, together with Philo’s interpretation of Enoch’s transformation as an allegory of repentance, have come together for me in a working hypothesis that the allegorical subtext of Revelation discusses spiritual experiences. The text portrays the contents of spiritual experiences in all their exotic mythological splendor; but the subtext, I hypothesize, concerns the “everyday realities” of having visionary experiences. My claim is limited to the first section of the book, which includes John’s prophetic commission (Rev 1:9-20), the seven letters to the churches (2:1-3:24), John’s vision of the heavenly throne (4:1-5:14), and the opening of the seven seals (6:1-8:1). The renewal of John’s commission as a prophet in 10:1 signals the presence in the subtext of a second major doctrinal concern, whose discussion will not be attempted in this essay. It is my claim that the first section of the book,

Rev 1:9-8:1, allegorizes seven stages of spiritual development. In John's system of spiritual exercises, the individual begins by becoming a seer or visionary and ends by becoming what Jews of John's era termed a *hasid*, "saint." The transference into heaven that Philo allegorized as repentance, John allegorized as a process not only of behavioral reform, but also of personality change. Where Paul's repentance on the road to Damascus had come through a rapture, a sudden, unanticipated gift of grace, John systematically cultivated repentance in others through the skillful direction of their visionary experiences. The "everyday realities" that he allegorized consisted of a guided imagery therapy of decidedly transpersonal character.

Integral to John's narrative is a technique of exegetical meditation. The procedure is well documented in the Christian monastic tradition from the fourth century onward (Carruthers, 1998) and goes back, I have elsewhere argued, to Jewish apocalyptic literature of the Second Temple era. The procedure is simple and easily learned. A meditator would choose a biblical passage, imagine a mental image that symbolized one or more ideas in the passage, and then relax mentally, in order to allow the image the opportunity to change spontaneously. If new imagery or other materials manifested, they were regarded as revelations. The inspired or revelatory materials had then to be interpreted in a manner that related them to the meditator's life, as guidance for conduct. John composed the opening chapters of Revelation as a manual for learning the meditative technique, by presenting verbal ideas in each of seven letters that he symbolized as pictorial (and sometimes also auditory) imagery in the corresponding seals (Merkur, forthcoming).

Revelation begins with an introduction that identifies the balance of the text as a letter to the seven churches in Asia. John next reports a spiritual experience. He heard a voice that told him to compose seven letters that were to be addressed to seven churches (Rev 1:11). He next experienced a vision that I will divide for purposes of discussion into four components. The first was a mental image of seven lampstands and "one like a son of man."

¹²Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven gold lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; ¹⁴his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; ¹⁶in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. (Rev 1:12-16)

John reacted to his mental imagery by succumbing to an experience of mystical death.

^{17a}When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. (Rev 1:17a)

The sequel to the mystical death was a vivifying assertion of divine unity.

^{17b}But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. (Rev 1:17b-18)

Because the son of man said "I died, and behold I am alive," when it was not the son of man but John who had immediately previously undergone mystical death and revival, the phrasing "laid his right hand upon me" possibly implied a mystical identification or union of the seer with the son of man. The fourth and final phase of the visionary experience was a prophet's commission:

¹⁹Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter. (Rev 1:19)

Visions that included a mystical death and revival were typical of apocalyptic seers (Merkur, 1989b); and in the middle ages, Christian meditators imaged the narrative of Jesus' passion and resurrection in order to induce mystical deaths and revivals (Merkur, 2007). "Mystical death" names a discrete variety of mystical experience that students of comparative religion also term "ecstatic" and "initiatory death" (Corbin, 1954, pp. 156-57; 1971, p. 79; Eliade, 1958; Scholem, 1965, p. 15; Merkur, 1992, pp. 181-96; 1999, pp. 87-93; 2007, pp. 47-67, 84-88). Mystical death closely resembles a panic attack in consisting of the urgent conviction of immediately impending death. The ideation is often accompanied by intense fear and vivid visual imaginations of dying. Unlike panic attacks, mystical deaths tend to resolve spontaneously through the realization that the experience of dying is an imagination; and repeated experience of mystical death can lead to equanimity at their onset. Mystical deaths may be followed immediately by mystical unions, possibly indicating that the panic states are products of resistance to unitive ideas that are pressing for admission to consciousness (Merkur, 1999, pp. 87-93).

The Heavenly Itinerary

In narrating his inaugural experience, John was offering his *bona fides* as a prophet. He was also offering his own real or fictionalized experience as an example for his readers' emulation. The texts of the seven letters followed next. Each letter is different, and there are no manifest connections among them. They are presented simply as a collection of unrelated letters that an angel happened to reveal to John (Rev 2:1-3:21). At the same time, a cumulative process of progress or development from meditation to meditation is demonstrable on the basis of the sentences in each letter that discuss the rewards of "him who conquers." When these sentences are read together as a group, they prove to outline an apocalyptic seer's itinerary during an ascension to heaven.

The first letter states: "To him who conquers, I will give permission to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Rev 2:7b). The motif of eating the tree of life in paradise is traditionally treated as a euphemism for enjoying immortality post-mortem in the heavenly abode of the dead. John intended both that this mythological reading be possible and that his phrasing simultaneously support a literal reading that pertained to visionary experiences. The term *pardes*, "orchard," was a Persian loanword that denoted a walled enclosure that contained a botanical garden and hunting park that surrounded the royal residence and its auxiliary palace buildings. The custom of surrounding royal palaces with exotic gardens began with the Assyrians in the ninth century BCE, but was taken over by the Medes and Persians, becoming particularly prominent in the Achaemenid period of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. The Hebrew term occurs in Song 4:13, Eccl 2:5, and Neh 2:8, in reference to royal or other residential gardens (Subtelny, 2004, pp. 16-21). In rabbinical usage (BT, Hagigah, 14a), as also in Paul (1 Cor 12:4), entering *pardes*, the "orchard," alluded to the Garden of Eden, which was imagined to surround God's heavenly *bekhal*, "temple" or "palace." Entering the orchard referred to the achievement of a vision of passing through the heavenly garden in the courtyard of the heavenly temple of God, en route to an audience in the inner throne room.

