VIII. The *Ascension of Isaiah* and the Johannist Constellation

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I. THE POST-JESUS GROUPS AND THE POLITICS OF WRITING

1. *A Multitude of Texts*

Early Christianity is characterised by a multiplicity of texts. The first Jesus followers, after his death, carried forward an important part of their *religious politics* through writing.[1] Their writings were intentionally conceived as persuasive devices addressing existing groups and potential audiences.[2] They

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[1] J. Clifford and G.E. Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986); M. de Certeau, *L'Ecriture de l'Histoire* (Paris, 1993²); J. Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition* (Washington, 2000); D. Barton and U. Papen (eds), *The Anthropology of Writing. Understanding Textually Mediated Worlds* (London and New York, 2010) in particular the introduction: 'What Is the Anthropology of Writing?', *ibid.*, 3-32. D. Fabre, *Écritures ordinaires* (Paris, 1993) and *Par écrit, ethnologie des écritures quotidiennes* (Paris, 1997); E. Norelli, 'Le statut des textes chrétiennes de l'oralité à l'écriture et leur rapport avec l'institution au IIe siècle', in id. (ed.), *Recueils normatifs et canons dans l'antiquité: perspectives nouvelles sur la formation des canons juif et chrétien dans leur contexte culturel* (Geneva, 2004) 147-94 and 'Scrivere per governare. Modi della comunicazzine e rapporti di potere nel cristianesimo antico. Introduzione al convegno', *Rivista di Storia del Cristianesimo* 3 (2006) 5-30.

[2] On audencies see I.H. Henderson, 'Reconstructing Mark's Double Audience', in E. Struthers Malbon (ed.), *Between Author and Audience in Mark, Narration, Characterization, Interpretation* (Sheffield, 2001) 6-28 at 10;

interconnected writers, oral transmitters, addressees and inter-
preters into a large web of mutual relationships. Memories and
narrations concerning Jesus and his followers were written down
for explaining the evolutions of Jesus story and the experiences
of the early groups of his followers after his death.[3] The politics
of writing had powerful effects but inevitably reflected contem-
porarily potentialities and hopes, strength and weakness within
the early Jesus groups.

Within this scenario, striking is the variety of concrete
forms that the politics of writing assumed.[4] A large part of the
dissimilarities of texts, it should be remarked, arose from the
specific necessities of the authors and addressees. In the course
of time the textual materials were increasingly destined to
respond to the needs of real people, to the exigencies of their
lives and social aggregations. They therefore had to envisage
variable and often difficult situations, in a variety of places,
answering concrete different questions. The various and some-
times conflicting expectations of Jesus' followers were trans-
lated into different visions and models, into diverse normative
and ideological textual instruments.

We move from the idea that writing does not crystallize life
or flatten existence. On the contrary, the textual production
highlights important goals, motivates people, binds them to
ideals. In the early decades after Jesus' death, the politics of
writing framed the action of authors who, working on their own
sources or their special information, disseminated and console-

R. Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel
Audiences* (Grand Rapids, 1998).

[3] See R. Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's
Gospel* (Louisville, 2001); I. H. Henderson, 'Prominent Patterns in the Social
Memory of Jesus and Friends', in A. Kirk and T. Thatcher (eds), *Memory,
Tradition and the Texts: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Leiden, 2005)
57-78.

[4] In the first 150 years not only many gospels were produced, but also letters,
collections of Jesus words, theological treatises, liturgical and moral
prescriptions, individual stories, descritions of visions and revelations, etc.

dated the beliefs and conceptions of Jesus' movement. Their work gave life to an important phenomenon of cultural re-interpretation of the movement itself.

Scholars agree that the writing activity of the various authors was not supported by the same sources or coincident processes of transmission. It is evident that since authors' locations, methods and approaches were diverse, the final interpretations and comprehensions may be dissonant. Read and diffused according to diversified perspectives, the texts had precise consequences on the life of Jesus' groups, on their mutual relationships, on their dominant or marginal conditions of life.

Within the environments of Jesus' first followers, the activity of writing started early. The cultural position and strength of groups, from the earliest times, were greatly influenced by the production of a multitude of texts. Decade after decade, in different places and settlements, inside and outside the Land of Israel, numerous authors were engaged in foundational and strategical narrations. On the one hand, their efforts seemingly intended to justify their projects and visions, defend their beliefs – and eventually contrast adversary positions – while, on the other, they had the inevitable effect of building exclusive patterns and models concerning Jesus and those who had gathered around him (their social aggregations and religious practices).

In the course of time, the strategy of writing gave distinctive foundations to many dis-homogeneous groups. Over the decades following Jesus' death, writers of different kinds gave birth to a multiplicity of original memories and reconstructions. Through these writings – increasingly considered by each group as trustworthy tools for the evaluation of the vicissitudes of Jesus and his movement – the heritage of the primitive Jesus movement was largely re-structured and transformed. It is not hard to imagine how individual members of early Jesus groups were deeply dependent on their 'authorized' written witnesses (and on the groups that produced them). The relationship with specific types of writings became for many of them a tool for defining

boundaries and identities. It became, at certain levels and in many senses, an instrument of self-designation and consolidation.

To view these cultural profiles in another way, it could be said that any transmission, about Jesus or about the post-Jesus movement, was rooted in local written procedures and distinctive textualizing tendencies. Because of their crucial function of diffusion, texts frequently responded to different principles of selection and elaboration of materials. Many processes originated from the innovative and radical choices of authors or specific local groups. Original and often sophisticated texts – condensing distinct local orientations or convictions – were produced and used by localised aggregates of followers.

The only reasonable consideration we can make is that the activity of writing and of diffusion of texts played an enduring but dishomogeneous role in the formation of attitudes of early Jesus' groups. According to the different subjectivities and cultural-ethnic backgrounds of the authors, the texts turned out to be decisive devices for the cultural and doctrinal qualification of the multifaceted stages of the post-Jesus movement. We must admit, in any case, that the production of texts does not simply reveal autonomy and distance among Jesus' groups but, not rarely, marks specific concatenations among them.

This means that it is practically certain that many behaviors within the post-Jesus movement might have lead to cases of open struggle but also of symbiotic coexistence. It is this alternation and interpenetration of dissimilar situations within the world of Jesus' followers that must be carefully taken into account in order to avoid unrealistic or idealistic images of their life.

These considerations merely intend to highlight that, as the activity of writing spread, what was created was not a monolithic 'Christianity'. A multitude of visions, perspectives and orientations came about. It stimulated the first aggregates of followers and inevitably characterized their narrations. On the basis of this fragmentation that marked the early post-Jesus

movement, we need to comment on some aspects of the crucial link between 'texts and groups'.

2. *Locating Texts within Groups*

Once that, for a variety of reasons, a writing strategy is inaugurated, one finds oneself conditioned by the principles and conventional literary usages, by the logic and aim of textualization, taken as a stable ongoing process. We believe that the production of a text depends, more or less consistently, both on the systemic structure of the language and on the contingent social functions of the textualization itself.

We must take into consideration the logic of a writing from a specific point of view. It is through writing that people often elaborate projects, take decisions and make themselves 'identifiable, adequate and efficient'.[5] This means that the act of writing inevitably has an impact on ordinary practical and essential forms of human aggregation. It normally allows one to identify oneself as 'belonging' to a functioning social organisation, and as acting within qualifying cultural grounds.

This state of things makes it evident that, where a process of *group building* is under way (as in the case of the groups of Jesus followers), the production of a text inevitably becomes functional to the perspectives of integration of the group and must respond to its specific needs. It becomes a crucial tool for defining the actual social life of subjects, not simply for expressing theoretical points or abstract ideals.

It is worth repeating that, since each text is rooted in a well-defined and well-qualified context, it may easily be the origin of relevant sectorial strategies. In any society, a new text may solicit or trigger a range of more or less positive confrontations among individuals and different kinds of groups. Ultimately, it may have unexpected overwhelming effects on real life. This

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[5] D. Fabre, *Par Écrit. Ethnologie des écriture quotidiennes* (Paris, 1997) 5.

hypothetical scheme may elucidate rather well the condition of early Jesus' groups.

