Heaven on Earth: The World to Come and Its (Dis)locations
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INTRODUCTION

Ancient Jewish sources from the Bible to the Talmud contain a dizzying array of ideas about a better life or world to come that features proximity to or dwelling with the divine—be it a personal life after death, a messianic period in ordinary historical time, or an eschatological era when the world as we know it is brought to a crashing end by God and an entirely new world order is established. Rather than explore any one of these ideas in detail, this essay focuses on a question that occupied proponents of all three conceptions: can the world to come—however it is imagined—be experienced, even if briefly, in this world? If so, what might that experience look like, and how might it be attained?

To be sure, some ancient Jewish sources imagine a deep disjunction between this world and the world to come. Take for example, the following Talmudic teachings. The first is attributed to the third century c.e. Palestinian sage, R. Yoḥanan:

*b. Berakhot 34b*

R. Ḥiyya b. Abba also said in the name of R. Yoḥanan: All the prophets prophesied about the days of the Messiah only, but as for the world to come, “No eye has seen, O God, but You, Who act for those that trust in You” (Isa 64:3).

R. Yoḥanan distinguishes here between the messianic age and the world to come and states that all of the biblical prophets’ promises of a future ideal time referred not to the world to come, but to a time in the course of human history when a king anointed by God (a messiah) would once again reign in Israel. Regarding the world to come, no human has ever seen what awaits us there, not even the prophets. It is a world and a time completely apart.

A second tradition, attributed to the third century c.e. sage Rav, imagines what the world to come will be like, but does so in a way that only serves to underscore the disjunction between that world and this one:

*b. Berakhot 17a*

A favorite saying of Rav was: The world to come is not like this world.¹ In the world to come there is no eating or drinking
or propagation or business or jealousy or hatred or competition, but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads feasting on the splendor of the shekinah [divine presence], as it says, “And they beheld Elohim, and ate and drank” (Exod 24:11).

For Rav, this world and the world to come are not alike, but radically disjunctive. In this world, our material bodies are engaged in eating and drinking and propagating; we sustain ourselves in business in competition with others, which engenders jealousy and hatred. But in the world to come, when we are free of material bodies of flesh and blood, none of these elements is present, and the righteous will be sustained by the splendor of the divine presence. Now if this world and the world to come are such distinct and disjunctive realities, we might conclude that entry into the world to come requires a complete escape from the present world—through temporary elevations out of this world or permanently, through death.

But according to some ancient Jewish sources, this world and the world to come are not so radically disjunctive. I refer not only to sources, such as b. Ketubot 111b, that assume there is plenty of eating and drinking in the afterlife, but to sources that posit certain points, or loci, of conjunction between this world and the world to come. Take for example, this anonymous tradition, also from b. Berakhot:

*b. Berakhot* 57b

Five things are a sixtieth part [of something else]: namely, fire, honey, Sabbath, sleep and a dream. Fire is one-sixtieth part of Gehinnom. Honey is one-sixtieth part of manna. Sabbath is one-sixtieth part of the world to come. Sleep is one-sixtieth part of death. A dream is one-sixtieth part of prophecy.

According to this text, the experience of the Sabbath anticipates in some way the experience of the world to come. If one may employ the shorthand of “heaven” for this ideal world to come, then according to this tradition, the Sabbath is a temporal point of conjunction—a meeting in time—that establishes a little piece of heaven on earth.

This essay explores the diverse ways in which different groups of ancient Jews understood the relationship between this world and some version of an ideal world to come. Some will assume an absolute disjunction between the two. The disjunctive approach declares that no experience in this world anticipates the experience of the next world. In fact, it is foolish or even dangerous to occupy oneself with such matters. But many others assume some
point of connection or conjunction between the two worlds. This conjunc-
tive approach takes two distinct forms. First, some ancient Jews who believed
in the conjunction of these worlds sought to identify or create a bridge that
would carry them from this world to the ideal world, certainly in death, but
perhaps also in moments of transcendence that elevate one out of this life.
There is a second approach, however, to experiencing the conjunction of this
world and the world to come that moves in the other direction. Some ancient
Jews sought not to escape the realities of this world, to travel from this world
to the ideal world beyond this one, but to experience “heaven on earth.”
Convinced that this world and the world to come are not radically divorced
from one another, these ancient Jews, particularly the talmudic rabbis, applied
themselves to the task of obtaining a foretaste of the world to come while in
this world by bringing the world to come into this world.

Ancient Jews developed their ideas in conversation with both the
Hebrew Bible and the intellectual currents and belief systems in their immedi-
ate cultural environment. We begin, then, with a brief overview of the relevant
biblical sources before moving on to Second Temple period Jewish writings
from the third century B.C.E. to the first century C.E., the centuries just prior
to the rise of the talmudic rabbis. These Second Temple sources emphasize a
movement from this world to another, ideal world. We will then turn to clas-
sical talmudic literature and examine the strategies employed by the rabbis for
moving in the opposite direction and locating heaven on earth.

BIBLICAL SOURCES ON THIS WORLD
AND THE WORLD TO COME

There is no clearly articulated notion of a world to come in the Pentateuch,
no promise of immortality, no life with God and celestial beings after death.
In fact, the Garden of Eden story in Genesis 2–3 makes it clear that humans
traded immortality for free will. While a few biblical stories refer to a shadowy
region below the earth, Sheol (see for example Gen 42:38, Prov 7:27, Job
10:21–22 and 17:16), to which the life force [nefesh] of the deceased descends,
this is not a robust concept of a world to come.