The second letter asserts, "He who conquers shall not be harmed by the second death" (Rev 2:11b). The concept of a death that is not harmful has already been encountered in the narrative of John's inaugural vision, which included an experience of a mystical death and revival (Rev 1:12-18). Where the first letter and seal discussed success at attaining a vision of heaven, the second letter and seal addressed the possibility of an adverse reaction to visionary experience. The promise not to be harmed compares with the talmudic versions of the tale of "The Four Who Entered Paradise," which has one seer die, another go mad, a third become heretical, and the fourth, the unique rabbi in the group, emerge unscathed (JT, Hagigah 77b; BT, Hagigah 14a) (Murray-Jones, 1993, p. 195).

With the third letter, we are clearly in the temple's inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies: "To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it" (2:17b). Moses had commanded that an omer of manna be kept in the ark perpetually (Ex 16:32-34). Jewish legend maintained that when Solomon's temple was destroyed, the ark was preserved, variously on earth or in heaven. The *Second Apocalypse of Baruch* 29:8, which dates to the late first century CE, relates that the treasury of manna would descend from heaven in the days of the messiah; and rabbinical tradition maintained that the third heaven contains mills that grind manna for the righteous (BT, Hagigah 12b; see also Tanchuma, Piquidi, 6; Bereshit Rabba 19; Bammidbar Rabbah 13) (Charles, 1920, p.65). Where, in the first letter, the conqueror enters *pardes*, the orchard in the courtyard of the heavenly temple, here, in the third letter, the conqueror has made his way through the heavenly temple into the holy of holies, where he is given manna from the heavenly ark whose mercy seat serves as the throne of God (on the psychedelic nature of manna, see Merkur, 2000).

The motif of the white stone or, perhaps, white gem (Aune, 1997, pp. 189-90) "was, doubtless, a *tessera*....a little cube or rectangular block of stone, ivory, or other substance, with words or symbols engraved on one or more faces" (Ramsay, 1994, p. 221). The award of a white stone may have signified the seer's completion of his ascension to heaven. Among their other ancient functions, they were "given to the victor at games, and to gladiators who had won the admiration of the public and had been allowed to retire from further combat" (Mounce, 1977, p. 100). The new name possibly alluded to biblical texts where renaming took place during a visionary experience, such as the occasion when "the Lord appeared to Abram" (Gen 17:1) and renamed him Abraham (17:5), and the event when Jacob received the name Israel (Gen 32:28) and "called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face'" (32:30).

The discussion of conquest in the fourth letter supports alternative readings: "He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from my Father; and I will give him the morning star" (Rev 2:26-28). The manifest contents of the verses promise the acquisition of supernatural powers, but the literary allusions suggest the presence of irony. The reference to the morning star, that is, to the planet we call Venus, alludes to a poem in Isa 14, where Isaiah satirized a recently deceased king of Babylon who had aspired to ascend to heaven (Aune, 1997, pp. 212-13). The king is termed the morning star in Isa 14:12. The passage is the unique account of an ascension to heaven in the Hebrew Bible, which it portrays as an impious attempt to usurp God's power.

How you are fallen from heaven,
 O Day Star, son of Dawn!
 How you are cut down to the ground,
 you who laid the nations low!
 You said in your heart,
 "I will ascend to heaven;
 I will raise my throne
 above the stars of God;
 I will sit on the mount of assembly
 on the heights of Zaphon
 I will ascend to the tops of the clouds,
 I will make myself like the Most High."
 But you are brought down to Sheol,
 to the depths of the Pit." (Isa 14:12-15)

Revelation's intention to allude to the impious ascension of Isa 14 is corroborated by the rod of iron and pots that are broken into pieces in Rev 2:27. These motifs both allude to and contrast with another verse within the same poem in Isa 14: "The Lord has broken the staff of the wicked,/ the scepter of rulers" (Isa 14:5). The sense in which a conquering seer could be given the morning star, as though it were a good thing, is intimated by the only other reference to the morning star in Revelation: "I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star" (Rev 22:16). Whether it was Jesus or David who was here designated the morning star, the motif had a positive valence, as it did not in Isa 14. The enigmatic allusions to the ascension in Isa 14 become coherent if we treat the embassy of the angel, "I Jesus have sent my angel to you" (Rev 22:16), as an allusion to the biblical text, "He will command his angels concerning you" (Ps 91:11) that Matthew and Luke cited in their account of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness (Mt 4:6; Lk 4:10). John presumably understood that when "the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple" (Mt 4:5; compare Lk 4:9), the narrative did not concern a physical action, but instead portrayed the content of a visionary experience in which Jesus saw himself in the heavenly temple. The positive and negative valences of the morning star have their explanation in the gospel narrative.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Begone, Satan! for it is written,
'You shall worship the Lord your God
and him only shall you serve.'"

Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him. (Mt 4:8-11; compare Lk 4:5-8)

From Revelation's allusions to other biblical texts, we learn that a successful ascension to heaven was no guarantee of virtue. A seer might seek magical powers with which to do evil; or he might instead remain devoted to God. The fourth stage in John's itinerary required a seer to make the moral and theological decision that Jesus had made on the occasion of his temptation.

Continued location in the Holy of Holies is indicated in fifth letter through its reference to priestly vestments: "He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels" (Rev 3:5). Himmelfarb explained:

The high priest dresses daily in four elaborate garments of wool and linen adorned with gold and gems. But there is an exception to this general rule: the one set of plain linen (*bad*) garments that the high priest wears once a year to enter the holy of holies ([Ex 28:4]; Lev. 16:4).

The linen of these plain linen garments is plain indeed. The linen used for the garments of the ordinary priests and the undergarments of the high priests is fine linen (*ses*) (Ex. 39:27-28). Only the breeches of the ordinary priests (Ex. 28:42) and the garments they wear when removing the ashes from the altar (Lev. 6:3) are to be of plain linen (*bad*). (Himmelfarb, 1993, p. 18)

When the conqueror in Revelation is clad in white garments, he becomes a priest in the heavenly temple. Because angels served as priests in the heavenly temple, the heavenly rite of investiture as a heavenly priest was simultaneously a rite of transformation into an angel. According to Revelation, the transformation coincided with the immortality of the conqueror's name and its announcement to God and the angels.