A text may take the form of a letter, discourse, announcement, brief note and so on. These literary genres carry great weight and are generally responsible for important effects on human life. Frequently, from the genre of the text, we understand the content of the scripture, its destination, context and purpose. Some types of texts simply suggest mechanisms (rites, symbolic gestures, cult procedures) for the legitimation of subjects and their activities. Other times they seek to impose a high religious standard or shared moral code. The use of different genres may favor or prevent achievements in an irreversible way. Under certain circumstances, a letter may be more incisive than an elaborate normative document. Not infrequently, it is an extensive and detailed narrative that may be necessary to convey sophisticated symbols, capable of intensifying beliefs and encouraging actions.

It seems clear that, at certain social levels, written texts potentially lead to innovative situations and new cultural evolutions. They may encourage the struggle of one group against another, and eventually lead to the defeat of adversaries and enemies. Sometimes, a written text may offer the possibility of internal harmony within the group or favour pacification and tolerance outside. In all cases, the procedure of textualizing marks an alteration of the *status quo*. Since a text suggests precise worldviews and opens new ways, it requires decisions and responses. It is something that increase human creativity.

The politics of writing is frequently the result of a rather long series of acts (projects, researches, rejections, adaptations and agreements) undertaken by an entire group. The group's life is conditioned by the creative work of the authors, by their skill and experience.

In conclusion, writing corresponds to self-promotion or self-defence. To start an act of writing means often to be in search of a legitimate way to give explanations and obtain a reasonable consensus. Equally, it often means being engaged in the

interpretation of complex mental trajectories and/or practical behavior of precise human beings in limited and precisely located groups.

3. *Internal and External Links among Texts: The Constellation of Texts*

Within the post-Jesus movement, the work of writing must be conceived as a strategic process set up by many groups of his followers not by one undifferentiated, homogeneous, abstract Jesus 'community'. It is directed to ground and legitimate the aims of specific persons, to attain vital targets in concrete settings. Our hypothesis is that, within the first aggregates of Jesus' followers, each text had a structural relationship with other texts of its group, but could also have links with texts belonging to other Jesus' groups. The diversity of the two kind of connections is evident and is extremely relevant because it permits to perceive the complex relational networks built through writing activities. Therefore, the strategy of writing cannot be envisaged and understood without referring to and taking in due account this polarization. Obviously, the polari-zation we have in mind is not rigid or universal. In essence, each text may be imagined as part of a *series of internal texts*, belonging to one environment of Jesus' followers. Contem-porarily, each text may be seen as something in dialogue – with more or less polemical modalities – with a number of *external writings* belonging to other followers' aggregates.

The above considerations drives to believe that it is necessary to understand – within the early post-Jesus movement – how all this works, and what it brings about (assimilation, formal or informal interdependence, distance, lack of coordi-nation and so on). It can be intuited that to localise one text in its group may concretely mean to clarify its specificity and function (in respect to the varied Jesus groups). This, today, is the urgent task of the cultural history of early Jesus groups.

We define all writings that have a strict reciprocal relation as a 'constellation' of texts.[6] The term constellation does not have a simply classificatory function. It is used to indicate a network of thematic connections among texts (and also among their sources).

The textual network that is implied by the constellations of texts originates from a shared *nucleus* of systemic conditions, which also depend from the mental, cultural and territorial situation of a group or of a set of individuals. It is the existence of such nucleus of systemic data that requires attention and analysis. It is true, however, that in the same constellation the solutions given to the systemic issues or questions may be dissimilar from case to case. This may depend on the fact that a number of persons or groups that, at a deep level, share the same systemic basis or disposition more or less differ in terms of social visions and expectations (and even in religious practice). Any hypothesis and reconstruction concerning constellations' contents and boundaries may not ignore such types of similarities and dissimilarities.

In substance, within each constellation, specific thematic *connections* highlight concrete correlations between groups. Thus, it is possible to affirm that a single text may always be constituent part of a system or systemic disposition. This means that a constellation generally implies not simply a variety of written texts, of diverse weight and importance, but also a bond among groups. It is clear that the geographical origin of the writings attributed to a constellation is not the determining element. It is their reciprocal dialectic relation – depending on

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[6] The concept of 'constellation' derived from astronomy is largely used in the fields of philosophy and psychology. 'Ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements. [. . .] Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars' (W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, tr. J. Osborne [London, 1977] 34). For C.G. Jung, a constellation is the activation of a psychic personal complex or an archetypal content. A similar concept is that of archipelago.

the same nucleus of systemic questions – that is important for evaluating functions and effects of a comprehensive textual constellation.

At a very general level, four conditions permit us to discern if different texts belong to the same constellation. The first condition concerns whether the texts try to give *answers* to the same fundamental systemic questions. The fact that identical or similar questions appear (and continue to reappear) in a variety of texts, and epochs, and that these texts suggest different solutions, may mean that their authors lived in similar fundamental conditions but also, to some extent, in diversified social-historical contexts. Second, we must consider whether different texts present similar *conflicts*, disputes over analogous issues, controversies or disagreements between persons or groups. The presence of similar conflicts is the symptom of concrete relationships between groups, and permits us to discern a network among social-religious agents. A third point is whether the texts presuppose the *observance of similar performances*, practices or rituals (e.g. purification and commensality rituals, prophetic acts, healing techniques, etc.). The textual descriptions of similar performances can be the symptom of deep ties between texts, on the one hand, and groups, on the other. Fourth, it is necessary to ascertain whether there is a literary *relationship* (e.g. linguistic and terminological similarities, homogeneous structure of discourse) among them. We mention literary relationships only at the last point, since our investigation principally concerns actions, functions, structural performances. The contemporary presence of these four elements may constitute the proof of contacts between groups.

The current state of research leads us to believe that, at least in the great Mediterranean cities (probably from the last decades of the first century) the 'fractionation'[7] of early Jesus' groups

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[7] P. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus. Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis, 2003); A. Destro and M. Pesce, 'Plurality of Christian Groups at Antioch in the First Century: The Constellations of Texts', in

was a widespread reality. This coexistence of diverse groups of Jesus within the same city probably brought about an enormous quantity of contacts and contrasts among them. In other words, many groups in one place encourage or impose contacts and correlations between their writers and their writings. At the analytical level, the identification of a constellation of texts may be helpful in solving the problem of locating a writing in a particular group or situation. The existence of a constellation of texts is, quite reasonably, an indirect evidence of the dialectical processses experienced by early Jesus followers.

All this means that the texts, produced by each group, are to be considered as inevitably embedded into complex social backgrounds, made up of different movements and associations. It is likely that the authors located in a particular place produced written texts on the basis of their knowledge of the texts coming from other groups of followers, in response to their orientations.

Within the same town or territory, how can we imagine the concrete relationship among the texts and the groups to which they belong? Archaeological studies have highlighted that each Jesus group was organized around a primary domestic structure. The place where the Jesus people gathered, as is known, is generally called a house-church. In our view, however, the domestic context it is not completely adequate to describe the social organization of the first Jesus groups.[8] For writing a text, the resources of a household may not be sufficient. It is questionable whether, for the production of the first writings, it was necessary to have any technical support (something similar to a *scriptorium*), or a specialized apparatus for classification and selection

L. Padovese (ed.), *Atti dell'Ottavo Simposio Paolino, Paolo tra Tarso e Antiochia* (Rome, 2004) 139-56; eid., 'Constellations of Texts in Early Christianity. The Gospel of the Savior and Johannist Writings', *Annali di storia dell'Esegesi* 22 (2005) 337-53; P. Trebilco, 'Studying "Fractionation" in Earliest Christianity in Ephesus and Rome', in C. Breytenbach and J. Frey (eds), *Reflections on the Early Christian History of Religion – Erwägungen zur frühchristlichen Religionsgeschichte* (Leiden, 2012) 299-333.
[8] Destro and Pesce, 'Plurality of Christian Groups', 139-56.

of materials.[9] What was needed was a good ideological competence concerning religious traditions, techniques of memorization, rituals and theological questions, sacred texts, and literary transmission. Techniques of preservation of the written materials had also to be known by users and addressees. Households were crucial in many senses, but not sufficiently equipped for these necessities.