What we do find in the Hebrew Bible—and this is more relevant to
the central concern of this essay—is the basic idea of two realms: the earthly
realm is the abode of humans and the heavenly realm is the abode of God.
And so we may ask: do biblical sources understand there to be a radical
disjunction between the abode of humans (the earth) and the abode of the
divine (heaven)? Or are their times, places, and experiences in which the two realms—the human and the divine—are conjoined, creating the possibility for some kind of shared experience or coexistence that might anticipate a future world to come?

In the Bible, the meeting or conjunction of heaven and earth occurs along three axes: the temporal, the covenantal, and the spatial. The first that we encounter is the temporal axis. At the creation, God sets apart one time—a day of the week—as a holy day of rest (Gen 2:1–3). Israel is enjoined to observe this Sabbath day in imitation of God (Exod 20:8–10) and as an everlasting covenant between God and Israel (Exod 31:16):

Exodus 31:15–17

Six days may work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to Yahweh; whoever does work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. The Israelite people shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time. It shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel. For in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He ceased from work and was refreshed.

In Leviticus 23:3, the Sabbath heads the list of appointed times, or festivals, that are holy to God and that are to be observed as holy by Israel. Thus the temporal conjunction of heaven and earth occurs in Israel’s calendar observance.

The second axis along which heaven and earth are conjoined is the covenantal axis. The two realms meet in the giving and receiving of the Torah that establishes the covenant between God and Israel. The Torah contains divine instruction or wisdom; obedience to its terms is a requirement for those who would live with God in his holy Land: “You shall faithfully observe all My laws and all My regulations, lest the Land to which I bring you to settle in spew you out” (Lev 20:22). By accepting this divine instruction and obeying the terms of the covenant, Israel secures God’s protective presence in her midst.

Third, there is a spatial dimension to the conjunction of heaven and earth—the sanctuary. Exodus 25:8 is explicit on this point. God says, “And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” When the Israelites construct the sanctuary according to the divine direction, God’s presence descends and fills the sanctuary. And in fact, the sanctuary is referred to as the tent of meeting because it was there that God would meet and converse with Moses.
In short, the Bible envisages three ways in which a piece of heaven may be found on earth: through the covenant or Torah that conveys divine instruction and enables the Israelites to dwell in God’s Land, through sacred time (i.e., the Sabbath and other sacred times of the calendar), and through sacred space (the sanctuary or tent of meeting and of course eventually the Jerusalem Temple where the divine and human realms meet).

We turn now to the literature of the Second Temple period. Do these texts see the earthly realm and the divine realm as disjunctive or conjunctive? If conjunctive, how do they understand and depict the three axes of that conjunctive relationship: the covenantal or Torah axis, the temporal or calendar axis, and the spatial or sanctuary axis?

SECOND TEMPLE LITERATURE

We begin with the covenantal axis of the conjunction of the divine and human realms. Some Second Temple writings continue the biblical portrayal of the divinely revealed Torah as a body of divine wisdom given over to the people of Israel, and therefore a piece of heaven on earth. Thus, chapter 24 of the book of Sirach from the second century B.C.E. relates the journey of divine wisdom, wandering throughout all of creation and all nations in search of a resting place until, in the course of time, she came to dwell in Israel as the Torah. Wisdom says:

24:3 “I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and like a mist I covered the earth.

. . .

24:5 A circle of sky I encircled alone, and in the deep of abysses I walked.

24:6 In the waves of the sea and in all the earth and in every people and nation I led.

24:7 With all these I sought repose, and in whose inheritance I would settle.

24:8 Then the creator of all commanded me, and he who created me put down my tent and said, ‘Encamp in Jacob, and in Israel let your inheritance be.’

24:9 Before the age, from the beginning, he created me, and until the age I will never fail.

24:10 In a holy tent I ministered before him, and thus in Zion I was firmly set.
24:11 In a beloved city as well he put me down, and in Jerusalem was my authority.

24:12 And I took root among a glorified people, in the portion of the Lord is my inheritance."

...  

24:23 All these things are the book of the covenant of the Most High God, a law that Moses commanded us, a heritage for the gatherings of Jacob.²

Wisdom permeated the cosmos and enjoyed a possession within each nation, and yet in due time she was instructed by God to set down her tent in Jacob and to dwell permanently in Zion, or Jerusalem. Verse 23 makes it clear that this Wisdom—this portion of Yahweh—is none other than “the book of the covenant of the Most High God, a law that Moses commanded us, a heritage for the gatherings of Jacob” (v. 23). The Torah is clearly viewed here as divine wisdom sent from on high to abide in Israel, a piece of heaven on earth. At the same time, however, the Torah is described in spatial terms—it has a holy tent, it encamps in the beloved city. By means of these spatial metaphors, Torah and Temple are blended into a single image of heaven on earth spatially located at the heart of the Jewish nation.

Other Second Temple texts, however, take a very different position, despairing of the possibility of experiencing heaven on earth. While these texts maintain a belief in and even a desperate yearning for the conjunction of the divine and human realms, they indicate that accessing the divine requires an ascent from the earthly realm to the divine realm where one can discover hidden divine wisdom unavailable on earth. The germ of this idea is found in Deuteronomy 29:28: “The secret things belong to Yahweh our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and our children forever, that we may observe all the words of this Law.” In this verse, Moses draws a distinction between the exoteric revelation—the words of the Law or Torah given at Sinai—and esoteric matters (“the secret things”) that were not revealed and belong only to God. Certainly, some texts from this period, such as Sirach 3:21–24, warn against dabbling in the hidden and esoteric wisdom that remains with God in heaven (“Things too difficult for you do not seek . . . the things that have been prescribed for you, think about these, for you have no need of hidden matters”),³ but others are drawn to it. For if the exoteric Torah of Moses is only part of the divine wisdom, the part needed for life in this world, then the hidden or esoteric wisdom that remains in heaven must hold the key to life in the world to come.
The desire to gain access to this wisdom that was not revealed is evident in *1 Enoch*, an unusual, composite work dating to the centuries before the Common Era. Like Sirach, *1 Enoch* contains a narrative of Wisdom’s search for an abode, but the morals of the two stories couldn’t be more different. As we saw, Sirach depicted the universal divine Wisdom emerging from heaven, wandering throughout the earth, and eventually establishing residence on earth in the form of Israel’s Torah. *1 Enoch* relates Wisdom’s story quite differently:

42:1) Wisdom did not find a place where she might dwell, so her dwelling was in the heavens.

