The veil was the means both of concealing and revealing the divine. It represented the material world and thus it concealed, but it clothed the divine and thus made it visible. ‘Coming forth’ from the presence of God, one who both reveals and is revealed, is one of the great themes of the Fourth Gospel (John 3.13; 6.38; 8.23). The Ascension of Isaiah expressed the idea more vividly if more crudely: ‘The Lord will indeed descend into the world in the last days [he] who is to be called Christ after he has descended and become like you in form and they will think that he is flesh and man’ (Asc. Isa. 9.13). The Epistle to the Hebrews spoke of one who was both sent out, ‘the apostle’, and passed back through the veil, ‘the high priest’ (Heb. 3.1). All these expressed the basic idea of passing from the invisible to the visible, from the 

debir and what it represented into the hekal and this world. The 

debir was the timeless place, the place of myths, the principles upon which the creation was built and by which it was to be understood. By a new actualization of these myths, a 

new beginning was made and a new creative process was begun. It is this aspect of the veil which underlies Irenaeus’ mysterious ‘recapitulation’, the explanation of the work of Christ which develops the ideas of Eph. 1.9—10: ‘For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.’ God restored the divine plan for mankind, said Irenaeus, which had been marred by the fall of Adam. His entire work from the beginning was restored in his Son, who lived as Adam but did not fall as Adam had done. By becoming again the first man, the whole human race was renewed and restored. This is the mythological view of history; all which we experience only in time exists outside time and eternity. Those in eternity grasp all history in a moment (‘all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time’, Luke 4.5). ‘When he became incarnate and was made man, he recapitulated in himself the long history of man, summing up and giving us salvation in order that we might receive again in Christ Jesus what we had lost in Adam, that is, the image and likeness of God’ (Against Heresies, III.18.1). By this gathering up, this recapitulation, Christ renewed everything, thus linking recreation and revelation, Eden and the One who walked in Eden.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE THRONE

Beyond the veil there was the holy of holies, the most sacred part of the temple. In Solomon’s time it had housed the cherub throne; in the descriptions of the desert tabernacle this became the mercy seat, the place of the presence of the Lord, which was at the very heart of the cult. By New Testament times the holy place had been stripped by enemy action and it was empty. The rituals were practised ‘as though’ the throne was there. St Paul built upon this when he spoke of Jesus as the new ‘mercy seat’ (Rom. 3.25). The word translated ‘expiation’ in the RSV is the same as that translated ‘mercy seat’ in Lev. 16.14. The poignant of this is not apparent if the temple setting is lost. St Paul was saying that the heart of the cult had been restored.

The throne of God in the holy of holies, which represented the highest heaven, passed into all Christian imagery of the last judgement. The angels around the throne were the basis of the earliest expressions of the Trinity, and, most crucial of all, the man figure on the throne, originally a memory of the ancient kings, was thought to have prefigured the incarnation, the presence of the Lord with his people in human form. It is the throne and its associations which proved the most fertile source of inspiration for the expression of early Christian thought.

The Presence of the Lord

Let all mortal flesh keep silence
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly minded,
For with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.
Liturgy of St James, tr. G. Moultrie
In the holy of holies, in heaven, was the divine throne. The Lord was believed literally to be present with his people; exactly how this was understood is not known, but it was to become a much debated issue as Israel's religion became more sophisticated. How could the Lord, in any sense, be in his temple? This question became even more pressing when the temple had been destroyed and the people were in exile in Babylon.

The psalmist expressed the ancient view: 'The Lord is in his holy temple, the Lord's throne is in heaven' (Ps. 11.4). Habakkuk too: 'But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him' (Hab. 2.20). As late as the time of Jeremiah, this belief about the divine presence continued: 'Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?' (Jer. 8.19). Always it was as a part of the idea that the temple was both heaven and earth. The throne of the Lord was in heaven, but also in the temple: 'A glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary' (Jer. 17.12). The king had been the earthly manifestation of the Lord in his temple; he had been addressed as the Lord's son (Pss. 2.7; 72.1) and he had sat upon the Lord's throne as king: 'Then Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king instead of David his father' (1 Chron. 29.23). The memory of these royal rituals persisted long after the cult itself had been transformed; there was often a human figure on the divine throne, and the ancient enthronement ceremony which had re-enacted the triumph of the Lord over his enemies passed into the vision of the last judgement.

Two great events in the history of the temple virtually coincided at the end of the seventh century BC: the reform of the Deuteronomists and the destruction of the temple and monarchy by the Babylonians. Between them they destroyed the ancient cult. The Deuteronomists had not favoured the monarchy, as can be seen from their surviving writings; they said that the wickedness of a king had caused the destruction of Jerusalem (2 Kings 24.3). They were to reformulate Israel's religion in such a way that the monarchy was no longer central to the cult. In addition, the exile of so many people to Babylon meant that they were physically separated from the temple which had been the centre of their life. These two circumstances combined to alter radically the perception of the presence of God in the temple. The events of history necessitated an idea of God not located in the one holy place, but rather of God travelling with his people, and the Deuteronomists rejected all the ancient anthropomorphisms of the royal cult. Theirs was to be a God whose voice was heard and obeyed, but who had no visible form. Since the Deuteronomists are thought to have played a major part in transmitting the sacred texts of Israel, it is not surprising that the older anthropomorphism of the cult has largely disappeared. The consequences of this for our understanding of Christian origins cannot be overestimated. Many of the older traditions did survive, however, and can be traced in the apocalypses, texts preserved only by Christian hands. It is in these that we find most of the evidence for the divine throne and the man figure upon it.