We have examples of a second social configuration, in addition to the aggregative model of the household and house-church, in which religious discussions, teaching and writing took place. Justin, approximately in the mid-second century in Rome, offered some insights into contexts and locations that we could consider as places of cultural production or schools. Also in the case of the Johannist texts, the act of writing seems to be the result of an activity of a school. In the Third Letter of John, which belongs to the Johannist constellation, the text is directed to two householders, Gaius and Diotrephes.[10] In this letter, the Presbyter who is writing is also the person who sends out itinerant preachers. He seems to be their leader, host and teacher. He assumes a plurality of tasks. He is probably located, rather than in a household, in a kind of school, a place of production of texts, and of training and dispatching of authorized preachers.

The analysis of a constellation of texts does not have the intention to discover whether the texts shared a historical or geographical origin. The early followers of Jesus were obliged to move from place to place. The different groups (for example Johannists or Paulinists) that lived in different towns and periods, in the Mediterranean areas, developed diverse types, forms,

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[9] See R.A. Derrenbacker, 'The "External and Psychological Cindition under which the Synoptic Gospels Were Written": Ancient Compositional Practices and the Synptic Problem', in P. Foster *et al*. (eds), *New Studies in the Synoptic Problem* (Leuven, 2011) 435-58.

[10] A. Destro and M. Pesce, 'Codici di ospitalità. Il presbitero, Diotrefe, Gaio, itineranti delle chiese e membri estranei', in L.Padovese (ed.), *Atti dell' IX Simposio di Efeso su S. Giovanni Apostolo* (Rome, 2003) 121-35.

and styles of writing. The primary attempt is to throw light upon aggregates of texts (endowed with common systemic features) that may become manifest at different times and in different places. Because of their mobility, the early groups of Jesus followers interrelated with many subjects and contributed to the circulation of images and views contained in their texts. Thanks to the constellation model, it is possible to individuate the recipients of a certain number of writings, even when we are unable to formulate hypotheses concerning the exact place in which the documents were produced.

II. The Ascension of Isaiah as a Part of the Johannist Constellation

We attempted in a previous contribution to identify a constellation of texts (that we call 'Johannist') constituted by the Gospel of John, the three letters of John, Revelation, *Ascension of Isaiah* (=*AscIs*), the fragmentary gospel of P.Oxy. 840, the Gospel of Thomas, the Apocryphon of John, the Gospel of Judas and the Acts of John. In that context, we had taken into consideration also the so-called Gospel of the Saviour,[11] but its date of composition is today subject of intense debate. The prevalent opinion seems now to exclude the second century. A. Suciu, for example, suggested that 'the true context in which the text must be inserted is the literature of the 5th-6th century post-Chalcedonian Coptic Egypt'.[12] If this text was not produced in the second century C.E., it can be not taken as an element of the Johannist constellation. It can be considered only as a moment of the history of the heavenly journey, one of the most important

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[11] Destro and Pesce, 'Constellations of Texts in Early Christianity'.

[12] A. Suciu, *Apocryphon Berolinense/Argentoratense (Previously Known as the Gospel of the Savior). Reedition of P. Berol. 22220, Strasbourg Copte 5-7 and Qasr el-Wizz Codex ff. 12v-17r with Introduction and Commentary* (Tübingen, 2015) forthcoming.

religious practices (or literary patterns) of which we have evidence in the Johannist constellation.[13]

In our hypothesis the *Ascension of Isaiah* is part of the Johannist constellation. In the following pages we summarize the numerous elements leading to relate *AscIs* to this constellation and in particular to the Gospel of John.

2.1 *The systemic question of the Johannist constellation and the Ascension of Isaiah*

a. Ascension of Isaiah. The systemic questions faced by *AscIs* originate from its cosmological vision. In it, a series of fundamental cosmic fractures hinder the communication between the heavens above and the earth below. The divine and the human world are separated not only by the seven heavens, but also by the atmosphere dominated by demonic powers. The division of the universe is underlined in *AscIs* 10:8. The 'Lord Christ' must 'descend in all the Heavens, then […] in the firmament and in this world […] to the angel of the Sheol, but not […] to the Hagual'. The cosmos of *AscIs* consists fundamentally of three parts: a zone under the earth's surface, the earth, the heavens. The zone under the earth is divided in two sections, one above the other: Sheol, where the dead await the resurrection (10:8.10; 11:19), and Hagual where the wicked angels will be thrown (10:8; see also 4:14). Above the earth we find, first, the air (10:30-31) and, then, the firmament (7:9-12; 10:29). Above them are the heavens. Each heaven consists of a physical space delimited by two boundaries, one below and one above. They are superposed one over the other, but between

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[13] We do not negate the relation between some pre-atthean and some pre-*AscIs* traditions that E. Norelli has many times extensively shown (see, for example, 'L'AI e il Vangelo di Matteo', in *L'ascensione di Isaia. Studi su un apocrifo al crocevia dei cristianesimi* [Bologna, 1994] 115-66). Each text of the constellation has its own network of relations with differentt writings of other groups of Jesus followers. Also the last redaction of the Gospel of John shows relations with the Gospel of Matthew or the the pre-Matthean transmission (see for example John 21).

them empty spaces exist, so that it is necessary to go through these intermediate empty spaces in order to pass from one heaven to the other. The altitude of each heaven is dissimilar. Air, firmament and first heaven are probably a half or a third of the others (7:18). The distance between heavens is the same until the third heaven, becoming greater between the third and fourth.[14]

AscIs speaks of seven heavens, but in reality the number is higher, since after the fifth heaven the air of the sixth (8:1-15) and the air of the seventh (9:1-5) are added. The air and the firmament above the earth are clearly distinguished from the upper heavens because they are inhabited by wicked angels. In the firmament Sammael/Satan dominates with his angels (7:9-12; 10:29). A clear differentiation exists between the first five and the upper heavens. This can be considered as a first discontinuity in the cosmic structure. The Beloved, in fact, will not start to transform himself assuming angelic form in the seventh and in the sixth heavens, but only from the fifth. *AscIs* speaks in fact of the five heavens as a unit (8:19-21; 10:9, Ethiopic text). Only in the five lower heavens are the angels divided into two parts and their glory becomes greater passing from the link to the right section. Another discontinuity in the cosmic structure exists between the second and third heavens. In the latter, the memory of any earthly event is cancelled or avoided (7:26). Planetary considerations are not absent since, in this setting, *AscIs* speaks of 'the angel of the sun and that of the moon' (4:18). In the cosmic structure of *AscIs* a third, and fundamental, fracture is represented by the air and the firmament, which separate the earth from the heavens and hinder communication between them.

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[14] M. Pesce, 'Presupposti per l'utilizzazione storica dell'Ascensione di Isaia. Formazione del testo; genere letterario; cosmologia angelica', in id. (ed.), *Isaia il Diletto e la Chiesa. Visione ed esgesi profetica cistiano-primitiva dell'Ascensione di Isaia* (Brescia, 1983) 63-69.

The systemic question that necessarily arises from the cosmic fractures consists in how to put in relation the divine and the human world influenced by Sammael/Satan. The answer to this systemic question is given by the descent on earth of a heavenly pre-existing being, the Beloved. However the descent of the Beloved introduces a series of problems. First, how this being, who belongs to the divine world and participates in the divine glory, can communicate with human beings and how the power of Sammael/Satan can be overcome. Second, how can he present himself down on earth, without revealing himself in his glory to the intermediate beings of the heavens and the demonic powers of the atmosphere? Transformation is the solution to these problems. The Beloved transforms himself progressively in the form of the different kinds of angels situated in the seven heavens. Ultimately, he adopts the form of a man (10:7-11; 10:20-31). It is this transformation that deceives angels, demons and also human beings. It substantially allows communication between the Beloved and human beings.

b. The Gospel of John. Also in John, the dominion of Satan over the world is connected to his cosmic position between earth and heaven. The communication between human beings and the divine world is impossible without removing 'the ruler of this world' (see John 12:31-32; 14:30-31; 16:8-11)[15] from his location on earth (12:31-32).

2.2 *Christology and Cosmic Structure*

The christological conception of the *AscIs* is very close to that of the Gospel of John.[16] In *AscIs*, as we have said, Jesus, called the

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[15] Cfr. J.L. Kovacs, '"Now Shall the Ruler of This World Be Driven Out": Jesus' Death as Cosmic Battle in John 12:20-36', *JBL* 114 (1995) 227-47.