(2) Wisdom went forth to dwell among the sons of men, but she did not find a dwelling. Wisdom returned to her place, and sat down in the midst of the angels.4

According to *1 Enoch*, Wisdom searched for a home among human-kind, but finding no dwelling place on earth was forced to retire to heaven, where she dwells among the angels. In Sirach, Wisdom takes the form of the exoteric Torah, but the Wisdom spoken of in *1 Enoch* is the esoteric wisdom not revealed at Sinai. How then is humankind to learn of this esoteric divine Wisdom that resides only in heaven? The book tells us: the secret treasures of divine Wisdom were made known to one righteous individual, Enoch, not through an act of revelation from heaven to earth (as in Sirach), but through a movement in the opposite direction. Enoch was taken up from the earth; he ascended to heaven where he was shown the secret divine Wisdom that resides there and can be accessed only there. His visions were recorded in a book, *1 Enoch*, and that book was transmitted to a select community of readers who alone possess the esoteric wisdom.

And what is this esoteric divine wisdom? According to *1 Enoch*, the esoteric divine wisdom that was not revealed at Sinai and can be experienced only in heaven, has a temporal and to some extent a spatial content. *1 Enoch* claims that upon his ascent, Uriel, the angel in charge of all luminaries, guided Enoch through the celestial sphere and revealed to him the “heavenly secrets,” that is, the secret laws that govern the movement of the heavenly bodies (*1 Enoch* 72:1, 74:2, etc.) and determine the true 52-week, 365-day calendar (*1 Enoch* 74:12, 75:3). Uriel explains that this calendar, established at the time of creation, is observed by the divine beings in heaven, and noncompliance with the calendar by those on earth is a sinful breach of God’s commands to the cosmos (78:10, 79:6, 80:1, and 82:7).5 By obeying this divine calendar, humans participate in the temporal rhythms of a supramundane or heavenly realm. Esoteric wisdom
has a second specific content in 1 Enoch that is spatial. During his tour, Enoch is given esoteric knowledge not only of astronomical and calendrical matters but also of the heavenly palaces awaiting the holy and elect (41:1–2).\textsuperscript{6}

We noted earlier that the Bible envisages the conjunction of heaven and earth along three axes: the covenantal (or Torah-based) axis, the temporal (or Sabbath- and calendar-based) axis, and the spatial (or sanctuary-based) axis. To be specific, the divine presence is experienced in the mundane realm by virtue of the exoteric Torah delivered from heaven; it is experienced in mundane time by virtue of the Sabbath and festivals; and it is experienced in mundane space by virtue of the sanctuary. 1 Enoch continues these three axes but where the Bible locates each in this world, 1 Enoch takes them out of this world altogether and locates them firmly in heaven in an esoteric, heavenly Torah and in supra-mundane time and space. It is only by accessing the secret and esoteric Torah that one can observe the Sabbath at the correct time and in synchrony with the angels who observe it in heaven. And it is only by accessing this esoteric Torah that one can adopt the behaviors of purity, praise, and obedience required of those who hope to reside, like the angels, in the heavenly sanctuary. In 1 Enoch, the covenantal, temporal, and spatial dimensions of the conjunction of heaven and earth remain intact but are lifted out of this world and placed in the heavens, accessible only to those who gain entry to that realm.

RABBINIC LITERATURE

We turn now to rabbinic sources. Some rabbinic sources view this world and the next, or the earthly and heavenly realms, as disjunctive rather than conjunctive and, like Sirach, warn against dabbling in esoteric knowledge of the world beyond this one. For example:

*m. Hagigah* 2:1

The laws of sexual immorality may not be expounded in the company of three persons, nor the account of Creation [i.e., cosmogony] [be expounded] before two persons, nor the account of the Chariot [i.e., esoteric teachings about the divine] before one person unless he is a sage and understands on his own. Whoever reflects on four matters—it would be better for him had he not come into the world: What is above? What is below? What is ahead and what is behind?\textsuperscript{7}

However, many more rabbinic texts assume some kind of conjunction between the divine and human realms. Some of these sources continue the
Second Temple focus on heaven, seeking to escape this world in order to experience heaven. But in other rabbinic sources, we see a reassertion of the biblical model that moves in the opposite direction and brings heaven down to earth. Consider the following traditions:

*m. Avot* 4:15 (following Kaufman ms):

R. Jacob said, “This world is like a vestibule to the world to come; prepare yourself in the vestibule that you may enter into the banqueting hall.”

He used to say, “Better is one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than the whole life of the world to come; and better is one hour of bliss [qorat ruah] in the world to come than all the life of this world.”