Paul had discussed transformation into an angel through the acquisition of an imperishable body (1 Cor 15:32-34) and had termed the process “glorification” (Rom 8:30). It followed being called and justified, and it was the final achievement in Paul’s scheme of spiritual progress. John was additionally concerned with further spiritual progress beyond the glorification at which Paul aimed. The sixth letter announces the visionary’s permanent residence in the heavenly temple: “He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name” (3:12). The writing of the name of God, the name of Jerusalem, and the new name of the Lamb possibly alluded to an ancient ritual that Jeremiah mentioned in connection with his first experience of prophecy.

Your words were found,
and I ate them.
Your word became for me a joy,
and the delight of my heart;
and I was called by your name:
“Yahweh, God of hosts.” (Jer 15:16)

At the time of his induction as a prophet, Jeremiah was apparently called by the name of God; a conquering seer in Revelation, who achieved the stage past glorification, was to receive the names of Jerusalem and the Lamb, as well as the name of God.

Because Jeremiah saw a rod of almond at the time of his prophetic call (Jer 1:11), we know that he was initiated in the Holy of Holies before the ark of the testimony (Num 17:10-11), because it was there that the ancient relic, said to be the almond rod of Aaron, was kept (Num 17:8). On the occasion of Jeremiah’s ritual initiation, either the angels who surrounded the heavenly throne or, perhaps more likely, the cultic prophet(s) who administered the rite called Jeremiah Yahweh as part of his initiation (Merkur, 1985). The story of Moses’ vision of the divine glory stood precedent for the initiatory procedure: “And He said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name “Yahweh.”’” (Ex 33:19a).

A related ritual was performed when Solomon was made king. Immediately after his anointment, “Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king” (1 Chron 29:23), a phrasing that implies that he sat on the mercy seat atop the ark within the holy of holies as a ritual of royal initiation. John described a variant of the royal ritual in his seventh letter, “He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.” (3:21).

In all, the sentences about the conqueror in the seven letters to the churches refer explicitly, although in an extremely abbreviated manner, to seven progressive phases of a seer’s ascension to heaven. Both traditional and modern critical readings are mistaken that assume that we are dealing with a literary device of seven unrelated letters. The sequence of the “conqueror” statements establishes that the letters form a sequential series. At the manifest level, the seer first enters paradise, in the courtyard of the heavenly temple. Next he must risk a mystical death in the sanctuary. When he arrives at the Holy of Holies, he is given both manna and a new name. At this juncture, he must withstand the temptation to wield despotic powers. If he does so, he joins the priesthood of the heavenly temple, gains immortality and becomes an angel. He next becomes a permanent resident of the heavenly temple and is called by the names of God, New Jerusalem, and Jesus. Lastly, he sits with Jesus on his heavenly throne.

Reacting against mythological apocalypticism, John had indicated that transformation into an angel--Paul’s “glorification”--was not, in his view, the ultimate attainment for a heaven-bound seer. At minimum, there were also the further matters of acquiring the names of God,

New Jerusalem, and Jesus, and becoming enthroned. These indications in the manifest content of the letters that more was to be accomplished spiritually than Paul had taught, presumably raised questions in readers' minds, both in antiquity and today, and so intimated that still more remained to be discussed.

John's Vision of the Heavenly Throne

Immediately following the texts of the seven letters, Rev 4:1-11 narrates the content of a second visionary experience. John finds himself in heaven, where he sees a throne that is surrounded by twenty-four thrones for twenty-four elders who are dressed in white and wear golden crowns. Four living creatures are "round the throne, on each side of the throne," apparently being carved into the throne (Hall, 1990, pp. 610-11). The four living creatures sing the *kedushah* prayer day and night. As they give glory and honor and thanks to "him who is seated on the throne," the elders fall down and worship.

The motif of the twenty-four elders in heaven was original to Revelation (Charles, 1920, p. 128) and drew on a conflation of literary sources (Aune, 1997, pp. 287-292). It compares most closely to the Q saying (Mt 19:28; Lk 22:30) that the twelve apostles will sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. It also compares with Ex 24:9-10, where Moses, Aaron, and seventy-two elders ascend Mount Sinai, where they envision God. Another text, Isa 24:23, anticipated a similar event in the future: "For the Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his elders he will manifest his glory." The elders' white robes indicates their priestly status; and their number, twenty-four, possibly alluded to the twenty-four divisions of priests at the Jerusalem temple.

These sources of the motif's inspiration should not be confused with its meaning in its literary context. No sooner has John finished the letters that outline a seer's itinerary of ascent to heaven, than he himself accomplishes one. In heaven, he finds one seated on a throne, which is surrounded and supported by four living creatures. He also finds elders who wear golden crowns, presumably the "crown of life" (Rev 2:10) that the second letter promised. They are in the Holy of Holies, as the third letter promised. They also wear white garments, as the fifth letter promised, and they sit on thrones, as the seventh letter promised. From these several correspondences we may infer that the elders are seers who happened to ascend to heaven in advance of John. They are not apostles, tribal elders, nor leaders of priestly divisions; their distinction is that they have conquered all seven stages.

John's vision next departed from the standard itinerary that he had outlined in the letters. He who is seated on the throne holds a scroll, written inside and out, that is sealed with seven seals. An angel asks who is worthy to open it. John then mourns.

