

‘To the Top of the World’: Ascending Mountains in Apocalyptic Literature

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Abstract

The prominent role of the mountain as the starting point of revelations in numerous apocalyptic narratives is intimately related to the idea of the 'cosmic mountain', a motif widely attested within all the cosmological and religious systems of the southeastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. However, the mountain motif also emerged from the wider background of supernatural descriptions and displayed an 'individual' character, acquiring a more distinctive role than many other motifs in apocalyptic literature. This paper focuses on its manifestations within the various apocalyptic texts, its relations to the 'cosmic mountain' motif, and its catalytic presence in every revelatory story-line. Also considered is the value of the mountain as a divine 'all-observing' *locus* and as a place of religious isolation for ascetics.

Keywords: mountain, apocalyptic, cosmology, Mediterranean, Middle East

During the past century, research has turned a keen eye on the study of the nature and character of the cosmic mountain motif, as part of the culture and literature of the people of the southeastern Mediterranean. Being regarded as the place where Earth and Heaven meet, the appropriate place of supernatural presence on earth, or the center of the world in most literatures and religions of this certain geographical region, this motif has been the subject of vigorous study and, particularly with regard to the Ugaritic, Canaanite, Egyptian, and Jewish literature. Apart from the work of Mircea Eliade, whose research demonstrated the common appearance and use of this motif among various religious backgrounds,¹ the effort to delineate the characteristics of the cosmic mountain reached its peak in the work of Richard Clifford; his dissertation, which is devoted to the intercultural influences between Canaan and Israel in respect to the cosmic mountain motif, became the basis of any future reference to this subject.² Contemporary research accepts the influence of Canaan on Jewish views of its sacred mountains, putting into question the central role of this motif

¹ See Eliade, M. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (trans. from French W. R. Trask, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1957), where he emphasized on the role of the cosmic mountain as the meeting point of Heaven and Earth (38, 53).

² See Clifford, R. J. *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* [HSM 4] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); before focusing on the main theme of his thesis, he outlines the basic features of the cosmic mountain as they appear in the texts of Mesopotamia and Egypt, as well as those among the Hurrians and the Hittites.

within Mesopotamian cosmology.³

The prestigious place of this motif among the texts, artistic works and religious beliefs of cultures across the southeast Mediterranean and Near East justifies the various forms in which it is presented. As far as the latter are concerned, Clifford singled out the following values that characterize the cosmic mountain: ‘In the ancient civilizations from Egypt to India and beyond, the mountain can be a center of fertility, the primeval hillock of creation, the meeting place of the gods, the dwelling place of the high god, the meeting place of heaven and earth, the monument effectively upholding the order of creation, the place where god meets man, a place of theophany.’⁴

The grandeur of its nature is pointed out in all these manifestations: the place where all life begins, the center of the world (*axis mundi*), the earthly dwelling of the gods, the locus of interaction between the mortal race and the gods. Nevertheless, no matter how diverse and unique these manifestations may appear, they all point out in the same direction, that is the divine, present either in its pure and direct form or by images and events that relate to it indirectly (creation, divine throne, paradise, hell, etc.). Thus, it is exactly this correlation with the divine that inevitably turns the simple (but nonetheless imposing) image of the earthly mountain into one of the most powerful cosmological and religious motifs that, besides all its other values, stands alone as the, primary communicational link between Heaven and Earth; and as such it is present throughout the apocalyptic narrative.⁵

Concerning the use of motifs in its narrative, apocalyptic literature does not differentiate itself from other literary forms; if anything, it is merely another genre of literature, born and spread inside the wider region of southeastern Mediterranean and Middle East, another written product that follows—and is subjected to—the same mentality, meaning the same philosophical, cosmological

³ For the view of contemporary research on this matter, see Levenson, J. D. *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1985), Donaldson, T. L. *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology* [JSNTSup 8] (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), Brooke, G. J., et al. (eds). *The Significance of Sinai: Traditions about Sinai and Divine Revelation in Judaism and Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), and Morales, L. M. *The Tabernacle Pre-Figured: Cosmic Mountain Ideology in Genesis and Exodus* [BTS 15] (Leuven: Peeters, 2012). See, also, Dean-Otting, M. *Heavenly Journeys: A Study of the Motif in Hellenistic Jewish Literature* [Judentum und Umwelt 8] (Frankfurt; New York: Peter Lang, 1984), regarding the role of the cosmic mountain in Mesopotamia.