The ancient traditions were reworked and in some texts the hand of the editor can be seen. The account of the building of the temple in 1 Kings, for example, comes in its present form from a historian influenced by the Deuteronomists. The dedication prayer has been suitably modified as a result. Solomon begins: 'The Lord has set his sun in the heavens, But he has said he would dwell in thick darkness. I have built thee an exalted house, a place for thee to dwell in for ever' (1 Kings 8.12-13); but then contradicts himself: 'But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!' (1 Kings 8.27). The Deuteronomists had no place for the literal presence of God, nor for the elaborate visions of heaven which were part of the royal cult. Time and again they insisted that there was no form in which God could be seen: 'Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; there was only a voice ... Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a graven image for yourselves' (Deut. 4.12, 15). This prohibition of images and anthropomorphism must have been later than the establishment of the cult itself; how else can we account for the cherubim, or the vision of Isaiah in the temple (Isa. 6) when he saw the Lord on his throne? This conflict between those who said that it was possible to have a vision of God, and those who denied it, was to continue for centuries.

The Deuteronomists relocated God in heaven only: 'Look down from thy holy habitation, from heaven, and bless thy people Israel' (Deut. 26.15). Instead of the Lord in his temple, they said
that his Name was there. Scholars cannot agree exactly what was meant by this term, or when the distinction between the Lord and his Name was first made, but it certainly was made. Compare, for example, two verses in Nathan’s prophecy, which in its present form has passed through the hands of the Deuteronomists: ‘Thus says the Lord: Would you build a house for me to dwell in?; and immediately afterwards: ‘He shall build a house for my name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever’ (2 Sam. 7.5, 13). Earlier strata of Deuteronomy seem to have equated the presence of the Lord and his Name (e.g. throughout Deut. 12), but the later Name theology was all a part of that great movement which sought to wean Israel from her older ways. (An account of this can be read in T. N. D. Mettinger, The Dethronement of Sabaoth.)

Another aspect of this process can be seen in the fate of the various ‘tent’ traditions. The stories of Israel’s time in the desert, although doubtless ancient in origin, did not achieve anything like the written form we now know until some time after the exile, and when they were compiled, those who did it were not simply gentlemen scholars recording old stories. They were telling them in order to teach something, to put across their point of view in the new situation of Israel’s rebuilding herself. They were showing how their beliefs were true to the original desert traditions of Israel. Whether they were or not is another question; similar things happen in the Church today whenever anyone wants to bring about change! As a result of this, two tent traditions were combined; one was the tradition of the prophets and the other of the priests, or perhaps it was the traditions of the northern kingdom and those of the south. The former spoke of God visiting his people and then departing, the latter of his dwelling with them all the time.

The ancient tent of prophecy is depicted in the desert stories as pitched outside the camp, e.g. Exod. 33.7—11; Num. 11.16—30; 12.1—16. These are the three most important passages which describe the tent of meeting. Anyone who sought a word from the Lord used to go outside the camp and into the tent. A pillar of cloud appeared at the door, i.e. outside the tent, and from this cloud the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face’ (Exod. 33.11). When Moses asked to see the glory of the Lord, he was told: ‘You cannot see my face for men shall not see me and live’ (Exod. 33.20). Moses was hidden in a cleft of rock and he saw only the back of the Lord as he passed (Exod. 33.21—3). A tradition which says that no man can see God, and which implies that the Lord does not dwell with his people but only visits them has strong affinities with the Deuteronomists’ position.

The ‘other’ tent was the tabernacle, the dwelling place, where the Lord was always present with his people. The tabernacle, a name which actually means dwelling place in Hebrew, was the elaborate miniature temple described in Exod. 25—31; 35.10—39, which housed the ark and the menorah. When we are told that the Lord was in the midst of the camp it is assumed that this refers to the dwelling of the Lord, i.e. to the tabernacle (Exod. 25.8; Num. 5.3). The Lord spoke to Moses inside the tabernacle from between the cherubim (Exod. 25.22), because this is where the Lord had settled from the moment the tabernacle was built (Exod. 40.34—8). This is exactly the same as was said of the first temple when it was consecrated by Solomon (1 Kings 8.10).

In each case a cloud, the glory of the Lord, filled the place and nobody was able to enter for a while. The word tabernacle occurs often elsewhere, but is translated differently in the English versions and therefore does not obviously indicate the tabernacle: ‘The place where thy glory dwells’ (Ps. 26.8); ‘The dwelling place of thy name’ (Ps. 74.7). Or where the Hebrew has a plural: ‘The holy habitation(s) of the Most High’ (Ps. 46.4); ‘Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool’ (Ps. 132.7); ‘My dwelling place shall be with them’ (Ezek. 37.27). The dwelling place of the Lord was the temple and those who wrote of the Lord’s dwelling must have had their hearts in the Jerusalem temple.

A third type of tent can also be detected; in fact it is the most common of all. This one had the combined name The tabernacle of the tent of meeting, a name which involves two contradictory ideas. It is thought that this was a combination of the two traditions, the prophetic and the priestly, or the northern and the southern, as a result of the upheavals of the exile and the common need for survival. Perhaps the original tent in the desert had been the place of oracles, the tent of meeting. Perhaps, when the people were in exile and far from the temple, the Lord had to be shown moving with his people, not dwelling in Jerusalem. Ezekiel expressed this in his vision of the chariot throne leaving the city (Ezek. 10) and travelling to Babylon (Ezek. 1). The
compilers of the Pentateuch did the same thing in their own way; they fused tent of meeting and tabernacle. The dwelling became a portable dwelling and the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was the result.