[16] M. Simonetti in 1983 rightly shows how the christology of *AscIs* rectifies an angelic christology under the influence of a Logos christology: 'Note sulla cristologia dell'Ascensione di Isaia', in Pesce, *Isaia, il Diletto e la chiesa*, 193, 207-208; E. Norelli, 'La filiación en la *Ascensión de Isaías*', in

Beloved, is (like the Johannine Logos) a supernatural pre-existing being who is slightly inferior to God, and slightly superior to the Holy Spirit (9:27-40).[17]

The christology of the *AscIs* resembles that of the Gospel of John, chiefly for the fact that the two texts presuppose that the descent of the Beloved or Logos can only take place by means of a transformation (*AscIs* 10:9; John 1:14).[18] This change is a systemic necessity requested by the cosmological structure and by the pre-existence of the Beloved/Logos. The pre-existent Beloved/Logos possesses a divine glory that is concealed, obscured by the human form he assumes.

The conception of a pre-existing supernatural being endowed with divine glory and only slightly inferior to God himself, is connected, both in *AscIs* and the Gospel of John, to the structure of the cosmos and its internal fractures. It permits a cognitive and redeeming contact between believers and God (through the Beloved). It has however also a legitimizing function in relation to Jewish contexts (since the existence of a pre-existent supernatural being slightly inferior to God is demonstrated by the conception following which the biblical prophet, Isaiah, affirms the presence of a second divine figure in heaven near to God). It is a biblical prophet that permits to affirm the existence of a second power in heaven that has taken the form of the human person of Jesus. The *AscIs* intends to demonstrate the

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P. de Navascués *et al.* (eds), *Filiación. Cultura pagana, religión de Israel, orígenes del cristianismo* V (Madrid, 2014), 243-74; Ch.A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology. Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden, 1998).

[17] In *AscIs* 11:30 the Beloved transforms himself in an angel. The Spirit, on the contrary, is an angel: 'the angel of the Spirit' (11:33). See Norelli *ad locum*. His subordination to the Beloved is also clear in 3:17. This inferiority seems presupposed also in John since the Spirit is sent by the 'Father' (14:26; 15:26; see also 16:13), but is given by Jesus (20:22).

[18] *AscIs* 1:5; 3:13; 8:10; 9:30; 10:9-10.15.18.19-21.23.26-27.30; 11:23.25.29. The terms *morphê* or *metamorphoô* are absent in John, but the *Logos* changes his form and becomes *sarx* (1:14).

pre-existence of Jesus as a heavenly being as part of the Jewish vision of the divine heavenly world.[19]

Christology has the function to give an answer to the systemic question of the inter-relation between the divine and human domains. It is therefore inevitable that a series of Christological conflicts characterizes the Johannist constellation. In the First Letter of John, the main conflict in the field of theological conceptions is probably about christology (4:2-4).

The fact that christology constitutes a major object of conflicts in the Johannist constellation is also demonstrated by the Gospel of Thomas (another text that in our view belongs to this constellation). Also between John and Thomas, in fact, it is christology which provokes fundamental conflicts (EvThom 1 // John 1:1; EvThom 77. 50,1. 11,3. 24,3. 61,5 // John 1:19; 8:12; 9:5).[20] It is well known that the Gospel of Thomas has a more or less indirect relation with the Gospel of John. It reports, for example, a series of sayings of Jesus close to those encountered in John.[21] J.-D. Kaestli rightly observes:

> Il est frappant de constater que ces échos johanniques se trouvent surtout dans les logia en forme de dialogue qui présentent des affinités avec le gnosticisme (log. 12-13;

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[19] In this sense *AscIs* presents inner-Jewish polemics, in which a Jewish group tries to legitimize itself through a particular interpretation of normative Jewish texts: K. Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium. 1.Teilband: Kapitel 1-10* (Stuttgart, 2000) 25-30.

[20] M. Grosso, *Vangelo secondo Tommaso. Introduzione, traduzione e commento* (Rome, 2011) 145, 156, 159-160, 220-21 presents an accurate comparison of John's and Thomas' christologies.

[21] R.E. Brown, 'The Gospel of Thomas and St. John's Gospel', *NTS* 9 (1963) 155-77. After Browns article: A. DeConick, *Voices of the Mystics: Early Christian Discourse in the Gospel of John and Thomas and Other Ancient Christian Literature* (Sheffield, 2001); M. Grosso, *Detti segreti. Il vangelo di Tommaso nell'Antichità* (Acireale and Rome, 2013) 285-98 (with a list of parallels); R. Uro, 'Thomas' I-Sayings and the Gospel of John', in id., *Thomas at the Crossroad. Essays on the Gospel of Thomas* (Edinburgh, 2003) 33-64.

18; 24; 37; 43; 51; 52; 61; 91). À mes yeux, ces logia à resonnance johannique ont une autre origine et se rattachent à une autre couche rédactionnelle que les materiaux synoptique.[22]

The fact that some words of Jesus in John's Gospel present affinities with some of Jesus' sayings in Thomas probably means that its author had contact with the same lines of transmissions that influenced the redaction of the Gospel of Thomas.[23]

2.3 *Prophetism in John and in AscIs*

At the level of the composition of the group, prophetism is of great relevance in the *AscIs*.[24] Chapters 1-5 devote great space to the actions of prophets; *AscIs* 6 presents what is probably the most accurate early Christian description of an ecstatic state related to a prophetic heavenly journey; chapters 6-11 describe the visions of a prophet. In brief, the text reveals a very deep knowledge of the existence of prophets among groups of early Jesus followers (and of their rituals and practices) and could be the expression of prophetic circles among them.[25]

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[22] J.-D. Kaestli, 'L'utilisation de l'*Évangile de Thomas* dans la recherche actuelle sur les paroles de Jésus', in D. Marguerat *et al.* (eds), *Jésus de Nazareth. Nouvelles approches d'une énigme* (Geneva, 1998) 373-95 at 393.

[23] E. Pagels, *Beyond Belief. The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York, 2003) 30-74; R. Uro, 'John and Thomas in Conflict?', in J. D. Turner and A. McGuire (eds), *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years* (Leiden, 1997) 361-80; id., 'Thomas and the Beloved Disciple', in id., *Thomas at the Crossroad*, 65-88; C.W. Skinner, *John and Thomas: Gospels in Conflict? Johannine Characterization and the Thomas Question* (Eugene, 2009).

[24] 1:5-6; 2:9-10.12-15; 3:1.6-7.10.19.27.31; 4:20; 5:2.12-13; 6:3.5-7.14.16; 7:1-2; 11:16.41; Bremmer, this volume, Chapter I.

[25] E. Norelli, 'L'ascensione di Isaia nel quadro del profetismo cristiano', *Ricerche storico-bibliche* 5 (1993) 123-48 and 'Sulla pneumatologia dell'Ascensione di Isaia', in Pesce, *Isaia, il Diletto e la chiesa*, 222-28. The function of the Spirit in John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13 is similar to the function of the Spirit in *AscIs* (see Norelli, 'Sulla pneumatologia dell'Ascensione di

The function of the prophets is manifold in the social group of the *AscIs*. They receive visions (the vision of chapter 6-10; the three visions of chapter 4:2-13.14-17.18; 11:2-16.17-22; see also: 3:13.31; 4:19-20; 5:1-7; 11:38.41); they interpret Jewish Scriptures (4:19-21) and have a leading position in the group (3:21-31). They also write and produce texts (4:19). In *AscIs*, the prophetic interpretation of the canonical books (for example, Isaiah) seems to consist of the insertion in their narrative structure of some christological revelations attributed to Isaiah. The prophetic experience apparently consists of the capacity to perceive the true nature of Jesus as a heavenly being, which is present but also concealed in his body. The prophet is also able to understand the canonical prophetic revelations of the Bible and the words of Jesus himself. The relevance of prophetism is equally evident, within Johannist constellation, in Revelation and the Gospel of John. We cannot repeat here what we have affirmed, on other occasions.[26]

Some aspects of John's representation of Jesus are typically prophetic. Actually, in John the title of prophet is *explicitly* attributed to Jesus (4:19.44; 6:14; 7:40.52; 9:17). John underlines that Jesus communicates his prophetic capacity to the disciples through the transmission of the Spirit (20:19-23). The Johannine groups therefore seem to conceive themselves in continuity with Jesus' prophetism.