⁴ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 5.

⁵ The singular form of the word is deliberately chosen. In spite of the variety of scenes and episodes found among the numerous apocalyptic texts, the key sections of their narrative can be identified and strictly specified, which in turn makes the definition of an ‘ideal’ apocalyptic narrative possible. See, especially, Gkinidis, E. N. (2017). *The Loneliness of the Prophet: Narrative Techniques and Emotional Manipulation in Apocalyptic Discourse* (Translated from Greek, unpublished doctoral dissertation), Democritus University of Thrace, Komotini; attempting to define the ‘ideal’ apocalyptic narrative, the author adopts the methodology of Vladimir Propp, in *Morphology of the Folktale* (trans. for Russian L. Scott, 2nd ed. L. A. Wagner, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), in which he asserts thirty one sections in the Russian folktale narrative. In the same manner, the apocalyptic narrative could be divided in three major sections, each of which comprises a number of smaller ones: The Departure, the Wandering and the Return.

and religious beliefs that are expressed throughout every genre of literature⁶. Rooted deeply inside them, these writings echo the eschatological fears and hopes of salvation of the average individual, providing a type of language that is characterized by intense emotional power and the constant presence of motifs⁷ which are widely known and repeated within every literary formation. Christopher Rowland emphasizes this dependence of apocalyptic discourse on religion within one of the most important apocalyptic literatures, the Jewish: ‘It is important to recognize that the concept of revelation is itself firmly rooted in Scripture, which provides the impetus for its use in later generations. Revelation is after all at the heart of Jewish religion: the manifestation of God’s will to Moses on Mount Sinai.’⁸

In spite of the extended use of the mountain motif in apocalyptic texts, it is rather easy to distinguish between two major modes of manifestation, which contain all the aforementioned forms of presentation, the *supernatural mountain* and the *apocalyptic mountain*. Supernatural mountains in the apocalyptic narratives concentrate most of the motif’s characteristics: they are exceedingly high and wide, made up of exotic elements (precious stones or gems, fire, light, etc.) and are occasionally combined with other motifs, evoking specific emotions (awe, wonder, etc.). This type of mountain is not widely present in the apocalyptic texts of the Hellenistic and Roman period, as

⁶ See Collins, J. J. (ed.) *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* [Semeia 14] (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1979), in which John Collins presented the most efficient definition of the apocalyptic genre to date (9): “‘Apocalypse’ is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.” With this definition, he put the apocalyptic genre as a whole to a broader perspective, as he treated texts from various literary traditions as apocalyptic and not only those that constitute a part of Jewish and Christian literature.

⁷ See Carey, G. “Introduction: Apocalyptic Discourse, Apocalyptic Rhetoric”, in *Vision and Persuasion: Rhetorical Dimensions of Apocalyptic Discourse* (eds. G. Carey and L. G. Bloomquist, St. Louis: Chalice Press), 1-18, where Greg Carey refers to these motifs as apocalyptic *topoi*, which constitute the quintessence of apocalyptic discourse (10): “*Apocalyptic discourse* refers to the constellation of apocalyptic topics as they function in larger Jewish and Christian literary and social contexts. Thus, apocalyptic discourse should be treated as a flexible set of resources that early Jews and Christians could employ for a variety of persuasive tasks. Whenever early Jews and Christians appealed to such topics as visions and revelations, heavenly journeys, final catastrophes, and the like, they were using apocalyptic discourse.”

⁸ Rowland, C. “The Book of Daniel and the Radical Critique of Empire. An Essay in Apocalyptic”, in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception* (Vol. 2, eds. J. J. Collins and P. W. Flint, Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 2001, 447-467), 465.

it occurs only in a few of them⁹, and is limited in the descriptions of otherworldly realities.¹⁰