And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I wept much that no one was found worthy to open the scroll or look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, "Weep not; lo, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." (Rev 5:2-5)

These verses reflect the interplay between meditative technique and its revelatory response. John cannot open the scroll in the sense that he cannot produce revelations. Only a heavenly being can open the scroll. Like mental imaging, however, weeping was a means by which seers prepared for revelation (Merkur, 1989b). The mixing of metaphors in the passage illustrated a further aspect of meditative technique. John hears a voice announce the Lion of Judah (Rev 5:5), but what he sees is a Lamb (5:6, 8) (Barr, 1984, p. 41). The Lamb proceeds to open the seals (6:1), a physical achievement with hooves rather than fingers that is difficult to picture in a mental image (Aune, 1998, p. 392). These quixotic, dreamlike features of the

narrative alert the reader to its symbolic character. They make impossible the seeing-is-believing attitude of the mythological apocalypses and remind us of the intrapsychic nature of John's vision. Like Pharaoh's dreams of seven cattle and seven sheaves of grain (Gen 41:1-7), the Lion and the Lamb were mental images that were equivalent or interchangeable for John's purposes. John constructed the mental image of the Lamb in the hope that it would function as a vehicle of revelation within a vision. He could as easily have meditated on another image such as a Lion.

Following these prefatory indications about the symbolic nature of visions, John proceeded to the details of each of the seven seals.

The Allegorical Reading

The transformation of a seer's mental image of himself as a man into a mental image of himself as an angel, crowned, robed, and enthroned, might satisfy a seer for whom visionary events were objectively valid or real. Corbin (1954, 1972) introduced the term "imaginal" to describe the paradoxical regard for visions as both intrapsychic and objectively real. For John, however, visions were not imaginal but imaginative. He demonstrated through the motifs of the Lion and the Lamb that he knew images to be symbolic. In this way, he indicated that he rejected angelification as a fiction or, at best, interpreted it as the symbol of a different kind of transformation that he did not consider imaginary.

What then did he make of transformation? It is my thesis that the seven letters and seven seals of Revelation allegorize the type of spiritual progress that we today term psychotherapeutic change. As a teaching addressed to seers who were symbolists, but neither to non-visionaries nor to seers who were mythologists, John's doctrine was presumably esoteric, secret, or sealed. In each of the letters, John remarked: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

The First Letter and Seal (Rev 2:1-7; Rev 6:1-2). The first letter states "To him who conquers, I will give permission to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Rev 2:7b). The image on the first seal consists of a rider who "went conquering and to conquer" (6:2). In this way, the image on the first seal allegorized an idea in the first letter, transforming a topic of abstract verbal conceptualization--"conquest"--into a mental image that could be used in meditation in order to cultivate a vision.

Scholars debate whether the rider on the white horse is to be understood as a heroic figure, perhaps an image of Jesus as conqueror, or is instead to be interpreted in a negative manner parallel with the riders that are portrayed on the second, third, and fourth seals. The rider is then identified as a personification of war. Aune (1998) noted that the motif is equivocal: "It is possible to interpret the figure of the cavalier in either a positive or a negative manner" (p. 393). I would like to suggest that the ambiguity was deliberate. Interpreted allegorically, the rider on the white horse is whomever achieves a paradisaic experience. How that person would respond to temptation was not yet under consideration.

The first letter and seal together refer to the successful attainment of the type of visionary experience that could be cultivated by allegorizing religious ideas as mental images. Conquering, in the context of the first letter and seal, meant succeeding at having visions. Where the first letter specified concern with visions of the courtyard of the heavenly temple, the first letter and first seal, taken together, address visions as such. A seer's vision of himself as an angel, crowned, robed, and enthroned, was still only the first step in John's spiritual progress.

The Second Letter and Seal (Rev 2:8-11; 6:3-4). Both the second letter and the second seal speak of death. The letter mentions "the first and the last, who was dead and came to life" (Rev 2:8) and demands that the reader "be faithful until death" (2:10) in order to avoid being "harmful by the second death" (2:11). The second seal portrays a rider who takes "peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another" (6:4). The shared concern with death may be treated as the topic of the second meditation.

The references are traditionally read mythologically in terms of Jesus' literal death and literal resurrection and a "second death" that killed the post-mortem soul that was enjoying an afterlife in heaven. Targumic literature of the era entertained the related concept of "a second death, by which (death) the wicked die in the world to come" (Aune, 1997, p. 168). The idea of being "faithful until death" has traditionally been understood as a reference to Christian martyrdom. The letter's references to a prison, a test, and ten days of tribulation are then interpreted as allusions to the process of being arrested and imprisoned prior to execution. Because human executioners are inferred, the text's reference to the devil is ignored; and a crown, "a wreath presumably made of some kind of leaves" is thought to be awarded posthumously, "even though such wreaths were never awarded posthumously either to victorious athletes or for military achievements" (Aune, 1997, p. 167).

But was John concerned with martyrdom? The term is never used in Revelation. Neither is the action portrayed. In the fourth letter, "he who conquers" is promised worldly political power: "I will give him power over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron" (2:26b-27a). And the sixth letter promises: "He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it" (Rev 3:12). The metaphor of the pillar alludes to the call of Jeremiah: "And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you" (Jer 1:18-19). A second allusion in the sixth letter corroborates the first. The motif of permanent residence in the temple alludes to Ps 23:6, "and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." By alluding to Ps 23:6, the motif of permanent residence also alludes indirectly to the biblical text two verses earlier, "Even though I shall walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me" (Ps 23:4). Both Jer 1:18-19 and Ps 23:4-6 pertained to being "faithful until death," but in both cases in the context of enjoying providential protection from death, not in the context of martyrdom. If we treat seriously Revelation's literary allusions, we must conclude that John was concerned not with martyrdom, but with deliverance. This reading is consistent with Philo's allegorical use of the motif of a victory wreath. According to Philo, God crowns the person who strives after virtue (*Leg. All.* 1.80), a concern of the living, and not of souls post-mortem.

Being "faithful until death" (Rev 2:10) referred, I suggest, to a willingness to endure an experience of mystical death. Like Paul, who asserted "I have been crucified with Christ" (Gal 2:19), John advocated the hazarding and endurance of mystical death. John expressed his purpose when he described being "faithful until death" as a prison, test, and tribulation for which the devil was responsible (Rev 2:11). The devil's role in its production was to be allegorized. Rabbinic thinking maintained that "Satan, the evil inclination, and the angel of death are one and the same" (BT, Baba Batra, 16a); and a mystical death occurred when a visionary experience was complicated, mythologically by Satan, the angel of death, but allegorically by "the evil inclination," which is to say, by the will to commit sin. Understood in this way as symbolic evidence of sin—in modern terms, as a manifestation of unconscious guilt—an experience of mystical death could be invaluable for the purpose of coming to know oneself as a sinner. John's reference to specifically *ten* days of tribulation presumably alluded to the ten commandments, the standard by which evil was defined as evil.