None of this can be proved; fashions in scholarship come and go, and the study of the Pentateuch is at the moment in a state of flux. Unravelling the strands at any time is a complicated business, but as they are separated it is sometimes possible to see how the various traditions about the presence of the Lord with his people received different emphases as their circumstances changed. Something similar happens today in the way that the Christmas stories are preached, for example, depending upon the particular congregation and its needs. (These desert stories were used for the ongoing life of a religious community, not for scholarly research.) Faced with overwhelming need, the very different theologies of 'dwelling' and 'meeting and departing' were fused.

The Fourth Gospel also speaks of the tabernacle: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth' (John 1.14); "'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up'... But he spoke of the temple of his body' (John 2.19, 21).

The Ark

Jesus, where'er thy people meet,
There they behold thy mercy seat.
W. Cowper

Another aspect of this development can be seen in the relationship between the ark and the cherub throne. In some traditions the ark was the footstool of the throne; in others it seems to have been the throne itself. We do not know how these two traditions related to each other. Those associated with the desert tabernacle describe two miniature cherubim at either end of a mercy seat of gold which was placed on the top of the ark (Exod. 25.17–21), whereas those of the temple describe two enormous cherubim in the holy of holies, each ten cubits across, which formed the throne. The cherubim of the tabernacle faced each other and their wings overshadowed the mercy seat (Exod. 25.10), whereas those of the temple stood side by side and faced down into the hekal (2 Chron. 3.13). Since the only dimensions given for the ark are that it was two and a half cubits long, and one and a half cubits both broad and high (Exod. 25.10), it would have been dwarfed by the cherubim of the temple throne. Some scholars think that the desert tabernacle stories were written in their present form after the destruction of the first temple, to provide a picture of the Lord moving with his people (i.e. into exile), and not confined to the temple in Jerusalem. The cherubim of the ark and the Mercy seat as described in Exodus would, on this theory, have been a vestige of the cherub throne and not its forerunner.

The ark, we are told, was made at Sinai, and was used to carry the two tablets of the commandments, a jar of manna (Exod. 16.33) and Aaron's rod which budded into an almond branch (Num. 17.8; cf. Heb. 9.4). In the stories of the early days, the ark, like the cherub throne, represented the actual presence of the Lord: 'Whenever the ark set out, Moses said, “Arise, O Lord and let thy enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee.” And when it rested, he said, "Return, O Lord, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel”' (Num. 10.35–6). A story from the Philistine wars shows the role of the ark: "Why has the Lord put us to rout today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies." So the people sent to Shiloh, and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim' (1 Sam. 4.3–4). This same title was given to the Lord of the cherub throne in the temple; in the time of Isaiah, King Hezekiah prayed in the temple: 'O Lord of Hosts, God of Israel, who art enthroned above the cherubim' (Isa. 37.16). Which cherubim, then, formed the original throne; those of the ark or those of the hekal? The question cannot be answered with certainty, but it is more likely that the cherubim of the temple were the originals.

According to the Priestly traditions about the time in the desert, Moses heard the voice of the Lord speaking from above the cherubim: 'And when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was upon the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim; and it spoke to him' (Num. 7.89). This account would have been written down long after the events it describes and may well tell us something of how the Lord was believed to speak to his people in the temple in
Arise, O Lord, and go to thy resting place.

thou and the ark of thy might. (Ps. 132.6—8)

What eventually happened to the ark nobody knows; there is one tradition recorded in the Babylonian Talmud that it was taken to Babylon along with the treasures of the temple (b. Yoma 53b), another that Jeremiah hid the ark, the tent and the altar of incense in a cave, to protect them from the Babylonian looters when the city was captured: 'The place shall be unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy' (2 Macc. 2.7). Another tradition attributed to Jeremiah said that he looked forward to a time without the ark, when the whole of Jerusalem would be the throne of the Lord and Israel and Judah would be united again (Jer. 3.16—17). Another tradition said that it had been hidden in the temple itself:

R. Nahman said: It was taught that the ark was hidden away in the chamber of the wood shed. R. Nahman also said: Thus we were also taught: It happened to a certain priest who was whiling away his time that he saw a block of pavement that was different from the others. He came and informed his fellows, but before he could complete his account his soul departed. Thus they knew definitely that the ark was hidden there. (b. Yoma 54a)

There was yet another tradition that in the age of the Messiah, five things would be restored which had been in the first temple but not in the second; the fire, the ark, the menorah, the Spirit and the cherubim (Numbers Rabbah XV.10). This tradition is the basis of Rev. 11.15—19. The seventh angel proclaims the kingdom of the Messiah (Rev. 11.15) and the heavenly temple is opened to reveal the ark of the covenant (Rev. 11.19). By New Testament times there was no ark in the temple; Josephus says that the holy of holies was empty (Wars, V.219).

The Cherubim

Keep me. O keep me, King of kings,
Beneath thine own almighty wings.