On the other hand, this motif is mostly evidenced in its apocalyptic form. This observation, apart from the allusions to the ‘conduit-between-Heaven-and-Earth’ properties of the motif, indicates the writers’ utter will to remain in accordance with the revelatory norm, which precisely emphasized these. From Mesopotamia to Egypt and from Palestine to Greece, hilltops and mountains were the most appropriate loci in the constant need for worship, being considered as the primary places where the divine resides. This widespread and popular notion was perfectly—and inevitably—combined with its “meeting-point” character. In the case of apocalypticism, this has been a matter of great importance. The syncretism of the Hellenistic era in the fields of culture and religion, a product of the universal character of the empire, was marked by a shift to religious objectives in general. The rise of many mystical communities, along with the further expansion of the preexisting ones throughout the Hellenistic world, indicates exactly this change within religious ‘needs’. The importance of the place of worship gives way to the worship practice itself, the communal character of the city-state ritual turns into care for individual worship, the well-being of the many transforms into salvation for the one through knowledge. In this new worldview, in which eschatology is of great value and importance, the mountain maintained its significant role within this new and ever-growing perspective of salvation, not as the dwelling place of the divine but as the only place on earth where the mortals can communicate with the supernatural.

In apocalyptic terms, the ascent to a mountaintop or an elevated place is a crucial part of the whole revelatory experience. As for the manner of revelation, all apocalyptic texts can be

⁹ It is mostly present especially in the *Book of the Watchers* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. In the first, especially, the mountain motif associates with various Jewish beliefs about the afterlife. For Paradise and Garden of Eden, see, Anderson, G. A. “The Cosmic Mountain: Eden and Its Early Interpreters in Syriac Christianity”, in *Genesis 1-3 in the History of Exegesis: Intrigue in the Garden* (ed. G. A. Robbins, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1988), 187-224, Bautch, K. C. *A Study of the Geography of 1 Enoch 17-19: ‘No One Has Seen What I Have Seen’* [JSJSup 81] (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003), and Luttikhuisen, G. P. (ed.) *Paradise Interpreted: Representations of Biblical Paradise in Judaism and Christianity* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1999); for Hell, see Bautch, *Geography*, 52-53; for the Divine Throne motif, Trotter, J. R. “The Tradition of the Throne Vision in the Second Temple Period: Daniel 7:9-10, ‘1 Enoch’ 14:18-23, and the ‘Book of Giants’ (4Q530)”, *RQ* 25.3 (2012): 451-466, Stokes, R. E. “The Throne Visions of Daniel 7, 1 ‘Enoch’ 14, and the Qumran ‘Book of Giants’ (4Q530): An Analysis of Their Literary Relationship”, *DSD* 15.3 (2008): 340-358, and Gallusz, L. *The Throne Motif in the Book of Revelation* [LNTS 487] (New York: T&T Clark, 2014); for the Divine Courtroom motif, see Mermelstein, A. – Holtz, S. E. *The Divine Courtroom in Comparative Perspective* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015); finally, for the Heavenly Temple motif, see Fletcher-Louis, C. H. T. *All the Glory of Adam: Liturgical Anthropology in the Dead Sea Scrolls* [STDJ 42] (Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 2002), esp. 207, 269-275, Himmelfarb, M. *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Bunta, S. N. “In Heaven or on Earth: A Mislplaced Temple Question about Ezekiel’s Visions”, in *With Letters of Light: Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Early Jewish Apocalypticism, Magic, and Mysticism* [Ekstasis 2] (eds. D. V. Arbel and A. A. Orlov, Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2010, 28-44), esp. 36-38.

¹⁰ For the mountain motif as part of the post-mortem apocalyptic scenery, see Wacker. M.-T. *Weltordnung und Gericht: Studien zu 1 Henoch 22* [Forschung zur Bibel 45] (Wurzburg: Echter Verlag, 1982), 151-160.

divided into two categories, the one concerning the transference of the human hero to another, supernatural world (apocalyptic journeys) or, the other, his acquiring of knowledge through visions and dreams while on earth ('stationary' apocalypses). The mountain ascent signifies the beginning of numerous apocalyptic narratives,¹¹ however it can sometimes be located inside the storyline, as in the cases of the *Book of the Watchers*, the *Revelation*, the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, and *Aeneid*, in which the travelers are transferred to mountaintops or hilltops in some point during their revelatory experience.¹² Nevertheless, in these cases, the supernatural values of the mountain motif are not primarily attributed to its 'conduit' character but seem to originate from his height. As part of the apocalyptic scenery, and not as the starting point of the experience itself, mountains offer a great view over the whole apocalyptic creation, in every possible direction, an attribute mostly emphasize through its depiction as 'divine residence'; the key feature of every god residing on a mountaintop was the ability to observe every event on earth, no matter how insignificant it may appear, this being a motif of great value, especially when it was combined with the divinity's practice of justice and judgement.¹³ In this sense, the ascent appears as a practice that exceeds the abilities of human nature, as the climber seems to acquire a portion of divine power every time he reaches the summit and the right to participate in the sharing of knowledge – a matter of great importance within apocalypticism itself.¹⁴