According to R. Jacob, this life is a preparation or perhaps a dress rehearsal for the world to come. Just as the noise, sights, sounds, and smells of the festivities of the banquet hall can be perceived from the vestibule, so too heaven spills over into this world, providing a foretaste and creating anticipation. R. Jacob’s second statement contains a three-way comparison that rates one hour of bliss in the world to come above all of the life of this world (unremarkably enough) except for repentance and good deeds; one hour of the latter is better than the whole life of the world to come (remarkably enough). This second statement is more radical than the first. Its claim is not that this world offers glimpses of the world to come but rather that by performing acts of repentance and good deeds in this world, the experience of the world to come is not only anticipated but also outperformed in this world.

The idea in R. Jacob’s first teaching—that heaven’s pleasures are experienced in some small or attenuated way in this world—is also found in traditions that describe activities in this world *[olam ha-zeh]* that will continue in the next world *[olam ha-ba]*:

*b. Sanhedrin* 91b

R Joshua b. Levi also said: Whoever utters song [of praise to God] in this world shall be privileged to do so in the next world too, as it is written, “Happy are those who dwell in your house: they forever praise you. Selah” (Ps 84:5).8

*b. Sanhedrin* 92a

R. Sheshet said: Whoever teaches the Torah in this world will be privileged to teach it in the next, as it is written, “And he who satisfies others shall himself be sated” (Prov 11:25). . . .
R. Eleazar said: Every leader who leads the community with mildness will be privileged to lead them in the next world [too], as it is written, “for he who loves them will lead them; he will guide them to springs of water” (Isa 49:10).

While these passages speak of reward for good deeds in this world, the reward is the continuation of the deed in the next world. Thus, singing God’s praise, teaching Torah, and leading the community are among the common activities engaged in every day that afford an experience of the next world.

Unlike the Second Temple sources that envisage a movement out of this world in order to enter the heavenly realm, many rabbinic sources seek to locate heaven on earth. They do so along the three axes we have identified thus far—the covenantal, the temporal, and the spatial. Moreover, the heightened rhetoric of the rabbinic sources suggests that the rabbis knew that in seeking to transform rather than transcend this world, they were swimming against a tide.

We consider first the covenantal axis. The rabbis reassert the biblical depiction of the Torah as divine instruction given over to Israel and found on earth, but with a twist. In some rabbinic sources, Moses must forcibly wrest the Torah from heaven in a dramatic move that arouses the jealousy of the angels, who believe it belongs in heaven. See, for example, the following midrash in which God has to disguise Moses to prevent the angels’ attack:

**Exodus Rabbah 28:1**

“And Moses went up to God” (Exod 19:3). It is written “You have ascended on high, you have led captivity captive” (Ps 68:19). What is the meaning of “You have ascended on high”? It means you (Moses) have been exalted because you wrestled with angels on high . . . . At that moment, the angels wanted to attack Moses, but God changed the features of Moses to resemble those of Abraham and said to the angels: “Are you not ashamed to touch this man to whom you descended [from heaven] and in whose house you ate?”

Later in the same midrashic work, God prepares an escape tunnel as the raging angels come after Moses to destroy him:

**Exodus Rabbah 42:4**

R. Isaac said: When God said to Moses, “Go, get down” (Exod 32:7), Moses’ face darkened so that he became like a blind man on account of his many troubles and did not know which way to go down. The angels sought to kill him, saying “Now is the time to slay him”; but God knew the intention of the angels. What did He do?
...The Lord opened unto him a window under his throne of glory and said to him: “Go, get down” (Exod 32:7).

In several traditions, the angels articulate the reasons for their vociferous objections to God’s plan to place heaven’s greatest treasure in the hands of mere mortals. In *Song of Songs Rabbah* 8:11, 2, the angels fear abandonment. Arguing that the Torah belongs in heaven with them, the angels compel God to assure them that he will not abandon the heavens in order to be with his Torah on earth:

*Song of Songs Rabbah* 8:11, 2

When the Holy One, blessed be he, announced his intention of giving the Torah to Israel, the ministering angels said to the Holy One, blessed be he: “Sovereign of the Universe, You are he whose majesty is over the heaven; it is your happiness, your glory, and your praise that the Torah should be in heaven.” He said to them: “What does it matter to you?” They said: “Perhaps tomorrow you will cause your divine presence to abide in the lower world.” Then the Holy One, blessed be he, replied to them: “I will give my Torah to the dwellers on earth but I will abide with the celestial beings. I will give away my daughter with her marriage portion to another country in order that she may pride herself with her husband in her beauty and charm and be honored as befits a king’s daughter. But I will abide with you in the upper world . . . .

R. Shimeon said in the name of R. Joshua ben Levi: Wherever God made His law to abide, there He made His divine presence to abide.

In the following midrash, the angels are described as coveting the Torah for themselves:

*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 7:9

And should you say that I have given you the law to your disadvantage, [know that] I have given it for your benefit, for the ministering angels coveted it, but it was hidden from them, as it is said “Seeing it is hidden from the eyes of all living . . . and kept close from the flying beings of the air” (Job 28:21)—this is the angels.

Remarkably, this midrash reverses 1 Enoch’s trope of a Torah hidden in the heavens away from humans and speaks instead of a Torah hidden from the angels and given to humans. In a similar reversal, the next midrash asserts that it is the angels who are unworthy of the divine Law. It is too abstruse or difficult for them and therefore God gives the Torah to humans:
Deuteronomy Rabbah 8:2

God said to Israel: “My children, the law is too abstruse for the ministering angels, but for you it is not too abstruse.” Whence do we know this? From what we read [in Deut 30:11] “For this commandment which I command you this day, it is not too hard for you” [for you, but it is too hard for ministering angels].

While the Second Temple sources examined above idealized an esoteric Torah beyond the ken of humans and known only to the angels in heaven, this rabbinic source idealizes the exoteric Torah as beyond the ken of angels and known only to humans on earth.