T. Ken

The cherubim were monstrous composite figures which appear frequently in the art of the ancient Near East. In the Old
Testament they were depicted on the tabernacle curtains, on the mercy seat and as the bearers of the chariot throne. It is possible that they originally represented the winds in the Hebrew tradition. 2 Sam. 22 (which is the same as Psalm 18) describes vividly how the Lord came from his temple (2 Sam. 22.7) to rescue David from danger (2 Sam. 22.10—11):

He bowed the heavens, and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind. (Ps. 18.10—11)

The parallelism of the poetry shows that the cherub and the wings of the wind are synonymous. There is another vivid description of the temple and the chariot in Ps. 104, and again the parallelism suggests that the cherub chariot was the wind.

Thou art clothed with honour and majesty, who coverestst thyself with light as with a garment, who hast stretched out the heavens like a tent, who hast laid the beams of thy chambers on the waters, who maketh the clouds thy chariot, who ridest on the wings of the wind, who maketh the winds thy messengers, fire and flame thy ministers. (Ps. 104.1—4)

The Hebrew word for wind, ruah, can also be rendered ‘spirit’ and the word for messenger mal’ak can also mean ‘angel’. The gap between the cherub as an angel figure and the cherub as a depiction of the wind therefore did not exist for the writer of this psalm. These were concrete representations of the spirits of wind and fire which surrounded the divine throne. (One could perhaps compare this with the way in which the dove has come to symbolize the spirit in Christian art.)

The presence of the Lord was often associated with storm clouds: ‘Behold the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt’ ( Isa. 19.1); ‘His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet’ (Nahum 1.3). Job could ask in despair:

What does God know? Can he judge through the deep darkness? Thick clouds enwrap him, so that he does not see, and he walks on the vault of heaven. (Job 22.13—14)

When Ezekiel saw the great throne of the Lord in his vision, he saw first that ‘a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness round about it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming bronze’ (Ezek. 1.4). By his time the two cherubim had become four, representing the four winds supporting the vault of the heaven on which was the sapphire throne of God (Ezek. 1.5, 22). Ezekiel may well have been the last Old Testament writer actually to know the cherub throne in the temple, and his vision must have depicted what he understood the throne to be. (Some think that the cherub throne had already been removed from the debir by Manasseh some fifty years before the time of Ezekiel, see Patai, Man and Temple. He had introduced many foreign elements into the cult, one of which was ‘the graven image of Asherah’ (2 Kings 21.7) which he set in the temple itself, possibly in the debir.)

Long after the cherubim had gone from the temple their memory remained; they were not obliterated from Israel’s vision of the heavenly world. 1 Enoch 18.2 (possibly from the third century BC) tells how Enoch saw the four winds supporting the vault of heaven just as the cherubim had done. More significant is the undatable material in 1 Enoch 40.2—9: ‘On the four sides of the Lord of Spirits [Enoch’s version of the Lord of Hosts] I saw four presences which told me their names. The living creatures, the cherubim, have become the four archangels: Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, and Phanuel, the messengers of God and the visible manifestation of his presence.

Philo gave a very sophisticated view of the role and meaning of the cherubim, and, although much of it was expressed in terms of Greek philosophy such as his educated readers would have expected, it is not likely that he invented these beliefs about the cherubim. For him the two cherubim also represented aspects of God; he calls them the two Powers of God, and says that they were represented in the Scriptures by the two names for God: Yahweh (Lord) and Elohim (God). The two names represented respectively the creative and the kingly aspects of God. This is very similar to the idea of the four archangels who manifested aspects of God, especially as Philo also said that Yahweh and Elohim were both names for the Logos, the archangel of the presence of God who becomes visible in the material world.
The two primary powers of the Existing One, namely that through which he wrought the world, the beneficent, which is called God, and that by which he rules and commands that which he made, that is the punitive, which bears the name of Lord, are, as Moses tells us, separated by God himself standing above and in the midst of them. 'I will speak to thee,' it says, 'above the mercy seat in the midst of the two cherubim'... he means to show that the primal and highest powers of the Existent, the beneficent and the punitive, are equal having him to divide them. (Who is the Heir?, 166)

Elsewhere he says that the Logos of God stands between the cherubim:

While God is indeed One, his highest and chief Powers are two, even Goodness and Sovereignty... And in the midst between the two is a third which unites them, the Logos, for it is through the Logos that God is both ruler and good. Of these two Powers, Sovereignty and Goodness, the cherubim are the symbols, as the fiery sword is the symbol of reason. (Cherubim, 27–8)

Here Philo equates the cherubim of the throne with the two who guarded the gate of Eden, another memory of the throne in Eden. The Palestinian Targum is exactly similar: 'And he cast forth the man and made the glory of the Shekinah* to dwell from the beginning to the east of the garden of Eden between the two cherubim' (Targum Neofiti to Gen. 3.24).

Elsewhere Philo spoke of the Word as the charioteer of the Powers (On Flight, 101), guiding the universe under the direction of God. It is curious that he should have chosen the term chariot if he did not have the chariot throne in mind. Philo also explained the angels who surrounded the throne of God and tried to make them comprehensible to his Greek readers. He called the heavenly host the 'Powers'; they were what the Old Testament had called the 'Glory of God'. Philo showed this clearly when he explained Exod. 33.18, where Moses had asked to see the glory of God. He was told that he could not see the face of God but only his back as he passed by (Exod. 33.23). Philo said that what was 'behind' the Lord was his Powers. Thus his Moses said, 'By thy Glory I understand the Powers that keep guard around Thee' (Special Laws, 1.45). What Moses could see of God was his visible manifestation in the creation. Since the Logos was the chief of these Powers (Who is the Heir?, 166) we see yet again the theme of the second God, the visible God, the Glory.

