its glory and greatness. As for its floor, it was of fire and above it was lightning and the path of the stars; and as for the ceiling it was flaming fire. And I observed and saw inside it a lofty throne . . . its appearance was like crystal and its wheels like the shining sun; and (I heard) the voice of the cherubim; and from beneath the throne were issuing streams of living fire. It was difficult to look at it. And the Great Glory was sitting upon it . . . as for his gown which was shining more brightly than the sun, it was whiter than any snow. None of the angels was able to come in and see the face of the Excellent and Glorious One, and no one of the flesh can see him. The flaming fire was round about him and a great fire stood before him. (1 Enoch 14.8—22)

First, this was a vision of heaven. Enoch was taken upwards by the clouds and winds, perhaps the cherubim and spirits of the earlier texts. He saw the chariot throne, which means that this must have been a temple vision, and the descriptions must be of what the earthly temple represented. He walked through the walls of marble and fire and came to the outer house, also built of marble. Zechariah had described the Lord as a wall of fire around his city, which may have been an allusion to the same belief, but there was also Isaiah 33, which asked who could dwell with the everlasting fire (Isa. 33.14). The person who could withstand the fire was exactly like the one who would be allowed to stand in the Lord’s tent on the holy hill (Ps. 15.1). This person, said Isaiah, would ‘dwell in the heights’ and ‘see the king in his beauty’ (Isa. 33.16, 17). The fire must have been a part of the heavenly temple, even as early as the time of Isaiah. The outer house, which in the earthly temple represented Eden, had in the vision a floor of crystals; Ezekiel’s heavenly Eden had been the place where the Prince of Tyre walked ‘in the midst of the stones of fire’ (Ezek. 28.14). Enoch saw there fiery cherubim, just as there were on the walls of the hekal, and from that place he saw a second house also built of fire. This was the holy of holies and in it was the chariot throne and the sound of the cherubim. There was the Great Glory in white robes but not described as a man figure. No flesh could look upon him. We then see that Enoch has a priestly role in this vision. He had been sent by the fallen angels to intercede with the Great Holy One, but was told that they should have been interceding for men and not a mortal for them. Instead, Enoch had to take to them a message of judgement. Enoch was then taken on a tour of the heavens, to see the sources of all the natural phenomena and also the final place of punishment for the fallen angels. The implications of this vision are important: Enoch has a priestly role and in this capacity he ascends to the divine presence. When he returns he brings a message from the throne. This must have been the role of the high priest and it is exactly how Philo describes the role of the Word, the second God who was also the true high priest. He interceded with God and brought the divine commands to earth (Who is the Heir?, 205; see Chapter 3).

There is a second account of Enoch’s ascent to the throne, which is even more remarkable, since it describes how Enoch’s spirit ascended to the heavens and saw the sons of God. He was shown all the secrets of heaven by the archangel Michael, who then took him to the highest heaven, ‘the heaven of heavens’, where he saw the house of crystal and the throne of glory guarded by the seraphim, the cherubim and the ophannim (‘the wheels’ of the chariot who are also alive). The angels went in and out of the house, and Enoch felt himself transformed before the Antecedent of Time (1 Enoch 71.11).

This transformation vision is the conclusion of the Similitudes or Parables of Enoch, a collection of three virtually parallel accounts of a throne vision. These are remarkable for two reasons: first, the Enoch figure only appears in the framework of the visions, as though he had been grafted on to an older text; and second, the three accounts in parallel suggest that they were all variants of an older traditional account. There are, for example, variant names for the central figure; sometimes he is called son of man (e.g. 1 Enoch 48.2) and sometimes the elect one (e.g. 1 Enoch 49.4). He is the anointed one of the Lord of the Spirits (Hosts) (1 Enoch 48.10), and sits on the throne of glory, either as the elect one (1 Enoch 51.3; 55.4; 61.8) or as that son of man. These are remnants of the old royal tradition, full of temple imagery.

In the first Parable the elect one was ‘under the wings of the Lord of the Spirits’ (1 Enoch 39.7), i.e. on the throne beneath the wings of the cherubim. Philo’s Logos spoke from between the cherubim, as did the Lord in Exodus. Around the throne were ‘those who sleep not’ singing the song of Isaiah’s seraphim: ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of the Spirits: the spirits fill the
earth' (1 Enoch 39.12). Here it is not the Lord of Hosts filling the earth with his Glory as in Isa. 6.3, but the same understanding of the Glory as we found in both Philo and the Targum; it was the spirits, the powers of God who surrounded him and were made visible in the world. The four presences, the four archangels, stood around the throne (1 Enoch 40.1—9).