Johannine prophetism is based on the transmission of the Spirit, perceived as a supernatural source of knowledge, which grants a deep understanding of the Scriptures and also of the words of Jesus (as shown in John 2:22). The writing of the Gospel of John seems to be conceived by its author/s as the

Isaia', 238-41 ('Lo Spirito fa conoscere Cristo', *ibid.*, 238); R.G. Hall, 'The Ascension of Isaiah: Community, Situation, Date, and Place in Early Christianity', *JBL* 109 (1990) 289-306.

[26] A. Destro and M. Pesce, 'Il profetismo e la nascita di una religione: il caso del Giovannismo', in G. Filoramo (ed.), *Carisma profetico, fattore di innovazione religiosa* (Brescia, 2003) 87-106.

work of prophets who write under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.[27]

The activity of the Johannist prophets seems, therefore, also to presuppose the existence of some forms of Johannist 'schools', or a kind of cooperation among prophets in their activities. These prophets examine the Jewish Holy Scriptures (John 2:22) and Jewish books, e.g. the Apocalypse of Abraham (8:56), the Vision of Isaiah or the *AscIs* (12:41); they collect (and give an interpretation to) the words of Jesus (2:22; 14:26; 15:26; 16:14). Probably, this prophetic activity was the place in which many Johannist writings were produced.

In conclusion, in John there is evidence of the existence of (a) experiences of contact with the supernatural world; (b) ecstatic-prophetic events taking the form of the celestial journey; (c) a hermeneutic technique, which seems to imply a school activity; (d) the production of a text as an expression of prophetic activity.

We could perhaps add that, in John's Gospel, an evolution can be perceived in three distinct phases: Jesus, the beloved disciple, and the Johannist prophets. While, in the first two phases, the search for a contact with the divine world has a character of exceptionality, in the third, Johannist prophetism appears as a significant experience of a group, and sometimes of all the members of the group. It appears as a 'school' phenomenon, with its own hermeneutic methods and procedures, applied to the words of Jesus and the Scriptures. At this level, within the Johannist movement, we detect an internal struggle between a prophecy that is considered true, and one that is judged false.[28]

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[27] Destro and Pesce, *ibid.*, in particular 98-101, 104-05.

[28] Alongside the prophets, 'pseudo-prophets' also appear (see 1 John 4:1-3), meaning that the dependency on prophetic revelations, among the different Johannist groups in conflict with each other, led to accusations of false prophecy among rival prophets. In this third phase, Johannist prophetism created above all texts endowed with authority. These texts, in many ways, define the Johannist groups, providing their legitimacy.

The concept of constellation that we have suggested permits to understand systemic elements that some texts have in common,[29] and also the spatial occupations and the conditions of cohabitations that they presuppose. The activity of such prophetic groups probably took place in towns where different orientations of Jesus followers developed and coexisted with Jewish groups.[30] We have evidence of a close local relation between Jesus' followers and Jews at least until the middle of the second century (see, for example, Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* 47). As we have already said, in many towns, not only households, but also some kinds of schools, had an important role in building a constellation of related texts.

2.4. *The Heavenly Journey*

The ritual practice of the heavenly journey is of central importance in *AscIs*. By heavenly journey, we mean the ascension of a visionary or prophet through the heavens. The aim of the journey is to reach and see the dwelling of God and receive specific divine revelations.[31]

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[29] Destro and Pesce, 'Plurality of Christian Groups at Antioch'.

[30] On the Johannine school, see R.A. Culpepper, *The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the Johannine School Hypotyhesis Based on an Investigation of the Nature of Ancient Schools* (Missoula, 1975); E. Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Quest for the Johannine School. The Apocalypse and the Fourth Gospel', *NTS* 23 (1977) 402-27; M. Marino, *Custodire la parola. Il verbo THPEIN nell'Apocalisse alla luce della tradizione giovannea* (Bologna, 2003) 179-89.

[31] On the heavenly journey, see A. Segal, 'Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and their Environment', in ANRW II.23.2 (Berlin, 1980) 1333-94; and our two articles (with bibliography): 'The Heavenly Journey in Paul. Tradition of a Jewish Apocalyptic Literary Genre or Cultural Practice in a Hellenistic-Roman Context?', in T.G. Casey and J. Taylor (eds), *Paul's Jewish Matrix* (Rome and Mahwah, 2011) 167-200 and 'Die Himmelsreise bei Paulus. Eine "religiöse" Praktik der antiken Welt', in W. Stegemann and R.E. DeMaris (eds), *Alte Texte in neuen Kontexten. Wo steht die sozialwissenschaftliche Bibelexegese?* (Stuttgart, 2014) forthcoming. See also M. Smith, 'Ascent to the Heavens and the Beginning of Christianity,' in

According to *AscIs* 6-11, Isaiah, during his visit to King Hezekiah, experienced a particular form of contact with the supernatural (6:1-14). He ascended through the seven heavens and could see God, the Son and the Holy Spirit. His ascension is followed by his re-descent to earth. The phenomenon is presented as an ecstatic experience: the journey takes place during a collective prophetic liturgy (6:3-6) in which a prophet is speaking.[32] During his speech a revelation through the Holy Spirit takes place (6:8-9). Then, suddenly Isaiah ceases to speak, his eyes are open, but his breath is suspended. The body remains on earth while the spirit is carried to the heavens (6:10-12). The confrontation between this kind of phenomenology of ecstasy and other contemporary descriptions of the bodily transformations connected with the heavenly journey[33] induces to the hypothesis that the text is the product of prophetic groups that are referring to their own practices, and not repeating mere literary or theological motifs.

This ritual act had a crucial systemic function in order to communicate with the divine world. It permitted to bypass the radical fractures existing between human beings and the place of God above the heavens. The experience of the heavenly journey appears in other texts of the Johannist constellation as the

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his *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh II*, ed. S. J. D. Cohen (Leiden, 1996) 47-67; id., 'Two Ascended to Heaven – Jesus and the Author of 4Q491', *ibid.*, 68-78; J.J. Collins (ed.), *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Missoula, 1979); G.W. Savran, *Encountering the Divine. Theophany in Biblical Narrative* (New York, 2005); L. Arcari, 'Sui rapporti tra Apocalissi 'con viaggio ultraterreno' e 'senza viaggio ultraterreno'. Indagine per una 'storia' del genere apocalittico', *Henoch* 26 (2004) 64-84; M.Tubiana, 'Il viaggio celeste in Paolo: un pattern per l'interpretazione di un'esperienza?', *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi* 29 (2012) 83-117.

[32] Forty prophets and sons of prophets are attending (6:3).

[33] A. Destro and M. Pesce, 'Le voyage céleste. Tradition d'un genre ou schéma culturel en contexte?', in N. Belayche and J.-D. Dubois (eds), *L'Oiseau et le poisson. Cohabitations religieuses dans les mondes grec et romain* (Paris, 2011) 361-71.

Gospel of John and Revelation.[34] According to April deConick, the heavenly journey was also widely practiced in the group represented by the Gospel of Thomas.[35]

2.5 *Soteriology*

Soteriology is another issue in which *AscIs* and John demonstrate affinities. Salvation does not consist of the coming of the Kingdom of God, but – in *AscIs* – of the destruction of the power of Beliar (1:3; 4:14; 10:12) or, in John, in the expulsion of the ruler of this world (John 12:31-32; 14:30-31; 16:8-11).[36] It is fundamental that, in John, the expulsion of the ruler of this world is strictly connected to the possibility, for the followers of Jesus, to ascend to heaven:

> Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself (12:31-32).

This is of fundamental importance. The ascension to God represents an essential condition for salvation. However, the ascension to God cannot take place if the devil's power is not destroyed. This is identical in John and in *AscIs*.[37] Expulsion of the ruler of this world and ascension (that implies heavenly journey) are substantially connected.

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[34] And the later *Gospel of the Savior*.

[35] DeConick, *Voices of the Mystics,* 86-108.

[36] See Kovacs, '"Now Shall the Ruler of This World Be Driven Out"'.