Notwithstanding, the catalytic role of the ascent within the apocalyptic narrative goes beyond every symbolism and manifestation of the mountain motif mentioned so far. When we examine the act of revelation within the apocalyptic storyline, it becomes immediately clear that it is not an easy task to achieve, as it requires something more than the act of the ascent itself, meaning

¹¹ *Icaromenippus* 11, *Sophia of Jesus Christ* 90.19-91.2, *Dialogue of the Savior* 125.4-5, *Paraphrase of Shem* 1.7-12, *The Letter of Peter to Philip* 133.13-17, *Apocalypse of Abraham* 12.6, *Testament of Levi* 2.5, *Shepherd of Hermas* 54.1, 78.4, *Apocalypse of St. John the Theologian* 1, *First Apocalypse of Jacob* 30.18-20, *Daniel* 9.20, *2Baruch* 13.1, 76.3, *Apocalypse of Peter* 1, *5Ezra* 2.42, *Jubilees* 1.1, *Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul* 19.9-21, and *CH. XIII* 1. The same can be attested for the *Questions of Bartholomew* 3.1, 4.1, and 4.6, where revelations commence on the top of a mountain, despite the fact that each revelation unfolds at its foot. In any case, the mountain ascent marks the beginning of the most valuable part of any apocalyptic narrative, in terms of information provided, the *Wandering* (see n.5).

¹² *Respectively, Book of the Watchers* 17.2, *Revelation* 21.10, *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* 1.7, and *Aeneid VI* 752-755. For the influences that the *Book of the Watchers* exercised on this part of the narrative in *Aeneid*, see, particularly, Bremmer, J. N. "The Golden Bough: Orphic, Eleusinian, and Hellenistic-Jewish Sources of Virgil's Underworld in *Aeneid VI*", *Kernos* 22 (2009): 183-208, esp. 203, and Bremmer, J. N. "Vergil and Jewish Literature", *Vergilius* 59 (2013): 143-150.

¹³ See Bunta, "Misplaced Temple," 31-32, on this matter.

¹⁴ However, the view from the mountain summit is not the only practice associated with the sharing of knowledge in apocalyptic literature; in some gnostic apocalypses (*Allogenes* 68.16-23 and *Apocalypse of Adam* 85.1-18), the mountaintop is recorded as the place where divine books are securely kept. See Baynes, L. *The Heavenly Book Motif in Judeo-Christian Apocalypses: 200 B.C.E. – 200 C.E. [JSJSup 152]* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012), for the heavenly book motif, especially in Judeo-Christian apocalypses, as well as Stroumsa, G. A. G. *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (Leiden: Brill, 1984): 115-123, for the mountain as part of the sacred geography among the Gnostics.

the separation of the climber's soul from his body; having a portion of divinity inside it, knowledge can be obtained by someone of the same nature who has been relieved from the boundaries and limitations which the human body imposes, so that his soul, divine in its nature, may partake in the knowledge that is destined for it. In other words, it is necessary for the participant to experience a condition which resembles death itself, the only state in human life where this separation is possible. In almost every case in which it is reported, this 'temporary experience of death'¹⁵ occurs either in a dream state or during an ecstatic state achieved through prayer. This practice is, as Richard Bauckham notes, '...the appropriate preliminary to a visionary revelation'¹⁶ and collaborates frequently with fasting for the attainment of ecstasy.¹⁷

What mountains offer in this sequence of events is the appropriate environment of isolation; the practice of releasing the divine soul from its terrestrial bonds is most effective when the body is secluded from anything resembling its own nature, that is any reference to the mortality of the physical world.¹⁸

However, the mountain is not the only place where this seclusion can take place, as there are many other representatives of nature's wilderness, where isolation from any temptation is ensured; in the *Apocryphon of John*, John is heading for a desert place;¹⁹ in the *Gnostic Apocalypse*

¹⁵ Bauckham, R. *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 1998): 23.

¹⁶ Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 240.