The second Parable promises that the elect one will sit on the throne of Glory as the judge. He will dwell among the elect and in his time the Lord will transform the earth. Here there is the characteristic blending of heaven and earth; the elect one sits on the heavenly throne, and yet lives among the chosen ones to transform the earth (1 Enoch 45.3—6). There follows a detailed description of the same figure, this time called 'that son of man' (1 Enoch 46.2), who was with 'One to whom belongs the time before time. And his head was white like wool.' The second figure was 'another individual whose face was like that of a human being. His countenance was full of grace like that of one amongst the holy angels' (1 Enoch 46.1). He was the revealer of hidden things (1 Enoch 46.3) and his role as the judge is described in terms very like those of the Magnificat: 'This Son of Man whom you have seen ... shall loosen the reins of the strong, and crush the teeth of sinners; and shall depose the kings from their thrones and kingdoms. For they do not extol and glorify him, and neither do they obey him, the source of their kingship' (1 Enoch 46.4—5). That son of man was named before the creation (1 Enoch 48.3) and kept hidden with the Lord of Spirits (1 Enoch 48.6). He was the anointed one of the Lord of Spirits (1 Enoch 48.10), endowed like the messianic figure in Isa. 11 with the spirit of wisdom (1 Enoch 49.3). He sat on the throne of the Lord of Spirits (1 Enoch 51.3), in a place where there were fountains of wisdom and righteousness (1 Enoch 48.1; 49.1). The mighty of the earth would have to watch as the elect one judged Azazel and all his angels and sent out the angels of judgement (1 Enoch 55.3).

The third Parable has similar themes and details: the elect one sits on the throne as judge (1 Enoch 61.8); he had been hidden by the Most High and revealed only to the chosen (1 Enoch 62.7); he would establish a place for the chosen who would live with him in their 'garments of glory' (1 Enoch 62.14—16). His name was the bond of the great 'oath' which restrained the created order (1 Enoch 69.25—6). The Parable concludes:

[Then] there came to them a great joy. And they blessed, glorified and extolled [the Lord] on account of the fact that the name of that Son of Man was revealed to them. He shall never pass away or perish from the face of the earth. But those who have led the world astray shall be bound in chains; and their ruinous congregation shall be imprisoned; all their deeds shall vanish from before the face of the earth. Henceforth nothing that is corruptible shall be found; for that Son of Man has appeared and has seated himself upon the throne of glory and all evil shall disappear from before his face. (1 Enoch 69.26—9)

The Parables of Enoch present many problems, the two greatest being: When were they written, and by whom? There is no fragment from this section of 1 Enoch amongst the Qumran texts, which means that there is no physical evidence for a pre-Christian date. On the other hand, there are so many themes and details derived from the royal cult in the temple that there can be no question of their being an original composition in the modern sense of those words, no matter when they were written. Whoever wrote them was using the expectations of the second divine figure, the angelic judge and ruler. The setting is the temple, with the cherub throne and the waters of Eden flowing from the throne. If they were pre-Christian in their present form, they depicted the heavenly world which the first Christians would have known; if they are a Christian composition, they show how closely the Christians identified with the older tradition. There is nothing in them which is clearly a Christian innovation; the son of man figure is drawn from the heart of the old temple cult.

One of Jesus’ own parables (and note that Enoch’s visions were also called parables) describes the heavenly throne. The parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25.31—46) is a throne vision. The Son of man will sit as judge on his glorious throne with all the nations assembled before him. He is the King whose Father has prepared a kingdom for the blessed (Matt. 25.34). Those judged are sent to the fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25.41). The motif of secrecy is also there; the condemned plead that they did not recognize the Lord (Matt. 25.44), and are told that they should have seen the Lord in anyone who needed their help. This is Jesus’ own addition to the judgement theme, bringing into the ancient tradition the democratization which had begun with Genesis 1; every man is
made in the image of God, and not just the manifested angel figure who had been the earlier 'Adam' in the garden of Eden.