In all of these sources, the Torah conjoins heaven and earth and does so in this world. As for the temporal and spatial dimensions of the conjunction of heaven and earth, here too some rabbinic sources focus on bringing heaven down to earth. Contrary to Second Temple sources that move in the opposite direction, it is not the heavenly calendar that is privileged. On the contrary, the earthly calendar is privileged and sets the standard to be followed by those residing in heaven, rather than the reverse. We see this in:

Pesiqta Rabbati piska 15 (parallels b. RoshHaShanah 8a–b, Exodus Rabbah 15:2, Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:14)

R. Hoshaya taught: When the lower court makes a decision and declares “Today is the new year,” then the Holy One, Blessed be He, says to the ministering angels: set up the tribunal, install the advocate, install the clerk of the court, for the lower court has decided and made fast today and this morning is the new year!

If the witnesses are delayed or if the court reconsider and transfers it to the next day, says God, blessed be he, to the angels: take down the tribunal, and the advocate and dismiss the clerk of the court, for the lower court has made a decree saying that tomorrow should be the new year. And what is the proof? “For it is a law for Israel, a ruling of the God of Jacob” [read by the rabbis as: For a law in Israel is also a ruling, i.e., obligation, for the God of Israel] (Ps 81:5)—what is not a law for Israel is also if we may say so, no obligation for the God of Israel.

R. Pinḥas and R. Hilkiah b. R. Simon say: When all the ministering angels assemble before God and ask, “Lord of the universe, when is the new year?” he answers them: “You’re asking me? I and you, we should ask the lower court.” And what is the proof? “For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the
Lord our God whenever we call upon Him?” [read by the rabbis as: when we make known to him (the festivals)] (Deut 4:7).

The calendar as determined by Israel on earth is the calendar to be followed in heaven and the angels align their worship with the worship of Israel, rather than the reverse. Indeed, the power of Sabbath observance in this world to actualize the conjunction of heaven and earth may be seen in the following traditions:

*b. Shabbat* 118b

R. Yoḥanan said in the name of R. Simeon b. Yoḥai: If Israel were to keep two Sabbaths according to the Sabbath laws, they would be redeemed immediately, for it is said, “Thus says the Lord: ‘As for the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths . . . ’ (Isa 56:4), which is followed by, ‘I will bring them to My sacred mount, etc.’ (ibid. v, 517).”

Two properly observed Sabbaths can bring redemption, which here is likely an indication of the world to come, since it is also said that just one Sabbath properly observed has the power to usher in the Messianic age (*Leviticus Rabbah* 3:1).

Finally, we turn to the spatial dimension of the conjunction of heaven and earth. In the Bible, of course, the spatial conjunction of heaven and earth was concentrated in the sanctuary. It was the central sanctuary in the Jerusalem Temple that attracted and housed the Shekinah or divine presence. In the Second Temple period sources reviewed above, the divine presence filled the heavenly temple to which humans seek access beyond this world. For their part, the rabbis reasserted the biblical emphasis on the central sanctuary in Jerusalem but, again, with a twist. They lived in a post-Temple era. The sanctuary was destroyed. Where, then, was the divine presence to be experienced? In what space and place on earth is heaven to be found?

Rabbinic sources provide two responses: the holy Land or the holy community. According to the first, the entire Land of Israel and not simply the site of the Jerusalem Temple attracts and houses the Shekinah. The idea of the divine presence in the Land was adduced by the rabbis when asserting the importance of residing in the Land of Israel and delegitimizing Jewish life outside the Land, as may be seen in *m. Ketubbot* 13:10–11 and *t. Ketubbot* 12:12, according to which a spouse (in some versions, husband or wife) cannot be compelled to leave the Land but can be compelled to move to the Land. According to *t. Avodah Zarah* 5:2–5 it is preferable to live in the Land
even in a town in which the majority of the inhabitants are non-Jews than to live outside the Land in a town in which the majority of the inhabitants are Jews. In case the point is lost, the text goes on to explain that “dwelling in the Land of Israel is deemed as important as fulfilling all the commandments in the Torah” (a view repeated in *Sifre Deuteronomy* 80). A little further on, the same passage stigmatizes those living in the Diaspora as comparable to those who have renounced God altogether and interprets Leviticus 25:38 (“I am the Lord your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God”) as saying “as long as you are in the Land of Canaan I will be your God, but when you are not dwelling in the Land of Canaan, it is as if I am not your God.” The passage ends with the climactic assertion that “anyone who leaves the Land during peacetime and goes [to live] abroad is as if he were worshiping idols,” and “Israelites who reside outside the Land are idolaters” even when they take pains to live in accordance with God’s laws. Only in the Land does one encounter the divine presence and experience a little heaven on earth.

Indeed, some texts go further. The Palestinian Talmud contains an extended reflection on the virtue not only of residing in the Land but also of dying in the Land. The dead in the Land will be the first to be resurrected in the messianic age. Although God intervenes to ensure that sages who die and are buried in exile will have a rapid underground transit to the holy Land, Palestinian sages scorn those who seek burial in the Land after a life lived outside the Land, and the sage Ulla is depicted as lamenting the fact that he will die in exile, with these words: “Losing the soul in the bosom of one’s mother is not to be compared to losing the soul in the bosom of a foreign woman” (*y. Kil’ayim* 9:4, 32c).

These sources, extolling the Land of Israel as the locus of the divine presence in a postdestruction world and indeed the point of entry to the world to come, were not uncontested. Indeed, Isaiah Gafni argues that the rabbis’ hyperbole concerning the Land, and their insistence on residence in the Land, increased in intensity in the early Amoraic period, precisely in response to an enhanced self-assuredness in Babylonia. And so we conclude by considering rabbinic sources that give a different account of where, in spatial terms, the divine presence may be found in this world. We begin with the Babylonian Talmud.