The Palestinian Targum has a similar understanding of this incident in the life of Moses: 'And I will make the troop of angels pass by who stand and minister before me and you will see the Word of the Glory of my Shekinah but it is not possible for you to see the face of the Glory of my Shekinah' (Targum Neofiti to Exod. 33.23).

The cherubim on the lid of the ark, or in the darkened debir as the chariot throne, were far more than primitive pagan symbols which had somehow crept into the temple. Throughout the whole history of the temple, and indeed long after the throne itself had ceased to exist as the centre of the cult, the cherubim were remembered as symbols of the presence of the Lord. In St John's vision the four-headed cherubim in Ezekiel became four living creatures each of which had one of those animal heads. One was a lion, one an ox, one a man and one an eagle (Rev. 4.7; cf. Ezek. 1.10). Ezekiel's cherubim had four wings (Ezek. 1.11); Isaiah's seraphim and St John's living creatures had six (Isa. 6.2; Rev. 4.8), all full of eyes. It is as the fiery six-winged creatures, full of eyes, that the cherubim have passed into Christian art, but they still retain their ancient role as the four upholders of the vault of heaven. In the atrium of St Mark's Basilica in Venice, for example, there is a small cupola depicting the creation of the world. On the four spandrels are the four living creatures, the four archangels with their six wings, supporting the firmament, the vault of creation. But let us return to the temple of Solomon, and to the great throne.

The Enthronement

O worship the King all glorious above;
O gratefully sing his power and his love.

R. Grant

Yahweh was in his temple, enthroned upon the cherubim. The Psalms constantly tell of the Lord in his city, and of the security and hope that his presence brought.

* Shekinah is related to the word for tabernacle and means the divine presence. This implies that the Lord himself guarded the gate in Eden.
In my distress I called upon the Lord;  
and my God I cried for help.  
From his temple he heard my voice,  
and my cry to him reached his ears. (Ps. 18.6)

May he send you help from the sanctuary,  
And give you support from Zion! (Ps. 20.2)

One thing I have asked of the Lord, that I will seek after:  
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,  
To behold the beauty of the Lord,  
And to inquire in his temple.  
For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;  
He will conceal me under the cover of his tent,  
He will set me high upon a rock. (Ps. 27.4—5)

God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved;  
God will help her right early . . .  
The Lord of hosts is with us;  
The God of Jacob is our refuge. (Ps. 46.5, 7)

Terrible is God in his sanctuary, the God of Israel,  
He gives power and strength to his people. (Ps. 68.35)

These few examples must suffice to show that the easiest way to enter into the world of the ancient temple is to read the Psalms and try to imagine the setting for which they were written. The vivid imagery which is so familiar to us was originally a literal description of the Lord in his temple, enthroned over the great rock, defending his people and his city.

There are several Psalms which seem to describe a great procession when the Lord entered his temple and ascended the throne. Perhaps this was a ritual associated with a celebration of the Lord as King. Again we have to imagine a setting in which words such as these would have been appropriate:

Lift up your heads, O Gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.  
Who is the King of glory?  
The Lord strong and mighty.  
The Lord mighty in battle. (Ps. 24.7—8)

God has gone up with a shout,  
The Lord with the sound of a trumpet. (Ps. 47.5)

Thy solemn processions are seen, O God,  
The processions of my God, my King, into the sanctuary –  
The singers in front, the minstrels last,  
Between them maidens playing timbrels. (Ps. 68.24—5)

Many scholars have contributed to the theory that there was just such a ceremony in the autumn, at the time of their New Year. The Lord was enthroned as King, having triumphed over evil and his enemies. The question is: Did someone represent the Lord in these ceremonies? The most likely answer is that it was the king.

Kingship was inseparable from judgement; this is an important key to understanding much of the later use of throne imagery. The links are clearly seen in Pss. 93—99, thought to be a sequence of psalms associated with this ceremony.

Rise up, O judge of the earth . . . (Ps. 94.2)

He will judge the world with righteousness,  
And the peoples with his truth. (Ps. 96.13)

Zion hears and is glad,  
And the daughters of Judah rejoice,  
Because of thy judgements, O God. (Ps. 97.8)

He will judge the world with righteousness,  
And the peoples with equity. (Ps. 98.9)

Mighty King, lover of justice  
Thou hast established equity;  
Thou hast executed justice  
And righteousness in Jacob. (Ps. 99.4)

The Lord came to his people as King and Judge. The ceremony is thought to have taken place at the time of the autumn equinox, in other words, at harvest time, which would account for the way in which images of harvest and images of judgement go together in the biblical tradition. Amos was the earliest example, with the basket of summer fruit which he saw as a warning of judgement (Amos 8.1—3). There was also Isaiah's picture of
Yahweh trampling the winepress (Isa. 63.1—6) and, perhaps the most fearful of all, the harvest of the grapes of wickedness which were pressed in the winepress of the wrath of God (Rev. 14.18—20).

The Great Light

Sun of my soul, thou Saviour dear,
It is not night if thou be near.