The Third Letter and Seal (Rev 2:12-17; 6:5-6). The points of correspondence between the third letter and the third seal involve contrast. The letter mentions both "food sacrificed to idols" (2:14) and being given "some of the hidden manna" (2:17), while the seal announces the prices of grain during a famine, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius" (6:6). John further signalled that he intended a deliberately inexact correspondence among the foodstuffs through the motifs of the third seal, where the visual image of scales to *weigh* food is paired with an auditory reference to the cost of grain by *volume* (Aune, 1998, p. 396).

Discrepant doctrinal ideas were similarly juxtaposed. In 1 Cor 8, Paul permitted eating food sacrificed to idols, on the grounds that idols have no real existence; although he allowed that some individuals might be led into sin through the practice. In 1 Cor 10:23-11:1, Paul again permitted eating food sacrificed to idols; he expressed concern only that on-lookers might thereby be led into sin. John's criticism in the third letter of the false prophet Balaam and Balak, his protégé, may have been aimed against followers of Peter and Paul who ate food sacrificed to idols (Himmelfarb, 1997, p. 90). Corroboration that Paul was being addressed is furnished by the use of Paul's phrase "stumbling block" (Rom 9:32-33) in the third letter's criticism of Balak for "put[ting] a stumbling block before the sons of Israel" (Rev 2:14). Turning Paul's phrase against Paul was intentionally ironic. Rev 12:17 and 14:12 are expressly supportive of "those who keep the commandments of God" (Marshall, 2001, p. 16), implicitly including the dietary laws of *kashrut*;

At the same time, the image of a rider on a black horse who holds a pair of scales presumably alluded to the Pharisaic teaching, "Judge all men on a scale of merit" (Mishnah, Aboth 1:6), that Jesus had directly controverted, saying, "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Mt 7:1; compare Lk 6:37). Jesus had endorsed Mosaic law (Mt 5:17-20; Lk 16:17) while criticizing judgmentalism, among other objectionable rabbinic practices.

The Fourth Letter and Seal (Rev 2:18-29; 6:7-8). The fourth letter affirms the process of divine retribution: "those who commit adultery...I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent...I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve" (Rev 2:22-23). John's psychological orientation warrants emphasis. He does not have the Lamb claim to know sinners' public and secret deeds. He described the Lamb claiming, "I am he who searches mind and heart." Implicitly, when "each of you [receive] what your works deserve," retribution is made to mind and heart. John's concept of divine retribution, which is exemplified by the case of adulterers who undergo tribulation unless they repent, was consistent, I suggest, with a teaching attributed to the second century rabbi, Shimon ben Azzai: "The payment for a commandment is the commandment, and the payment for a transgression is the transgression" (Mishnah, Aboth 4:2). The concept here was naturalistic. An action is termed good because it is beneficial, or evil because it is harmful. Adultery is not evil because it is prohibited by God. Rather, it is prohibited by God because it is evil, as is proved by the mental conflicts and social difficulties that adulterers suffer for their actions. Long before Freud conceptualized the process of unconscious self-punishment, its empirical evidence was comprehensible as retribution.

The letter's description of "this teaching" as "what some call the deep things of Satan" (2:24) bridged the logical gap to the fourth seal. As an abstract concept concerning the relation between an action and its consequence, retribution could not be converted directly into a mental image. The letter's reference to "the deep things of Satan," introduced the idea of Satan as a topic that could be pictured in a mental image. The seal instead pictured a rider on a pale horse whose "name was Death, and Hades followed him; they were given authority" (6:8). John's juxtaposition of retribution, Satan, and Death was inconsistent with the mythological tradition that imagined Satan and his demons in rebellion against God. It agreed instead with the biblical book of Job and rabbinic teaching, which regarded Satan as a loyal angel who furthers God's purposes by acting on God's behalf. John's association of Satan and Death was possibly a first century instance of the teaching later recorded in the Talmud, "Satan, the evil inclination, and the angel of death are one and the same" (BT, Baba Batra, 16a).

The transformative process that commenced with a mystical death (second letter and seal), and continued through the abandonment of judgmentalism (third letter and seal), in order to arrive at a naturalist theology of ethics (fourth letter and seal) can be seen as a doctrinal unpacking, a meditative working through, of mystical death experience. It can also be seen in its historical context as a socially recognized achievement in spirituality. A seer who had progressed to the fourth seal and attained a naturalistic understanding of divine retribution appreciated the "attribute of justice" (*middat ha-din*) that the rabbinic Sages

ascribed to God and associated with the divine name *'Elohim*. A seer now exemplified the personality type that the Sages termed a *tsaddik*, “righteous one” or “just one.” The designation of James the Just translated the term *tsaddik* and had a technical significance in Judaism of the era. Paul listed justification (Rom 8:30) as the second of three stages of spiritual progress, after being called and before being glorified. Revelation similarly located righteousness in an intermediate position, as the fourth of its seven stages.

The resistance of temptation that was paradigmatic of a *tsaddik* was exemplified by the concern of the “conqueror” passage in the fourth letter, with its allusion to the tale of Jesus’ temptation to exercise Satanic powers. Rabbinical tradition expected most religious people to have a lifelong experience of inner conflict. Sin is ordinarily tempting, and the temptation is ordinarily to be resisted. The conflict arose from humanity’s natural endowment. The twin inclinations, the *yetzer ha-tov* and *yetzer ha-ra*, the “will to good” and “will to evil,” were forever at war in the human heart. Through self-mastery, the rabbis held, it was nevertheless possible for any Jew to attain righteousness. It was necessary only to make oneself fulfill all of the observances of Judaism. Scholem (1991) explained:

The righteous person, who seeks to meet the demands of the Torah, is caught in a never-ending struggle with his Evil Urge, which rebels against these demands; he must constantly wage battle with his own nature. But even this struggle between the Good Urge and the Evil Urge, in which he emerges as the “hero who conquers his own drive,” never goes beyond the demands placed upon every human being. (p. 91)