While the Babylonian Talmud incorporates Palestinian traditions that valorize the holy Land and residence within it, it moderates this rhetoric of loyalty to the Land with a rhetoric of what Gafni has called “local patriotism.”
that asserts the value of the Diaspora. The result is an often conflicted discourse, exemplified in an extensive passage at the end of Bavli tractate Ketubbot (110b–112a). The Gemara on this Mishnah opens with some of the heavily pro-Land Palestinian traditions already cited and closes with other strongly pro-Land traditions, attributed primarily to Palestinian authorities: “The dead outside the Land will not be resurrected” (R. Eleazar); “Whoever walks four cubits in the Land of Israel is assured of a place in the world to come” (R. Yohanan); and in the most explicit statement of the Land as both a necessary and sufficient condition for life in the world to come, R. Abbahu is reported as saying: “Even a Canaanite bondwoman who lives in the Land of Israel is assured of a place in the world to come.” Residence alone—even for a non-Jewish, female slave (who, in the rabbis’ view, occupies the lowest status before God)—suffices to secure a place in the world to come. The unit ends with hyperbolic expressions of the love that certain sages feel towards the Land; they kiss its cliffs and roll themselves in its dust.

However, these pro-Land statements serve as an envelope around dueling Babylonian and Palestinian traditions in which the status of the Holy Land, particularly vis-à-vis Babylonia, is contested. For their part, the pro-Babylonian voices in this dialogue subvert Palestinian claims, elevating Babylonia to a status that is sometimes second, sometimes equal, and sometimes superior to that of the holy Land and asserting that the divine presence, or Shekinah, is found in Babylonia.

Taking advantage of a Tannaitic tradition that states that the Shekinah accompanies the Israelites wherever they are exiled, Abaye and Rava and even some Palestinian authorities teach in b. Megillah 29a that the Shekinah is currently in Babylonia, in certain synagogues and houses of learning. Indeed, this is said to be the meaning of Ezekiel 11:16, “I have been to them a small sanctuary.” According to Midrash Tanhuma Noah 3, the superiority of the Babylonian yeshivot that were transferred to Babylonia from Jerusalem after the first destruction is attributed to the fact that they never saw captivity or persecution or despoilment and were never ruled by Greece or Rome, but dwelled securely in Babylonia with their Torah since the first destruction. In short, the Palestinians may have the Land, but the Babylonians have the Shekinah, synagogues and study houses, and the relatively safe and secure conditions needed for Torah learning to thrive.

Related to this idea of the attachment of the Shekinah to yeshivot is the rabbis’ second response to the problem of the location of the divine presence after the destruction of the Temple: the Shekinah is connected not to a specific
geographic location, such as the Land of Israel or Babylonia, but to righteous individuals wherever they might be. Hence we read:

_Numbers Rabbah_ Naso 13, 2

When the Tabernacle was erected Israel said: “Let my beloved come into his garden” (Song 4:16). . . . He [the Holy One, blessed be He] sent word to them through Moses, saying, “Why do you fear? I have already, ‘Come into my garden, my sister, my bride!’” (Song 5:1).

R. Ishmael son of R. Yosi said: It does not say in this text, “I am come into the garden” but “I am come into my garden” (Song 5:1)—this means, into My bridal chamber; namely, into the place which has been My principal abode from the very beginning, for was not the principal abode of the _shekinah_ in the terrestrial regions [i.e., on earth]?

When Adam sinned, the _shekinah_ withdrew to the first sky; when Cain sinned, it withdrew to the second sky; when the generation of Enosh sinned, it ascended to the third sky; when the generation of the Flood sinned, it rose to the fourth sky; when the generation of the Dispersion sinned [at the time of the Tower of Babel], it moved up into the fifth sky; when the Sodomites sinned, it rose into the sixth sky, and when the Egyptians sinned, it ascended into the seventh sky. As a counterpart to these, seven righteous men arose who brought the _shekinah_ down from the celestial to the terrestrial regions. They were the following: Abraham brought it down from the seventh to the sixth; Isaac brought it down from the sixth to the fifth; Jacob brought it down from the fifth to the fourth; Levi brought it down from the fourth to the third; Kohat brought it down from the third to the second; Amram brought it down from the second to the first; and Moses brought it down from the celestial to the terrestrial region. . . .

The wicked caused the _shekinah_ to depart from the earth, but the righteous have caused the _shekinah_ to dwell on the earth.

How different this text is from the Second Temple sources reviewed above. In the narratives related in Sirach and _1 Enoch_, divine Wisdom was portrayed as descending from heaven and seeking a home in the earth (successfully in Sirach but unsuccessfully in _1 Enoch_). By contrast, in this rabbinic narrative the direction of the movement of the divine element is reversed! The original home and principal abode of the Shekinah, or divine presence, is not in the heavens but on earth. In the beginning, the Shekinah dwelled on
earth. But human wickedness caused the Shekinah to retreat to the heavens, implying that when the Shekinah is in heaven it is in exile. The Shekinah is redeemed, however, brought back to its rightful abode on earth by the actions of the righteous. Thus, beginning with Abraham, the Shekinah began the return journey until finally, with the construction of the sanctuary by the Israelites, it was safely home.

This text both affirms and undermines the importance of the sanctuary as the site of the spatial conjunction of heaven and earth. Although the passage ends with the Shekinah's descent into the sanctuary, it makes clear that the earth as a whole is the dwelling place of the Shekinah, not just the sanctuary. Moreover, it ties the Shekinah's presence or absence to human morality.