[37] See also J. Knight, 'The Origin and Significance of the Angelomorphic Christology in the Ascension of Isaiah', *JTS* NS 63 (2012) 66-105 at 84: 'The ascending Beloved One obtains the submission of these beings, rectifying the cosmic problem which 7.9-12 implies has ramifications for people on earth. The work's soteriology has neither meaning nor context if the firmament angels do not worship the Beloved One in chapter 11. Thus it is the ascension and neither the Beloved One's descent through the heavens nor even his appearance as Jesus as such which marks the crucial moment in the Ascen. Isa. Christology'.

Enrico Norelli has underlined a difference between John and *AscIs* in this motif of the expulsion of an angelic evil power. For John, the expulsion takes place in the present, for *AscIs* in the future. Furthermore, in *AscIs*,

> the judgment on the powers coincide with the ascension that is distinct from the crucifixion (which does not have in itself a soteriological influence), while in John the judgment coincides with the resurrection that is in the same time also elevation (12:23.28.32).[38]

At this point, we may conclude by observing that the Johannist constellation of texts seems to be produced by a system that tries to bring together specific components, which all depend on a specific cosmological vision. It combines a cosmology, where a fracture or a series of fractures exist between above and below, with a 'high' christology, a fundamental function of prophets, and an idea of salvation conceived as the destruction of evil supernatural powers on the cosmos.

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[38] Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae. Commentarius*, 83 and 518, 520; see also *AscIs* 2,4; 9,14; R. Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead* (Leiden, 1998) 375, who recognizes that: 'the view that the destiny of the righteous is to ascend to heavenly glory (symbolized by their heavenly robes, thrones and crowns), surmounting the vast distance that separates this world from the divine world above, is not obviously very compatible with the eschatological hope for the coming of God's kingdom in this world'. Bauckham tries to defend the unit of composition of *AscIs* against Norelli's theory of different stages of composition. It seems to me that Norelli's answer ('L'Ascension d'Isaïe est-elle vraiment une unité littéraire? Une discussion avec Richard Bauckham', Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi 32/1 [2015] in press), shows sufficient reasons to reject Bauckham's thesis. See also E. Norelli, 'Ancora sulla genesi dell'Ascensione di Isaia. Alcune osservazioni a partire dal contributo di Jonathan Knight, The Ascension of Isaiah: A New Theory of Composition', *CrSt* 36 (2014) 121-40.

2.6 *Literary Relations between the Gospel of John and AscIs*

  a. In John 12:37-41, we read:

> Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah: 'Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?' [Is 53:1]. And so they could not believe, because Isaiah also said, He has blinded their eye and hardened their heart, so that they might not look with their eyes, and understand with their heart and turn and I would heal them [*testimonium* ex Is 6:9-10]. Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him.

Essentially, the *Gospel of John* affirms that Isaiah: 1. had *seen* the glory of the preexistent Jesus; 2. had spoken of him; 3. had announced in advance the unbelief of many Jews. John seems to be particularly interested in this fact, since he underlines it twice: 'they did not believe in him' and 'they could not (οὐκ ἠδύναντο) believe'. In the first case (v. 38) John quotes Is 53:1, in the second he quotes (v. 40) a *testimonium* from Is 6:9-10. John seeks to explain *how* Isaiah could know the future history of Jesus and the unbelief of the Jews. His idea is that Isaiah had spoken of Jesus because he had seen his glory, that is, he had had a vision.

  Also Abraham, according to John, 'saw' Jesus, and that was possible because Jesus pre-existed him:

> 'Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.' Then the Jews said to him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?' Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am (John 8:56-58).

According to John, Abraham himself had a vision of the pre-existent Son. We can therefore suppose that John probably knew the text (or the content) of the Apocalypse of Abraham 29:4-13, where Abraham – after a celestial journey – sees from above the vicissitudes of a christological figure:

> <And I looked> and saw a man going out from the left side of the heathen. Men and women and children, great crowds, went out from the side of the heathen and they worshiped him. <And> while I was still looking, those on the right side went out, and some shamed this man, and some struck him, and some worshiped him. <And> I saw that as they worshiped him, Azazel ran and worshiped, and having kissed his face he turned and stood behind him. And I said. 'Eternal, Mighty One! Who is this shamed and struck man, worshiped by the heathen with Azazel?' And he answered and said: 'Hear Abraham! The man whom you saw shamed and struck and again worshiped is the laxity of the heathen for the people who will come from you in the last days, in this twelfth hour of the age of impiety. And in the [same] twelfth period of the close of my age I shall set up the man from your seed which you saw. Everyone from my people will finally admit him, while the sayings of him who was as if called by by me will be neglected in their minds. And that you saw going our from the left side of the picture and those worshiping him, this [means that]many of the heathen will hope in him. <And> those of your seed you saw on ther right side, some shaming and striking him, and some worship-ping him, many of them will be misled on his account. And he will tempt those of yours seed who have worshiped him.[39]

The Johannist theory about prophecy, however, is different from that of other groups of Jesus followers.[40] John's idea of the

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[39] Translation of A. Kulik, *Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha. Toward the Original of the Apocalypse of Abraham* (Atlanta, 2004) 32-3.

[40] Norelli, 'Sulla pneumatologia dell'Ascensione', 224 affirmed: 'L'AI sembra per un certo verso un rovesciamento (o un'integrazione?) di questa prospettiva'.

biblical prophecy is different from that of Q (Mt 13:17 // Lk 10:24):

> many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it (according to the formulation of Mt 13:17).

Following this view of Q, the prophets never did *see* in advance the vicissitudes of Jesus on earth. The same theory is shared by 1 Pt 1:10-12:

> Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!

The author of 1 Pt affirms that the prophets predicted events that had to occur to Jesus because the Spirit was speaking through them. John, by contrast, justifies Isaiah's prophetic capacity because of the fact that *he had a vision of Jesus's* pre-existent glory. This Johannine view of Isaiah's prophetic capacity is strictly connected to the belief in the pre-existence of the Son. It is because the Son has existed from eternity near God that he can be seen by those who ascend to the heavens.

Such diversity helps us to understand some distinctive features of the Johannist constellation. The fact that Isaiah saw the pre-existent Son in his divine glory means that he knows who Jesus is. The glory of the pre-existent Jesus is fundamental for John (17:5; 17:24) and equally fundamental it is to see it:

> Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world (17:24).

We cannot forget that, according to John, what the Jews do not believe is precisely the supernatural dignity of Jesus. It is his belonging to the divine world that many Jews did not accept. Isaiah's vision of the Beloved's glory is therefore absolutely essential to the legitimation of John's christology within a Jewish context. To the same legitimation of John's christology within a Jewish context is also functional the affirmation that even Abraham had knowledge of Jesus' destiny on earth.

b. The passage of Isaiah 6:9s quoted in John 12:37-41 is also present in Mt 13:14-15 and Mk 4:12. But John depends neither on Matthew nor Mark. John does not depend on Matthew because Matthew quotes directly from the LXX of Isaiah, while John 12:40 makes use of a *testimonium* that profoundly changes the text of Isaiah.[41]

The quotation of Isaiah in John 12:37-40 shows some significant differences in relation to Mt 13:13-15. First of all, an inversion and an omission. Mt 13:15 writes: '(a) this people's heart has grown dull, (b) their ears are hard of hearing, (c) they have shut their eyes'. John 12:40 omits the ears and changes the order of the other two elements, quoting first eyes and then the heart: '(b) He has blinded their eyes and (a) hardened their heart'. A second noteworthy difference is the fact that Matthew

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[41] From the literary point of view almost all the verbs and a noun are changed. F.J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, 1998) 367 (who ignores Ch. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures. The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* [London, 1952] 36-39 and the works of E. Norelli: see the following note and notes 49 and 53) thinks that the quotation from Is 6:10 'seems to be a loose citation of the Hebrew reworked by the author'. John however does not follow the order of the sentences of the Hebrew text, omits the ears and there is no literary evidence that he was depending from the Hebrew.

quotes literally the text of the *Septuaginta* of Isaiah. John, by contrast, presents a profound modification of the biblical text.