The Fifth Letter and Seal (Rev 3:1-6; 6:9-11). The fifth letter complains: “I have not found your works perfect.” In advocating the perfection of one’s works, it encourages progress beyond the achievement of justification or righteousness that the Sages considered “good enough” for a *tsaddik*. The fifth letter ends with the promise that those who “are worthy” will “walk with me in white” garments (Rev 3:4). This image recurs on the fifth seal. On the seal, “the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God” (6:9) are given white robes (6:11). Unlike mythological apocalyptists such as Paul and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, who placed transformation into an angel-glorification--as their climactic achievement, John privileged allegorical apocalypticism and a different concept of transformation. His fifth stage did not concern mental images wearing angelic garments, which a seer might have achieved at the first of John’s seven stages. Rather, John’s fifth stage of transformation was concerned with walking with the Lamb, which was angelic in a different and metaphorical sense.

The traditional mythological reading of Revelation understands martyrs in heaven post-mortem (Charles, 1920, pp. 173-74) as the souls “under the altar... who had been slain for the word of God” (Rev 6:9). Read allegorically in terms of spiritual experiences, however, the motif of the soul’s sacrifice pertained to the loss of the sense of self that occurs during nondualistic types of mystical union (on mystical union, see Merkur 1989a, 1999). Writing a generation prior to John, Philo discussed this trope in commentary on the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, which Leviticus 10:1-3 narrated as a punishment for sin, but Philo called a willing sacrificial offering.

Nadab and Abihu, too, who had drawn nigh to God and had forsaken the mortal life and become partakers of the life immortal are beheld naked of vain and mortal glory. For those who carried them away would not have borne them in their coats (Lev. x. 5), had they not become naked by bursting every bond of passion and of bodily constraint, in order that their nakedness and freedom from the body should not be debased by the irruption of impious thoughts. For not to all must leave be given to contemplate the

secret things of God, but only to those who are able to hide and guard them. And so Mishael and Elzaphan do not take them up in their own coats, but in those of Nadab and Abihu, who had been devoured by fire and been taken up (into heaven). For having stripped themselves of all that covered them, they offered their nakedness to God, but their coats they left behind for Mishael and Elzaphan. Now coats are those parts of the irrational by which the rational was hidden. (*Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis*, II, 57-58; Philo, 1929, pp. 259-61)

It is thus that the priests Nadab and Abihu die in order that they may live, receiving an incorruptible life in exchange for mortal existence, and being translated from the created to the uncreate. Over them a proclamation is uttered betokening immortality, "They died before the Lord" (Lev. x. 2), that is "They came to life," for a corpse may not come into God's presence. And again, "This is that which the Lord hath said, 'I will be sanctified in them that draw nigh unto me.'" (Lev. x. 3), "But dead men," as we hear in the Psalms, "shall not praise the Lord" (Psalm cxiii. 25): for that is the work of living men. (*On Flight and Finding*; Philo, 1934, pp. 41-43)

The pagan Neoplatonist Porphyry, writing in the third century, similarly referred to the disappearance of the sense of self during mystical union as a sacrifice of the soul (Fowden, 1986, pp. 147-48). In John's model of a seer's development, then, the first stage was the acquisition of a capacity for visionary experience. The second through fourth stages concerned experiences of mystical death and meditations on their significance for the concepts of sin, judgmentalism, divine retribution, and self-restraint. The fifth stage commenced a discussion of mystical union. By aligning the fifth letter's concern with transformation into an immortal angel with the fifth seal's concern with mystical union, John implied that the mystical experience of apparent unity with God was correctly understood not as a deification or divinization, but as a vision equivalent to angelification. It was an experience of *unio mystica*, but it was to be interpreted in conformance with the prophetic tradition as an instance of *unio sympathetica* (on *unio sympathetica*, see Corbin, 1954; Heschel, 1962). Mystical union was a symbolic vision whose manifest content required allegorical interpretation before its spiritual meaning could be inferred correctly.

The Sixth Letter and Seal (Rev 3:7-13; 6:12-7:17). The sixth letter discusses "the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth" (Rev 3:10). The letter divides the community into two groups: "those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie" (3:9); and those of "patient endurance" who will be kept "from the hour of trial" (3:10). Reference is then made to the conqueror, who will permanently reside in the temple and have the names of God, New Jerusalem, and Jesus written on him (3:12). The sixth seal complements these several ideas by portraying "the great day of...wrath" (6:17) in its opening portion (6:12-7:1) and the protection of the earth, sea, trees, and 144,000 servants of God (7:2-17) in the seal's further contents.

Traditional interpretations regard both the sixth letter and the sixth seal as predictions of fabulous events that will occur in the end-times; but if we are to attempt a reading of John's allegory, we must assume that the text pertains to spiritual experiences during the course of mortal life. The biblical prophet Jeremiah reported a vision to which John's imagery alluded.

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.
I looked, and lo, there was no man,
and all the birds of the air had fled.

I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
 and all its cities were laid in ruins
 before Yahweh,
 before his fierce anger.
 For thus says the Lord,
 "The whole land shall be a desolation;
 yet I will not make a full end.
 For this the earth shall mourn,
 and the heavens above be black;
 for I have spoken, I have purposed;
 I have not relented nor will I turn back." (Jer 4:23-28)

The imagery of the sixth seal began with variants of Jeremiah's images, before moving beyond them. John wrote: "Behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale" (Rev 6:12b-13). In Jeremiah's prophetic experience, the vision of a devastating earthquake was followed by verbal inspirations that interpreted the vision allegorically, using still further imagery as metaphors that concerned the ruination of the kingdom of Judah. By alluding to Jeremiah's text, John indicated that his own language was not to be treated at face value as eschatological mythology but was similarly to be interpreted in the prophetic fashion as a symbolic vision.