Other texts go further in explicitly connecting the Shekinah to communities or to individuals who are righteous. In *b. Megillah* 29a we read that the Shekinah leaves the Holy Land and goes into exile with the people, choosing Israel the people over Israel the Land, an idea found already in the book of Ezekiel. While according to some texts, the Shekinah plays favorites, attaching only to persons of good lineage (*b. Qiddushin* 70b) or certain personal qualities (*b. Shabbat* 92a), other texts focus on the activities that draw the Shekinah. As might be expected, the Shekinah is said to be found in synagogues and houses of learning (*b. Megillah* 29a), but also:

*b. Berakhot* 6a

Rabin b. R. Adda says in the name of R. Isaac: How do you know that the Holy One, blessed be He, is to be found in the synagogue? Because it is said, “God stands in the divine assembly” (Ps 82:1). And how do you know that if ten people pray together the shekinah is with them? Because it is said, “God stands in the divine assembly” (Ps 82:1). And how do you know that if three are sitting as a court of judges the shekinah is with them? Because it is said, “among the divine beings He pronounces judgment” (Ps 82:1). And how do you know that if two are sitting and studying the Torah together the shekinah is with them? Because it is said, “In this vein have those who revere the Lord been talking to one another. The Lord has heard and noted it, and a scroll of remembrance has been written at His behest concerning those who revere the Lord and esteem His name” (Mal 3:1). . . . And how do you know that even if one man sits and studies the Torah the shekinah is with him? Because it is said, “In every place where I cause My name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you” (Exod 20:21).
b. *Bava Batra* 10a

If a man gives even the smallest coin to a beggar, he is deemed worthy to receive the *shekinah*.

b. *Menahot* 43b

R. Simeon b. Yoḥai says, “Whosoever is scrupulous in the observance of this precept [tsitsit, the wearing of fringes] is worthy to receive the *shekinah*."

These and other sources teach that wherever prayer, judging, Torah study, ritual observance, hospitality, kindness, and other benevolent deeds occur, there too the Shekinah is to be found. The actions and activities of humans create a space in the mundane world into which the Shekinah enters, thereby actualizing the conjunction of worlds and locating heaven on earth.

**CONCLUSION**

Ancient Jews prior to the rise of Islam did more than imagine a better world to come. They sought not only to gain access to it after death but to experience it, even if fleetingly, while yet living. To do so they identified points of conjunction between heaven and earth along three axes: a covenantal axis centering on Torah or wisdom as the bridge between the two, a temporal axis centering on the Sabbath and festivals as the bridge between the two, and a spatial axis centering on the sanctuary or other holy sites as the bridge between the two. While some Second Temple Jews privileged the esoteric Torah hidden in heaven, the Sabbath and festivals as observed in heaven, and the pure sanctuary in heaven as sites for accessing an experience of the next world, a set of texts within rabbinic literature pushed against this trend. Privileging the exoteric Torah given over to Israel on earth, the Sabbath as determined and observed on earth, and earthbound spaces such as the Land and even righteous human communities or individuals as opportunities for accessing an experience of the next world, the rabbis sought to bridge the gap between this world and the world to come so as to locate “heaven on earth.”

**NOTES**

1. Following the Oxford ms.
2. Translations of Sirach are based on the translation of Benjamin G. Wright as found in Albert Pietersma, et al., eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), with standardization of proper names such as Moses and Jacob.
3. The full passage reads: “Things too difficult for you do not seek, and things too strong for you do not scrutinize. The things that have been prescribed for you, think about these, for you have no need of hidden matters. With matters greater than your affairs do not meddle, for things beyond human understanding have been shown to you. For their presumption has led many astray, and their evil fancy has diminished their understanding.” For a discussion of this passage and the claim that “hidden matters” in Sirach refers to knowledge of past occurrences and future events, see Yair Furstenberg, “The Rabbinic Ban on Maaseh Bereshit: Sources, Contexts and Concerns,” in In the Beginning: Jewish and Christian Cosmogony in Late Antiquity (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism; ed. S. Katzan, et al.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 39–63, esp. 45–47.

4. Translations of 1 Enoch are based on George W. E. Nickelsberg et al., eds., 1 Enoch: A New Translation, Based on the Hermeneia Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).


6. This knowledge is referred to as the “books of zeal and wrath” as well as the “books of haste and whirlwind” received by Enoch (39:2).

7. For a full discussion of this passage and a persuasive explanation of the inclusion of the laws of sexual immorality in this list, see Furstenberg, “The Rabbinic Ban.”

8. This passage does not appear in some witnesses due to homoioiteleuton.


10. For the similar second to third century C.E. gnostic myth of the opposition of the evil planets to the soul’s ascent to heaven in order to bring the powers of light to earth, see Peter Schäfer, Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen. Untersuchungen zur rabbinischen Engelvorstellung (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975), 219; for the idea that the angelic opposition to Moses reflects a Jewish adaptation of this gnostic myth, see Joseph P. Schultz, “Angelic Opposition to the Ascension of Moses and the Revelation of the Law,” Jewish Quarterly Review 61 (1971): 282–307, 288. For more on the angelic opposition to the revelation, see Hindy Najman, “Angels at Sinai: Exegesis, Theology and Interpretive Authority,” Dead Sea Discoveries 7:3 (2000): 313–33.

12. The relevant parts of the passage are *t. Avodah Zarah* 5:3–6.

3. One should rather dwell in the Land of Israel even in a town in which the majority of the inhabitants are Gentiles, than outside the Land even in a town in which all the inhabitants are Jews.