ἐπαχύνθη γὰρ ἡ καρδία τοῦ λαοῦ τούτου, καὶ τοῖς ὠσὶν αὐτῶν βαρέως ἤκουσαν καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν ἐκάμμυσαν, μήποτε ἴδωσιν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς καὶ τοῖς ὠσὶν ἀκούσωσιν καὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ συνῶσιν καὶ ἐπιστρέψωσιν καὶ ἰάσομαι αὐτούς (Is 6:10 LXX).

τετύφλωκεν αὐτῶν τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς καὶ ἐπώρωσεν αὐτῶν τὴν καρδίαν, ἵνα μὴ ἴδωσιν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς καὶ νοήσωσιν τῇ καρδίᾳ καὶ στραφῶσιν, καὶ ἰάσομαι αὐτούς John 12:40).

This modification is significant in both literary and theological terms. At the literary level, a noun and almost all the verbs are changed: instead of ἐπαχύνθη, ἐκάμμυσαν, συνῶσιν, ἐπι-στρέψωσιν John writes ἐπώρωσεν, τετύφλωκεν,[42] νοήσωσιν, στραφῶσιν. Instead of τοῦ λαοῦ τούτου, he writes αὐτῶν. From the theological point of view, the action is attributed by John to God, and not to human beings.[43] Such changes mean that John depends not directly on the LXX text, but on an early Christian tradition in which the *testimonium* of Is 6:10 was used and transformed, from the literary viewpoint.

[42] Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*, 38 rightly thinks that this literary form of quotation of Is 6:10 is also present in Paul who does not follow the LXX and uses the same verbs of John 12:40 in 2 Cor 3:14: ἐπωρώθη τὰ νοήματα αὐτῶν (where we find not only the same verb, but also he same substitution of 'they' to 'people') and in 2 Cor 4:4: ἐτύφλωσεν τὰ νοήματα.

[43] On the basis of the literary similarity of 1 John 2:11 (ἐτύφλωσεν τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτοῦ) with John 12:40, it is possible that John thinks that it is the power of evil who provokes blindness and not God himself.

In John, the textual form of Isaiah 6:10 is closer to that of Mark, but the form of the *testimonium* in the two gospels remains substantially different:

John   τετύφλωκεν *αὐτῶν*   τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς
        καὶ ἐπώρωσεν αὐτῶν   *τὴν καρδίαν,*
        ἵνα μὴ ἴδωσιν   *τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς*
        καὶ νοήσωσιν   τῇ καρδίᾳ
        καὶ στραφῶσιν,
        καὶ ἰάσομαι αὐτούς.

Mark   ὅτι βλέποντες οὐ βλέπουσιν
        καὶ ἀκούοντες οὐκ ἀκούουσιν
        οὐδὲ συνίουσιν
        μήποτε ἐπιστρέψωσιν
        καὶ ἀφεθῇ αὐτοῖς.[44]

John seems to follow a pattern of memorization based on the repetition of *ofthalmoi – kardia*. A subject in the third person singular (God) performs the action of blinding the eyes and hardening the heart. In Mark, the subject is plural: human beings do not see and do not understand, because Jesus is speaking in parables to them. 'Mark has reversed the order of hearing/seeing [present in Isaiah LXX] to seeing/hearing'.[45] Both John and Mark place seeing in the foreground.

We might think that John and Mark (and after him, Matthew) depend on a tradition that tries to explain why the Jews did not accept Jesus and his message. John, however, reveals three important differences in comparison both to Matthew 13:14-15 and Mark 4:12: a) before quoting Is 6:9-10, he quotes Is 53:1; b) he adds an affirmation and a second

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[44] See Acts 28:26-27; Rom 11:8.
[45] J. Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (New Haven, 2000) 1, 300; C.A. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive. Isaiah 6.9-10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation* (Sheffield, 1989).

introductory formula: 'for this reason they could not believe, because Isaiah also said' (John 12:39), c) John adds a final remark after quoting Is 6:9-10: 'Isaiah said this because he saw[46] his glory and spoke about him' (John 12:41).

In the vision that Isaiah had in the Temple of Jerusalem (Isaiah 6), 'there is no mention of the glory' of Jesus,[47] but only that 'the whole earth is full of his glory' (6:3), while the *Targum of Isaiah* 6:1.5 speaks of 'glory of the *shekinah* of the Lord'. In both cases, the glory is that of the Lord and not of Jesus. John does not depend therefore directly on Isaiah but on another source (or on another theological or religious conception).[48]

One of the fundamental questions raised by the affirmation of John 12:41 concerns the connection between the fact that Isaiah 'saw' the glory of the pre-existent Logos and the fact that he 'spoke' about him. A question arises: where did Isaiah, according to John, speak about Jesus? In the biblical, canonical book of Isaiah? Or is he thinking of a tradition that transmits the words of Isaiah about Jesus? If he makes use of a conception diffused in some circles of Jesus' followers, this conception must have a connection with the canonical book of Isaiah, since John quotes two passages from it (53:1 and 6:9-10). Furthermore, if John attributes to Isaiah a vision of the glory of the Son, this may mean that he believes that a prophet can have visions of this kind.

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[46] John repeats three times that Isaiah εἶπεν and at the end writes that he 'saw'. He spoke because he saw. John underlines the specific visionary experience of Isaiah. Matthew 13:14-15 includes the person of Isaiah in an abstract idea of prophecy. He does not have interest in the personal experience of Isaiah, which on the contrary is at the center of attention in John.

[47] G. Segalla, *Giovanni. Versione. Introduzione. Note* (Cinisello Balsamo, 1990) 350.

[48] Codex D of John had some difficulty in understanding this sentence and therefore changed 'why' (ὅτι) in 'when' (ὅτε) and added τοῦ θεοῦ before αὐτοῦ in order to read: 'when he saw the glory of his God'. D could not understand why John affirmed something that was not in accordance with the text of Is 6:1.

In conclusion, first, John believes that the prophet Isaiah experienced a celestial journey during which he obtained special revelations. Secondly, we have to investigate about the historical origin of the narration according to which Isaiah had at least one heavenly journey (during which, he saw the glory of the Son and the unbelief of the Jews).

c. The *AscIs*[49] presents some statements that seem extremely close to John 12:41.[50] Chapters 6-11 of *AscIs* describe the vision that Isaiah had in the twentieth year of the reign of Hezekiah, king of Judah. This is not the vision that, according to the canonical book of Isaiah, the prophet had in the Temple in the year of the death of the king Uzziah (Is 6:1-13).[51] Chapters 6-11 of *AscIs* describe the vision of Isaiah after his journey through the seven heavens (7:9-9:1) guided by an angel (7:2-8). Arrived at the place of God, the prophet sees the glory of the Beloved:

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[49] On the *AscIs*, see E. Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae. Commentarius* (Turnhout 1995); P. Bettiolo *et al.*, *Ascensio Isaiae, Textus* (Turnhout 1995); Pesce, *Isaia, il Diletto e la chiesa*; P.C. Bori, 'L'esperienza profetica nell'Ascensione di Isaia', *ibid.*, 133-45, now also in *L'estasi del profeta ed altri saggi tra ebraismo e cristianesimo dalle origini sino al «Mosé» di Freud* (Bologna, 1989) 17-30; A. Acerbi, *L'Ascensione di Isaia. Cristologia e profetismo in Siria nei primi decenni del II secolo* (Milan, 1989); E. Norelli, *L'Ascensione di Isaia. Studi su un apocrifo al crocevia dei cristianesimi* (Bologna, 1994); Hall, 'The Ascension of Isaiah: Community', J. Knight, *Disciples of the Beloved One: The Christology, Social Setting and Theological Context of the Ascension of Isaiah* (Sheffield, 1996) and 'The Mystical Understanding in the Ascension of Isaiah', in *SBL.SP* (Atlanta, 2000) 103-29.

[50] On prophetism in John's gospel, see A. Destro and M. Pesce, 'Il profetismo e la nascita di una religione: il caso del giovannismo', in Filoramo, *Carisma profetico,* 87-105. Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae. Commentarius*, 65-66 locates chapters 6-11 of *AscIs* 'in the context of the hellenistic-jewishchristian mission in Antioch at the end of the first century' and chapters 1-5 'at Antioch probably in the first years of second century'. Chapters 1-5 therefore, were written 'to defend and reaffirm 6-11' (*ibid.* 81).