After alluding to Jeremiah's vision, John's account of the sixth seal continued with original imagery: "The sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place" (Rev 6:14). To account for these motifs, I would note that in one variety of mystical experience, everything perceptible and imaginable vanishes when consciousness is absorbed in oneness (Paper, 2004). *Ex hypothesi* mystical union is "the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth" (3:10). For some, it is "the great day of...wrath"; but those are protected who are sealed with the name of God.

What was at stake experientially? The letter advised seers to "hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown" (3:11). This assertion of individuality, of personal identity and personal possession, was also reflected in the hymn within the sixth seal: "Therefore are they before the throne of God/ and serve him day and night within his temple" (Rev 7:15). Experiences of oneness with God did not entail deification. A seer who experienced mystical union remained before the throne, serving God. Similarly, being written with the name of God symbolized mystical union by constituting a ritual union not with God but with God's name. The doctrinal rejection of nondualism applied not only to the seer, but also to God's presence. The statement, "and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence" (7:15), distinguished the one who sits upon the throne, shaping visions, from his presence, which is part of a vision's content. The one is the source of grace, the other is its effect. In rabbinical thinking, the presence (*shekbinah*) that can be experienced in a specific location differs from God, who is both omnipresent and ineffable. Like the name of God that functioned as a protective seal, the presence (*shekbinah*) that can be experienced differs from God; and any seer who could distinguish God from his name or presence would additionally be able to avoid narcissistic inflation and maintain his personal identity following mystical union.

John's distinction between God and his presence also informed his phrasing of "him who is seated on the throne and...the Lamb" (6:16). The identification of the Lamb with the presence accounts for the delicate phrasing, "For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd" (7:17). As the presence, the Lamb is in the midst of the throne without being the one who sits on it. A mental image within a visionary experience, John's Lamb was not in any sense divine. It had a function equivalent to the angel named Yahweh in the Hebrew

Bible (Gundry, 1994, p. 676). It conveyed divine revelations while representing the ineffable Teacher in vivid, anthropomorphic imagery within visions.

The Seventh Letter and Seal (Rev 3:14-21; 8:1). The seventh letter demands repentance. "I know your works....For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked....Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; so be zealous and repent" (Rev 3:15, 17, 19). These ideas allude to the book of Job, which has a seer insist on the standard of a *tsaddik*, suffer financial, familial, and physical calamities, and repeatedly experience nightmarish dreams and visions until, in a transformative vision of God in the whirlwind, he renounces the *tsaddik's* standard of measured recompense and embraces the concept of altruism. Job then begins to function as a prophet, interceding with God on behalf of his companions (Merkur, 2004).

This move beyond justice to altruism, exemplified in Job and endorsed by John, constituted the final stage of John's system of spiritual development. In rabbinical terms, the seer had apprehended and fully internalized the divine attribute of mercy (*middat ha-rahamim*) that is exemplified in the divine name *YHWH*. The seer thereby became a *hasid*, a "pious one" or "saint." The term derives from the noun *hesed*, which means mercy, lovingkindness, loyalty, fidelity, grace or charm, in different contexts in the Hebrew Bible (Jacobs, 1957, p. 143). It means piety in the original sense of Latin *pietas*, "dutiful love....the moral relation lying between two parties that is entailed in, but lies beyond, the concrete legal requirements, as in the relations between parent and child...man and wife, host and guest or client" (Montgomery, 1939, p. 98). Through translation, *hesed* acquired the further meanings of charity, grace, and sanctity. In rabbinical usage, the term did not have the connotations of consecration or dedication to a special vocation or spiritual style of life, that is implied in its Latin translation as *sanctus*. The *hasid* is better understood as a character type, in the typological sense of Theophrastus' *Characters* (1973). *Hesed* was "a kind of spontaneous...goodwill in a man's character which makes him delight in giving freely and joyfully to others" (Jacobs, 1957, p. 144); and a *hasid* was a person of benevolence, generosity, graciousness, charm, altruism, and goodness. Where a *tsaddik* aspired to acquit himself of his religious obligations, a *hasid* effortlessly exceeded the obligatory and tended to the optimal. Scholem (1991) explained:

The *Hasid*...the pious man is the extraordinary type....the *Hasid* carries out not only what is demanded of him, that which is good and just in the eyes of the Law, but goes beyond the letter of the Law....He demands nothing of his fellow, and everything of himself. Even when carrying out a prescription of the Law, he acts with such radical exuberance and punctiliousness that an entire world is revealed to him in the fulfillment of a commandment. (p. 90).

Where Job portrayed the spontaneous arrival of a seer at *hesed*, Revelation offered a program for the deliberate, systematic cultivation of the optimal character type. Because the concept of a spiritually advanced personality could not be represented directly in the form of a mental image, the seventh seal approached the topic indirectly. As an abstract concept, repentance was unsuitable for representation by a mental image that could be used in meditation. The seal consequently bore an image of the aftermath of repentance. The half hour's silence of the perpetual choir in heaven upon the opening of the seventh seal (Rev 8:1) occurs immediately prior to an offering of incense (8:3-5) and likely derived its imagery from the silence that was maintained in the Jerusalem temple when incense was offered (Mishnah, *Tamid* 5:1-6; *Testament of Adam* 1.12) (Aune, 1998, p. 508). The motif simultaneously had mystical connotations. Silence was yet a further allusion to the disappearance of plurality during an experience of mystical oneness. At the same time, the term "silence" alluded to the prophetic theology of the "still small voice" (1 Kgs 18:11-12) whose revelation to Elijah on Mount Horeb rejected visionary imagery by affirming a negative theology. The term also

alluded to Ps 65:2, “to You silence is praise,” which the Qumran *Songs of Sabbath Sacrifice* had interpreted as the worship distinctive of the highest angels in heaven (Alexander, 2006, pp. 22, 38, 41, 98 n. 3). Silence, then, was a symbol of worship at its most refined.