J. Keble

The autumn equinox probably accounts for another image frequently used of the Lord as King:

Let thy face shine on thy servant;
Save me in thy steadfast love! (Ps. 31.16)

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.
(Ps. 50.2)

May God be gracious unto us and bless us
And make his face to shine upon us. (Ps. 67.1)

Thou who art enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth...
Restore us O God,
Let thy face shine, that we may be saved. (Ps. 80.1, 3)

The familiar lines of Isaiah are also a part of this picture:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.
(Isa. 9.2)

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
And thick darkness the peoples;
But the Lord will arise upon you,
And his glory will be seen upon you. (Isa. 60.1—2)

The earliest known blessing of the high priests and one of the latest prayers in the Old Testament, that of Daniel written in the second century bc, both use this image of the rising sun:

The Lord bless you and keep you:
The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you:

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
(Num. 6.24—6)

O Lord, cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary, which is desolate. (Dan. 9.17)

The gate of the temple faced east; at the autumn equinox, it is suggested, the rays of the rising sun would have shone through the gate and illuminated the great golden throne in the debir. This symbolized the coming of the Lord to his people.

Perhaps Ezekiel had this in mind when he described the glory of the Lord returning to the temple. His vision occurred at the New Year (Ezek. 40.1): 'And behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the east; and the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. . . . As the glory of the Lord entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the temple' (Ezek. 43.2, 4, 5). Zechariah also sang of this dawn when the Lord would come to his people: 'the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness' (Luke 1.78—9). Something must have given rise to all this imagery. Even if we cannot reconstruct the lost world of the ancient temple in exact detail, significant fossils do break the surface in literature that has survived, not only from the period of the first temple, but from the later centuries.

The rising sun may also account for a curious piece of information in the account of King Josiah's reform: 'He removed the horses that the kings of Judah had dedicated to the sun, at the entrance to the house of the Lord . . . and he burned the chariots of the sun with fire' (2 Kings 23.11). This account of Josiah's reform was written by people sympathetic to the ideals of the Deuteronomists, the puritanical reformers of Israel's religion. All that they condemned as pagan may not have been pagan at all. It may simply have been a part of the ancient cult which they did not like, just as they did not like the idea of the Lord present in his temple, seated on a golden throne. These temple horses appear elsewhere as the steeds of the Lord's agents. Zechariah's visions in the sixth century, after the return from Babylon and before the second temple had been built, were all based upon the imagery of the first temple. In the first of his visions he saw four horses riding out to patrol the earth
(Zech. 1.8—11). In another vision he saw four horse-drawn chariots sent out to patrol the four corners of the earth (Zech. 6.1—8). Nobody can explain these horses or how they fitted into the beliefs of the time; there must have been some role for them in the drama of the Lord’s judgement being sent forth from his temple. These same horses appear six centuries later in St John’s vision of the judgement (Rev. 6.1—8). For an early Christian visionary they were still a part of the Lord’s judgement!

Visions of the Throne

Be thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art.

Ancient Irish, tr. M. E. Byrne and E. H. Hull

The Lord enthroned in his temple was the subject of several prophetic visions. It is not correct to say that the prophets’ visions were based on temple ritual; rather, the temple ritual made visible the world of the heavenly temple, the divine reality. It was this which the prophets saw. In other words, temple ritual derived from the world of the prophets’ visions, and not vice versa. When we read these accounts in the prophets we see the golden cherubim of the sanctuary come alive, just as they do in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, when the figures on the temple walls become the spirits of the heavenly sanctuary.

[And the like]ness of living divine beings is engraved in the vestibules where the King enters, figures of luminous spirits . . . [in] the midst of the spirits of splendour, [is] a work of wondrous colours, figures of the living divine beings (4Q 405.14—15) . . . [fig]ures of the shapes of divine beings, engraved round about their [gl]orious brickwork, glorious images of the b[ric]kwork of splendour and majes[ty]. Living divine beings (are) all their construction, and the images of their figures (are) holy angels. (4Q 405.19 ABCD)

The earliest description of a throne vision is the call of Isaiah in the eighth century BC, and yet the temple imagery is recognizably that of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, used by the Qumran community some eight centuries later. Such similarity suggests that the inner meaning of the first temple had not been forgotten in the intervening centuries, even though so little has survived from those years which could add detail to the picture. Isaiah described the throne thus:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim: each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: ‘Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.’

Then flew one of the seraphim to me having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven.’ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me.’ (Isa. 6.1—8)

Here are all the elements of the throne vision: the throne in the sanctuary where the Lord is King, the surrounding hosts, the smoke of the incense, the sense of impending judgement, and the song of the angels. Every detail is there; even the altar of incense which stood before the throne provides the coal to purify the prophet’s lips. After his vision of the glory of the Lord the prophet became a messenger of judgement.

Micah’s vision is less well known, but it shows how the prophets, with their visions of the Lord, functioned as political advisers. The kings of Israel and Judah were preparing to go to war and they consulted the prophets. Micahiah told of a vision of the Lord on his throne, surrounded by the hosts. He heard the Lord send a lying spirit into the mouth of the other prophets who were the king’s advisers, and then he announced to them the doom which the Lord had decreed for them (1 Kings 22.13—23). Amos saw the Lord in the temple, standing beside (or upon) the altar. He too was given a message of judgement (Amos 9.1—4).