—This [ruling] implies that dwelling in the Land of Israel is deemed as important as fulfilling all the commandments in the Torah, and all who are buried in the Land of Israel it is as if they were buried beneath the altar [of the temple in Jerusalem].

5 And [Scripture also] states, “[I am the Lord your God who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt] to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God” (Lev 25:38) [which implies] that as long as you are in the Land of Canaan I will be your God, but when you are not dwelling in the Land of Canaan, it is as if I am not your God.

R. Simeon b. Eleazar says, “Israelites who reside outside the Land are idolaters. How so? If it gentle threw a party for his son and went and invited all the Jews dwelling in his town, even if they should eat and drink [only] their own [food and drink], and their own attendant should stand ready to serve them, they still worship idols, as Scripture states “[. . . lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the Land, and when they play the harlot after their gods and sacrifice to their gods] and one invites you, you eat of his sacrifices” (Exod 34:15).

13. The same metaphor appears in *y. Moed Qatan* 3, 81c, where a priest is severely chastised for proposing to leave the holy Land—even temporarily—to perform the mitzvah of levirate marriage on behalf of his deceased brother. “Your brother,” he is told, “left [the Land] and God is to be blessed for killing him; do you wish to follow in his steps? He abandoned his mother’s bosom and embraced a foreign bosom—would you now commit the same sin?” According to an alternative tradition, the brother’s sin is described as abandoning his mother’s bosom and embracing a foreign bosom.


15. Ibid., 12–13, 41–57.

16. An excellent analysis of this unit may be found in Jeffrey Rubenstein, “Coping with the Virtues of the Land of Israel: An Analysis of Bavli Ketubot 110b–112a,” in *Israel-Diaspora Relations in the Second Temple and Talmudic Periods* (ed. I. Gafni; Jerusalem: Shazar Institute, 2004), 159–88. Relevant excerpts from this extensive unit are as follows

Rab Judah [BA] said: Whoever lives in Babylon is deemed as though he lived in the Land of Israel; for it is said in Scripture, “Away, escape, O Zion, you who dwell in Fair Babylon” (Zech 2:11).
Abaye [BA] stated: We have a tradition that Babylon will not witness the sufferings [that will precede the coming] of the Messiah. . . .

R. Eleazar [PA] stated: The dead outside the Land will not be resurrected; for it is said in Scripture, “And I will give glory in the land of the living” (Ezek 26:20) [implying] the dead of the Land in which I have my desire will be resurrected, but the dead [of the Land] in which I have no desire will not be resurrected.

Abba b. Memel [PA] objected: “Oh, let your dead revive, let corpses arise” (Isa 26:19); does not [the expression] “let your dead revive” refer to the dead of the Land of Israel, and “let corpses arise” to the dead outside the Land; while the text, “And I will give glory in the land of the living” (Ezek 26:20) was written of Nebuchadnezzar concerning whom the All-Merciful said, “I will bring against them a king who is as swift as a stag”? The other replied: Master, I am expounding another Scriptural text: “Who gave breath to the people upon it, and life to those that walk thereon” (Isa 42:5). . . .

Now as to R. Abba b. Memel, what [is the application] he makes of the text, “Who gave breath to the people upon it”? He requires it for [a teaching] like that of R. Abbahu [PA] who stated: Even a Canaanite bondwoman who [lives] in the Land of Israel is assured of a place in the world to come. . . .

“and life to those that walk thereon.” R. Jeremiah b. Abba [BA] said in the name of R. Yoḥanan [PA], that [this teaches that] whoever walks four cubits in the Land of Israel is assured of a place in the world to come.

Now according to R. Eleazar [PA], would not the righteous outside the Land be revived? R. Ilai [PA] replied: [They will be revived] by rolling [to the Land of Israel].

R. Abba Sala the Great demurred: Will not the rolling be painful to the righteous? Abaye [BA] replied: Cavities will be made for them underground.

17. Residence also takes priority over fulfilling the commandment to be fruitful and multiply as we learn from the story about the man who remained unmarried rather than leave the Land in order to marry a particular woman.

18. Thus, immediately following the first set of pro-Land teachings, the Gemara tells the story of Rav Zera who evaded Rav Judah because he wanted to emigrate to the Land, but Rav Judah had taught that “whoever goes up from Babylon to the Land of Israel transgresses a positive commandment” since it is God who will effect the restoration of the exiles. Rav Judah cites a tradition that locates Babylonia just below the Land in status: “As it is forbidden to leave the Land of Israel for Babylon, so it is forbidden to leave Babylon for other countries.” Rabbah and R. Joseph go further in asserting Babylonia’s superiority
to the Land in some respects: “all countries are like dough (an indeterminate admixture as opposed to fine flour) towards the Land of Israel, and the Land of Israel is like dough towards Babylonia.” The two are equated by Rav Judah: “Whoever lives in Babylon is deemed as though he lived in the Land of Israel,” and Abaye maintains that Babylonia will not witness the sufferings that will precede the coming of the Messiah.

19. The passage reads:

It has been taught: R. Simon b. Yoḥai said: Come and see how beloved are Israel in the sight of God: to every place to which they were exiled the shekinah went with them. They were exiled to Egypt and the shekinah was with them, as it says, “Lo, I revealed Myself to your father’s house in Egypt” (1 Sam 2:27). They were exiled to Babylon, and the shekinah was with them, as it says, “for your sake I was sent to Babylon” (Isa 43:14). And when they will be redeemed in the future, the shekinah will be with them, as it says, “Then the Lord your God will return [with] your captivity” (Deut 30:3).

On this text as an expression of local patriotism, see Gafni, Land, 55–56.