The connection between the seventh letter’s concern with the attainment of altruism and the seventh seal’s concern with a negative theological approach to mystical union is the impact of the latter on the personality. When the narcissistic vanity of deification or divinization is avoided, the identification with all existence that mystical union promotes can take behavioral form as generosity, mercy, altruism, and so forth. It can also take emotional form as empathy with all humanity, if not also with all living things. The attainment of a capacity for empathy is a component of the psychotherapeutic achievement that Winnicott (1963) termed “the capacity for concern” and I have discussed as a capacity for relationality (Merkur, 2007), in Martin Buber’s (1958) sense of encountering others as an I meeting a Thou. Perhaps no experience more than mystical union can overcome “stranger anxiety” (Spitz with Coblener, 1965), the fear of strangers that infants develop between five and nine months of age and that all of us retain ever afterward. Nothing inhibits empathy more than stranger anxiety; nothing counters stranger anxiety more than mystical union.

Summation

Because the claims of this article are many and complex, it will be useful to summarize the major points of my argument:

(1) The motif of transformation in Jewish apocalypticism originated in the Enochian literature in reference to visions in whose course seers saw themselves turned into angels. Philo interpreted the motif allegorically as a symbolism of repentance.

(2) Revelation announces itself as an allegorical text and should be so interpreted throughout.

(3) John is twice given prophetic commissions, implying that there are two basic messages in the text. This article addresses only the first.

(4) When the seven statements, one in each of the seven letters, that begins, “He who conquers...” are read in sequence, they portray an ascension to heaven. John himself ascends to heaven immediately afterwards (Rev 4-5). He there sees 24 elders whose crowns, robes, and thrones indicate that they are seers who have ascended to heaven before him.

(5) *Ex hypothesi* not only the manifest content of John’s prophetic commission, the “He who conquers” statements, and John’s ascension to heaven, concern spiritual experiences, but so too does John’s allegorical subtext.

(6) When the points of affinity between the seven letters and seven seals are employed as clues to the allegorical subtext, the text appears to be concerned with three varieties of spiritual experience and their correct understandings:

(a) Visions were to be considered mental images, whose manifest content was symbolic, and whose meaning was to be reached through allegorizing interpretation.

(b) Mystical deaths were to be accepted rather than avoided, interpreted as symbolic visions, attributed to uncorrected sins, and valued for their capacity to teach a true sense of justice.

(c) Mystical unions were not to be treated at face value as deification or divinization, but were instead to be interpreted symbolically and valued for their capacity to teach a true sense of empathy, altruism, and mercy.

The program of spiritual progress that John outlined had features that we may today recognize as psychotherapeutic. He conceptualized his program as prophetism, a way of seeking and interpreting spiritual experiences, that had the capacity to transform a seer firstly into a *tsaddik*, and eventually into a *hasid*. The early Jewish Christian movement must have had sufficient success promoting transformations for John to have been able to work out the details of his program. At the same time, he was not treating the general population. He was

working with rare individuals who self-selected to become Christian seers. We have no idea how effective his program was.

The therapeutic action of his program has interior coherence. He advocated a process of insight-oriented meditation. The insights that he sought were theological and prophetic rather than autobiographical. Religious insights that are attained through religious meditations may nevertheless have a genuinely therapeutic effect. Meditations that work with religious motifs are working with manifest materials that the unconscious appreciates as symbols, precisely as is the case in the play therapy of children (Merkur, 2005). When the unconscious generates religious insights in an “aha!” experience of religious understanding, it is simultaneously producing conflict-resolutions at an unconscious level of thought (Merkur, 1985). The solutions of the religious problems sublimate unconscious conflict-resolutions. The insights are manifestly religious, but unconsciously they are psychohygienic and, in some cases, psychotherapeutic. As Sterba (1968, p. 79) remarked, “every mystic experience of lasting effect is a...*tour-de-force* conflict solution.”

A conscious meditative process that works with sublimations at their level of sublimation can stimulate the unconscious to produce insights that accomplish the work of personality change. The therapeutic question is whether the meditations concern topics and accommodate attitudes that facilitate conflict reduction, or instead impede it. John was comfortable with all manner of visual imagery, but he opposed their mythological understanding. Visions were symbolic, and ascensions to heaven were to be allegorized no differently than any other images.

Among the varieties of spiritual experiences, John privileged visions, mystical deaths, and mystical union. He announced his concern with the three experiences in his account of his prophetic call (Rev 1:17-19), and he based his system of spiritual development on promoting the same three types of experiences in others. He addressed visions in the seven “conqueror” statements in the seven letters, and again in the vision that intervenes between the letters and the seals. Visionary experience was also the topic of the points of correspondence between the first letter and the first seal. Mystical death was the topic of the second through fourth pairings of letters with seals. The second pair concerned its experience, the third and fourth its interpretation. With the fifth letter and seal, John turned to address the experience of mystical union; and the points of correspondence between the sixth and seventh letters and seals offered interpretations of mystical union.

It would be fair to say that John was concerned to produce prophets, rather than apocalyptic seers. John’s way of working with mystical death experiences promoted awareness of unconscious guilt, and encouraged the identification and correction of one’s sins. It was, as it were, a forerunner of “defense analysis,” which alerts a person to the counter-productive nature of behavior that had previously been regarded as ego-syntonic. John’s way of working with mystical union experiences rejected the grandiosity, inflation, or vainglory that so frequently attends the experiences. By emphasizing the distinction between creation and its Maker, John used the idea of God to deflect the working through of mystical union from concern with the self, to concern with others. Not divinization, but altruism, mercy, benevolence, and empathy were the lessons that were to be learned from mystical union.

All in all, John’s spiritual exercises cultivated conscience. Visions of serving as an angelic priest in the heavenly temple encouraged a desire to be conscientious. Mystical death manifested unconscious guilt, giving conscience a greater measure of access to consciousness than it had previously had. Conscious resolve was now able to side with conscience against desire, which had previously been strong enough not only to resist conscience, but indeed to repress it. Mystical union permitted conscience maximal access to consciousness, in its world-embracing exuberance of love. Its powerful affirmation of the self had however to be contained within realistic bounds, but self-love or, more precisely, conscience’s approval of the self could then be deployed to strengthen conscious resolve in dealing with desire. Nurtured internally by self-esteem, a person could afford the generosity of *hasidut*. A

considerable integration of conscience with resolve--in psychoanalytic terms, of the positive superego with the ego--would have been achieved.

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