The most terrifying of all the throne visions in the Old Testament are those of Ezekiel. He lived during the exile and had
seen the destruction of the temple. The people to whom he spoke were far from Jerusalem, and their question would have been: 'If the Lord dwells in the temple, and the temple is destroyed, and we are far away from the temple, are we far away from the presence of the Lord?' Ezekiel answered this question with his vision of the chariot throne of the Lord leaving the temple in Jerusalem just before the Lord's judgment was poured out upon the wickedness of the city. The chariot throne of the Lord had travelled east with his people and appeared to Ezekiel in Babylon, on the banks of the river Chebar (Ezek. 1.1). In his second vision he was transported to see evil practices in the temple (one of which was sun worship! Ezek. 8.16) and he then saw the Lord sending angels of destruction into the city. They came in through the north gate of the temple and stood by the great bronze altar (Ezek. 9.2). The Glory of the God of Israel rose from the cherubim and ordered the judgement to begin (Ezek. 9.3). A sapphire throne appeared above the cherubim (Ezek. 10.1; cf. Exod. 24.10, a very old account of the vision of the Lord on Sinai). One of the angels was told to throw the coals from the altar onto the city. This must have been the altar of incense beneath the throne in the temple, but here a part of the living scene of the judgement. The cherubim were no longer golden statues but living creatures and beside them the prophet saw wheels. Ezekiel never describes the throne as a chariot but 1 Chron. 28.18 shows that that is what it was, and that is how it was remembered: 'It was Ezekiel who saw the vision of glory which God showed him above the chariot of the cherubim' (Ecclus. 49.8). The chariot rose and left through the eastern gate (Ezek. 10.19).

The prophet's vision in Babylon gives more detail of the chariot. It came with a storm cloud (Ezek. 1.4) and the cherubim were like men but they had four faces and four wings (Ezek. 1.5). Over the heads of the cherubim was a crystal firmament (Ezek. 1.22), and above this was the sapphire throne on which was a human form (Ezek. 1.26). This is the earliest reference to a human figure on the throne, and it was made by someone who had been a priest in the first temple (Ezek. 1.3). It was 'the likeness of the glory of the Lord' (Ezek. 1.28). In the second chariot vision, Ezekiel saw an identical figure, a man of fire and bronze (Ezek. 8.2; cf. 1.27), who lifted him up and brought him in a vision to Jerusalem. The figure was not on a throne, but acted as Ezekiel's guide and showed him the evils for which Jerusalem was to be punished. A careful reading of chapter 9 shows that his man of fire and bronze was directing the judgement; he commanded the six executioners who came from the north, and the scribe of judgement, the man in linen, who accompanied them (Ezek. 9.1). The man figure, according to Ezek. 1.28, was the likeness of the glory of the Lord, and in the temple vision Ezekiel saw that this glory had gone up from the cherub throne and was standing at the threshold of the temple (Ezek. 9.3). The sequence is: the glory left the throne, he called to the scribe dressed in linen, the Lord said to him ... All three (the glory, the man figure and the Lord) are the same person. 'Begin', said the man figure who accompanied Ezekiel, 'at my sanctuary'. After the coals from the incense altar had been cast on the city, the glory of the Lord went from the threshold and rejoined the cherub throne (Ezek. 10.18) which then left the temple. Ezekiel knew that this was what he had seen in Babylon, by the river Chebar (Ezek. 10.20). This is the most remarkable piece of anthropomorphism in the Old Testament. A fiery man figure occupied the cherub throne and was described as the likeness of the glory of the God of Israel. He left the throne and accompanied the prophet on his visionary journey, he was worshipped in Jerusalem and he brought judgement upon the city.

Later tradition remembered all these things about the man figure. In the Apocalypse of Abraam, an angel was sent to accompany Abraham on his ascent to the heavenly throne. This angel was called Iaoel. Now Iao is recognizable, even in the Old Slavonic in which this Apocalypse has survived, as a Greek form of the divine name. What we have in this Apocalypse is the memory of an angel originally called Yahweh-el. He was the angel who lived in the seventh heaven (Apoc. Abr. 10.8) and had been assigned especially to Abraham and his heirs; 'Behold I am assigned (to be) with you and with the generation which is predestined (to be born) from you' (Apoc. Abr. 10.17). The angel was dressed as a high priest, with the high priest's turban; he carried a gold sceptre and his face was glowing (Apoc. Abr. 11.2-4). Philo called the Logos 'the man after his image' (On the Confusion of Tongues, 146), as well as the archangel and the high priest the universe.

Finally, and perhaps most significant of all as evidence for the
later abhorrence of anthropomorphism which explains why so little has survived, it was forbidden to read this chapter in Ezekiel describing the throne chariot: ‘They may not use the chapter of the chariot as a reading from the prophets’ (Mishnah, Megillah 4.10). ‘The chapter of the chariot (may not be expounded) before one alone, unless he is a sage who understands of his own knowledge’ (Mishnah, Hagigah 2.1). After his vision of the man on the throne, Ezekiel was commissioned to take a message of judgement to his people. In later visions Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord returning to the temple at the New Year and entering by the eastern gate (Ezek. 43.1—5).

There are other places in the Old Testament where the prophets allude to this expectation of judgement. Isaiah warned his contemporaries that the Lord would appear in his temple to render recompense to his enemies (Isa. 66.6). Malachi warned: ‘The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. . . . Then I will draw near to you for judgement’ (Mal. 3.1, 5). One who had suffered at the hands of the wicked was wearied, ‘until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end’ (Ps. 73.17). From the time of Isaiah right through until the Book of Revelation, there was a continuous tradition of throne visions; a divine figure in human form sat on the throne and brought judgement. We shall now look briefly at some of these.