[51] The author of *AscIs* could not ignore Is 6:1-13. He wanted intentionally distinguish the vision of *AscIs* 6-11 from that of Is 6 (a vision of which he never speaks).

> 'And I saw one standing whose glory surpassed that of
> all, and his glory was great and wonderful' (9:27).

The Beloved is also defined as 'the Lord of all the glory' (9:32). In this vision the prophet also sees that the Son descends through the seven heavens and transforms himself progressively into an inferior angelic form until he adopts the form of a human being. In addition, the prophet sees his virginal birth, his infancy, his miracles, the hostility provoked by the Stranger against him among the children of Israel, who do not know who he is. The prophet then sees his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension to God through the seven heavens (11:1-23).

d. E. Norelli has shown that, exactly in the passage in which Isaiah sees the Beloved descending on the earth, *AscIs* (11:14) employs the same *testimonium* of Is 6:10 used by John 12:40. The reason is that *AscIs* seeks to demonstrate that the unbelief towards Jesus had been predicted by the prophet Isaiah. According to the Coptic translation, 11:14-15 writes: 'unusquisque cor [suum] indurabit sibi de eo. Et non sciet unde venerat', while the Ethiopian translation is: 'obcaecabantur omnes de eo, et non credebant omnes. Et nesciebant unde erat'. The Latin Text (L2) and the Slavonic text of the *Visio* read simply 'et non cognoverunt eum' and omit the long section of 11:3-22, which, on the contrary, is present in the Ethiopic and Coptic translations. Norelli has convincingly shown that the phrase 'et non cognoverunt eum' has the closest parallels in Revelation 1:12-13; John 1:14 and John 1:10.[52] This phrase, too, therefore gives evidence of a close literary relationship between *AscIs* and Johannist environments.

In the Coptic and Ethiopic translations, the object of ignorance of the Jews is the miraculous birth of Jesus, the fact that the mother of Jesus 'did not give birth; the midwife did not go up (to her), and we did not hear (any) cries of pain' (11:14).

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[52] Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae. Commentarius*, 536-37.

Norelli has underlined that, in the Coptic fragment of 11:14, *AscIs* made use of Is 6:10. However, in disagreement with the Ethiopic translation 'the motif of blindness comes before (probably) the motif of hardness of the heart like in John 12:40'.[53] This hardness of the heart is present only in the *testimonium* quoted by John 12:40 and in the Coptic version of *AscIs* 11:14, but not in the *testimonium* of Mark 4:12.[54] In substance, John 12:40 makes use of the same *testimonium* of Is 6:9-10, employed by *AscIs*.

  e. The fact that John 12:40 does not quote Is 6:10 exactly, following the text of the *Septuaginta*, but according the form of a *testimonium* from a previous tradition is of particular relevance, since he literally repeats the text of the *Septuagint* of Is 53:1 (quoted immediately before in 12:38). This fact is probably the symptom of two redactional phases.[55] The aim of the last redactor of John, on quoting exactly the LXX of Is 53:1, was probably to give a biblical basis to the theory that the

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[53] *Ibid.*, 556-57. See also Norelli's research on the *testimonia* related to the birth of Jesus in 'Avant le canonique et l'apocryphe. Aux origines des récits de la naissance de Jésus', *RThPh* 126 (1994) 305-24.

[54] John 12:40, as we have seen underlines twice the theme of the heart. The LXX of Isaiah shows a chiastic structure: heart, ears, eyes – eyes, ears, heart; hardness, deafness, blindness – blindness, deafness, hardness. In John and *AscIs* the order is blindness – hardness, in Mk on the contrary blindness, deafness, incomprehension.

[55] E. Norelli in his commentary on *AscIs* maintains that the present text of *AscIs* was produced by a group that wants to represent and update a writing of prophetic character, the so-called *Vision of Isaiah*, now included in *AscIs* 6-11, attaching to it the introduction of chapters 1-5. The *Vision of Isaiah* would be written before the present text of *AscIs*, and was therefore used in many different contexts before its insertion in *AscIs*. As its well-known the *Visio* continued to exist as an autonomous text both in the Slavonic and in the Latin transmission, as it is demostrated by the Latin edition of 1522. It is plausible that the author of John's Gospel had direct knowledge of the *Vision*, before its insertion in the *AscIs*. See also R.G. Hall, 'Isaiah's Ascent to See the Beloved: An Ancient Jewish Source for the Ascension of Isaiah', *JBL* 113 (1994) 463-84.

unbelief towards Jesus was not general (although the majority of the Jews did not believe in him). In fact, immediately after, John affirms (v. 42): 'Nevertheless (μέντοι[56]) many, even of the authorities, believed in him'.[57] The fact that Is 53:1 could be used to demonstrate that there was a biblical prediction about a differentiated reaction to Jesus is demonstrated also by Paul in the Letter to the Romans 10:16:[58]

> 'But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' (Ἀλλ᾽ οὐ πάντες ὑπήκουσαν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ. Ἡσαΐας γὰρ λέγει· κύριε, τίς ἐπίστευσεν τῇ ἀκοῇ ἡμῶν;).

If the biblical text speaks of *someone* (τίς), this means that not all are meant.

The reason for quoting Is 53:1 is that John wants to demonstrate that the Bible had already predicted that the majority of the Jews would not believe, but that some of them, on the contrary, would recognize him. John thinks that Isaiah made a heavenly journey in which he had seen also the descent of the Beloved, his earthly life, and the unbelief of the majority of the Jews.[59]

It makes no sense to affirm that Isaiah spoke of the unbelief of the Jews because he had seen the glory of the Logos, if he had not also seen the descent of the Logos and his experiences on

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[56] The use of μέντοι is recurring in John in order to underline a divergence in relation to what it is normally to be expected (see 4:27; 7:13; 20:5; 21:4).

[57] Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 368: 'In 12:37-43 it appears that the tradition is accepted and reworked (vv. 38-41) and then left to one side as the author pursues his own understanding of the failure of 'the Jews' (vv. 42-43). This is one of the few places in the Fourth Gospel where the author's respect for the tradition creates an awkward tension'.

[58] Cfr. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*, 39.

[59] These two ideas of John do not necessarily coincide with the two redactional phases of the *AscIs* (the first more inner-Jewish, the last more directed to face the conflict between prophets and presbyters within a particular group of Jesus followers).

earth. The fact is that the vision of *AscIs* 6-11 includes all the elements that John 12:37-41 presupposes.

f. In concluding this long literary comparison between the *AscIs* and the Gospel of John, it seems possible to affirm that John had information about the Vision of Isaiah now inserted in the second part of *AscIs* (Chapter 6-11) and about prophetic practices in which the heavenly journey was also normal and familiar. This confirms our affirmation that *AscIs* belongs to the Johannist constellation.

The practice of the heavenly journey was widespread in the religious environment of the Roman-Hellenistic world (certainly also at the end of the first century and at the beginning of the second).[60] We have shown in other contributions that the model and practice of the heavenly journey is present in the *Somnium Scipionis*, in Plutarch's *The Sign of Socrates* (and other works of Plutarch), in Philo (and not only in apocalyptic and Qumranic literature) where it is connected with a cosmology that tends to put in opposition the world above and the world below.[61] It was equally present in Jewish groups and among Jesus followers.

The presence of the heavenly journey in John, Thomas and *AscIs* is a confirmation of what we have defined as similar ritual solutions to the same systemic question. In John and *AscIs*, in fact, from one side different cosmic fractures separate the earth below and the heavens above (where there is the habitation of God), and from the other side the earthly world is dominated by evil supernatural powers that hinder the communication with God. Both these presuppositions make the practice of the heavenly journey a necessary instrument in order to have a direct contact with God and a direct revelation from Him.[62]

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[60] On the heavenly journey, see the bibliography cited in note 31.

[61] Destro and Pesce, 'Le voyage céleste', 369-71.

[62] See Destro and Pesce, 'Il profetismo e la nascita di una religione: il caso del giovannismo' and 'Lo spirito e il mondo vuoto. Prospettive esegetiche e antropologiche su John 4,21-24', *Annali di Storia dell'esegesi* 12 (1995) 9-32.