¹⁷ The relationship between fasting and religious ecstasy was well known among the cultures of the ancient world. For their relation to the practices of ascent in the Mediterranean world, see Himmelfarb, M. "Practices of Ascent in the Ancient Mediterranean World", in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys* (eds. J. J. Collins and M. Fishbane, Albany: State of New York Press, 1995), 123-137; see, also, Fraade, S. D. "Ascetical Aspects on Ancient Judaism", in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible to the Middle Ages* (Vol. 1, ed. A. Green, New York: Crossroad, 1986), 253-288 (esp. 261-269), and Swartz, M. D. "'Like the Ministering Angels': Ritual and Purity in Early Jewish Mysticism and Magic", in *AJS Review* 19.2 (1994): 135-167, regarding their position among Jewish beliefs, as well as Guillaumont, A. "A propos du célibat des Esséniens", in *Hommages à A. Dupont-Sommer* (eds. A. Caquot and M. Philonenko, Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1971), 395-404, for their presence among the beliefs and ritual of the Essenes.

¹⁸ See Miller, P. C. "'All the Words Were Frightful': Salvation by Dreams in the Shepherd of Heras", *VC* 42.4 (1988): 327-338, esp. 329; through prayer, the soul enters a cataleptic state, in which it is utterly overwhelmed by the visionary experience that follows. See, also, Johnson, N. B. *Prayer in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha: A Study of the Jewish Concept of God* [JBLMS 2] (Philadelphia: Scholars Press, 1948), concerning the importance of prayer in the Jewish apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, and Penner, J. et al. (eds.) *Prayer and Poetry in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature: Essays in Honor of Eileen Schuller on the Occasion of Her 65th Birthday* [STDJ 98] (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012), for the prayer as a vital part of the religious practices of the Essenes. On the other hand, see Dodds, E. R. *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 69-101, Yarbrow Collins, A. *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* [JSJSup 50] (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 1-20 and Levison, J. R. *Of Two Minds: Ecstasy and Inspired Interpretation in the New Testament World* [DSSCOL 1] (North Richland Hills: BIBAL Press, 1999), esp. 11-36, for the ecstasy as a psychological state of communication between humanity and the divine in ancient Greek and Jewish religion.

¹⁹ *Apocryphon of John* 1.17-19.

of Paul, Paul is all alone on the road;²⁰ in *Zostrianos*, the hero, disappointed from the world, is seeking his death in a desert place, too;²¹ in *2 Baruch*, Baruch is sitting under a tree or inside a cave,²² and in *4 Ezra*, the prophet receives his revelations in a desert place, sitting under a tree, or on a field of flowers.²³ This diversity of revelatory places is important, so long as they are represented by their common point of reference, that is the seclusive character of nature's wilderness.²⁴

The examination of the presence of the mountain motif in the apocalyptic literature displays its catalytic role within the whole narrative. However, in spite of being entirely influenced by and dependent on ancient religious and cosmological beliefs, the mountain motif managed to stand out from the background of mythology and cosmology as an 'individual motif', more active in apocalyptic narratives than in the texts of any other literary genre. This notion is perfectly—and in a very lively way depicted in the words of Moshe Barasch, in his comments on the apocalyptic treatment of landscape features: '...the isolation of a single element, and its treatment as a "person", is indeed specific to the apocalyptic genre, and, in a broader, and necessarily much vaguer, sense, of the age and culture that produced apocalyptic visions, and granted the eschatological experience a central place.'²⁵

²⁰ *Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul* 18.1.

²¹ *Zostrianos* 3.23-28.

²² *2 Baruch* 6.1, 55.2, 77.18 and 21.1

²³ *4 Ezra* 5.13,19-21, 6.31-36, 9.23-28, 10.58-60, 12.51 and 13.56-14.2

²⁴ See, especially, Lane, B. C. *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), for the role of the seclusive character of certain areas (mountain, desert, cave). See, also, Ustinova, Y. "Cave Experiences and Ancient Greek Oracles", *T&M* 2.3 (2009): 265-286, for the ecstatic trance that took place inside the cave oracles in ancient Greece, and Yarbrow Collins, A. *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Scholars Press, 1976), 120-122, for the desert as a place of security against persecution, which is often associated with religious seclusion.

²⁵ Barasch, M. "Apocalyptic Space", in *Apocalyptic Time* [Numen 86] (ed. A. I. Baumgarten, Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 2000, 305-326), 308.