**Visions of the Throne in the Apocalypses**

**Immortal, invisible, God only wise,**

**In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.**

W. Chalmers Smith

The apocalypses are revelations of the heavenly world. The word literally means ‘unveil’, and that is exactly what they did. They disclosed what was beyond the veil of the temple, and the dominant theme of the apocalypses is, as we should expect, the divine throne. It is customary to draw a line between prophecy and apocalyptic, and between prophecy and wisdom literature; but these lines are only demarcations of convenience drawn by modern scholars. In reality, the wise men and the prophets did very similar things, and the apocalyptists were only the later version of both. This can best be illustrated by the Book of Daniel, which is clasped by modern scholars as an apocalypse (the only one in the Old Testament), but is placed among the prophets in our Old Testament (which derives the order of its books from that of the Greek Old Testament, not that of the Hebrew where Daniel is among the ‘writings’ at the end), but Daniel himself is described as a wise man who can interpret dreams (Dan. 1.3; 2.25).

The best known of the throne visions is that of Daniel 7:

As I looked, thrones were placed, and one that was ancient of days took his seat;

his raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool;

his throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire.

A stream of fire issued and came forth from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;

c the court sat in judgement, and the books were opened . . .

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.

And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

(Dan. 7.9—10, 13—14)

The context of this vision was the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes. The temple had been desecrated and the daily burnt offering taken away. Antiochus was seen as one of the fallen angelic figures who had dared to come against the Lord and his city. In a later vision Daniel described him as the little horn who had ‘magnified itself, even up to the Prince of the host; and the continual burnt offering was taken away from him, and the place of his sanctuary was overthrown’ (Dan. 8.11). If the prince of the sanctuary was cast out, as was shown in Ezekiel’s oracle against the Prince of Tyre, his people were defeated. The vision of Dan. 7 shows the reverse of this process; the Prince is restored to his heavenly place, and thus, as the interpretation of the vision shows, the restoration of their Prince meant the restoration of the people: ‘And the kingdom and the
dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High' (Dan. 7.27).

There have been many attempts by scholars to explain this vision: it is related to Ps. 2 and clearly has the same enthronement setting; it also resembles the ancient Ugaritic account of the god Baal going up before the throne of El, the Canaanite High God. Now this description of Baal and El is about one thousand years older than Dan. 7 and there is no way that it could possibly have been the immediate source of the imagery. But there is another possibility, namely that those who first described the relationship of Israel's king to her God described it in terms of Baal and El. The period of the early monarchy was only a couple of centuries distant from the Ugaritic account of Baal, and all this would mean is that the guardian angel of Israel, who was manifested in the king, was believed to ascend to the presence of God Most High in the same way that Baal ascended to El or the Prince of Tyre ascended to the garden of Eden. Israel's culture was not sealed off from the influence of the surrounding peoples; it would not be surprising if they had expressed their own ideas in similar terms. It does, however, mean that the earliest Israelite cult would have had this belief in the second divine figure whom Philo described as the Logos and whom the Christians identified with Jesus even to the extent of finding pre-incarnation appearances of Jesus in the Old Testament. Justin, for example, said

that it was Jesus who appeared to Moses and Abraham and all the other Patriarchs and conversed with them, ministering to the will of his Father (Trypho, 113).

Then neither Abraham nor Isaac nor Jacob nor any other man ever saw the Father and the ineffable Lord of all things whatever and of Christ himself; but they saw him who according to his will is both his Son and his angel form ministering to his will. (Trypho, 127)

Hippolytus, who wrote at the end of the second century, knew that the bronze angel who appeared to Daniel (Dan. 10.5—6) was 'the Lord and not just an unnamed angel': 'He sees the Lord, not yet indeed as perfect man, but with the appearance and form of a man as he says' (Commentary on Daniel, IV.36). Irenaeus knew that it had been the Word of God who walked in the garden of Eden: 'And so fair and goodly was the Garden, the Word of God was constantly walking in it; He would walk round and talk with the man, prefiguring what was to come to pass in the future' (Proof, 12). He had been one of the three angels who met Abraham (Gen. 18.1—2): 'Two, then, of the three were angels, but one the Son of God ... the Son, the same who spoke with Abraham, being "the Lord", received power to punish the men of Sodom "from the Lord out of heaven", from the Father who is Lord over all' (Proof, 44). These few examples must suffice to show how widely this second divine figure was known both in Judaism and in early Christianity. Daniel's vision had all the components of that older pattern; there were beasts and a hostile sea surrounding the heavenly throne, there was a second divine figure who took human form ('one like a son of man') and travelled on the clouds. The second divine figure was installed as the agent of the judgement.

Contemporary with Daniel, or perhaps a little older, is the earliest material in 1 Enoch.

And behold I saw the clouds: And they were calling me; and the course of the stars and the lightnings were rushing me and causing me to desire; and in the vision the winds were causing me to fly and rushing me high up in heaven. And I kept coming (into heaven) until I approached a wall which was built of white marble and surrounded by tongues of fire; and it began to frighten me. And I came into the tongues of fire and drew near to a great house which was built of white marble and the inner wall(s) were like mosaics of white marble, the floor of crystal, the ceiling like the path of the stars and lightnings between which (stood) fiery cherubim and their heaven of water; and flaming fire surrounded the wall(s) and its gates were burning with fire. And I entered into the house which was hot like fire and cold like ice, and there was nothing inside it; (so) fear covered me and trembling seized me. And as I shook and trembled I fell upon my face and saw a vision. And behold there was an opening before me (and) a second house which is greater than the former and everything was built with tongues of fire. And in every respect it excelled (the other) ... in glory and great honour ... to the extent that it is impossible for me to recount to you concerning