There are many examples of such throne visions in the literature of the intertestamental and early Christian periods. The Testament of Levi is an example, perhaps from the second century BC, but reworked by several hands and now confused in some places. The original version seems to have described three heavens: the first was the place of the great sea (Test. Levi 2.7), the second the place of the heavenly armies prepared for the day of judgement, and 'in the highest of all dwelleth the Great Glory, far above all holiness' (Test. Levi 3.4). This is the threefold pattern of temple court (sea), hekal (the garden of the cherubim) and holy of holies. Levi's prayers had been heard and he was to become a son of the Most High (i.e. a divine figure; cf. Ps. 82.6), and a servant and a minister of his presence (Test. Levi 4.2). The angel then opened for Levi the gates of heaven and he saw 'the holy temple and upon a throne of Glory the Most High' (Test. Levi 5.1). Levi was installed as a priest until the Lord himself would come and dwell in the midst of his people; this suggests that he was a representative, a substitute for the Lord himself. He was also told to be a warrior and execute vengeance on Shechem; this is the familiar combination of warrior and priest, first found in Deut. 32.43, where the Lord himself avenge the blood of his servants and makes expiation for the land. A second vision seems to be an expansion of this first; Levi is vested as a high priest by the 'seven men in white raiment' (Test. Levi 8.2):

The first anointed me with holy oil and gave me the staff of judgement.
The second washed me with pure water and fed me with bread and wine (even) the most holy things, and clad me with a holy and glorious robe.
The third clothed me with a linen vestment like an ephod.
The fourth put round me a girdle like unto purple.
The fifth gave me a branch of rich olive.
The sixth placed a crown on my head.
The seventh placed on my head a diadem of priesthood and filled my hands with incense that I might serve as priest to the Lord God.
(Test. Levi 8.5—10)

The high priest is vested by angels, exactly as happened in the case of Joshua (Zech. 3.1—5). Levi's vision, then, was part of the traditional belief about the high priesthood and not something original to the author of this Testament. The similarity to early Christian baptism customs has led some to suggest that the text has been altered. The bread and wine in particular are thought to be a Christian addition, but this need not necessarily be so. The earliest reference to a priest in Jerusalem is in Gen. 14, where Melchizedek the priest-king brings Abraham bread and wine (Gen. 14.18), and bread and wine were offered with the sacrifices in the temple. We know too little about the priesthood rituals to state with any confidence that a text has been altered.

The second example is from the Assumption of Moses, a text from the first century AD. It describes the manifestation of the angel of Israel, and, since the whole of the Assumption is an expansion of the last chapters of Deuteronomy, this passage corresponds to Deut. 32.43 and shows how it was understood at this time.

And then his kingdom shall appear throughout all his creation.
And then Satan shall be no more,
And sorrow shall depart with him.
Then the hands of the angel shall be filled
Who has been appointed chief,
And he shall forthwith avenge them of their enemies.
For the Heavenly One will arise from his royal throne
And he will go forth from his holy habitation
With indignation and wrath on account of his sons.
(Ass. Mos. 10.1—3)

There follows a passage describing terrifying events: the sun and moon darkened, the stars out of order and the sea sucked back into the abyss. Finally, Israel is exalted and taken up to heaven to look down upon its enemies in Gehenna.

This example shows a different use of the throne vision. The Heavenly One is the chief angel, the warrior ('avenge them of their enemies') and priest (his 'hands shall be filled'), who leaves his throne and his holy dwelling in order to save his people. It is usually assumed that the angel was Michael, but since the passage corresponds to one in Deuteronomy about the Lord, it is more likely that this is a vision of the Lord leaving the holy of holies. There are other passages in the Old Testament where this is described, both from the eighth century BC. 'For behold, the
Lord is coming forth out of his place . . . and the mountains will melt under him' (Mic. 1.3, 4); and 'For behold, the Lord is coming forth out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity' (Isa. 26.21). This vision, then, is of the same type as Ezekiel's when he saw the Lord, described as the angel of fire and bronze, leaving the chariot throne in order to bring punishment upon the city.

A third example is in the Apocalypse of Abraham, where the patriarch ascends and sees first a great fire and then:

under the fire a throne of fire and the many-eyed ones round about, reciting the song, under the throne four fiery living creatures, singing. (Apoc. Abr. 18.3)

And while I was standing and watching, I saw behind the living creatures a chariot with fiery wheels. Each wheel was full of eyes round about. And above the wheels was the throne which I had seen. And it was covered with fire and the fire circled it round about, and an indescribable light surrounded the fiery crowd. (Apoc. Abr. 18.12—13)

Some of this text has probably become corrupted in the course of transmission, but what follows is clear enough. Abraham is given a panoramic view of the history of Israel as he looks down from the place of the throne.

The throne is also described in the Life of Adam and Eve and the very similar Apocalypse of Moses. Adam had a vision: 'When we were at prayer there came to me Michael the archangel, the messenger of God. And I saw a chariot like the wind and its wheels were fiery, and I was caught up into the Paradise of righteousness, and I saw the Lord sitting, and his face was flaming fire that could not be endured. And many thousands of angels were on the right and the left of that chariot' (Life 25.1—3). The chariot throne in Paradise was surrounded by a sea (Life 28.4). Later the archangel Michael called all the angels to Paradise to see the judgement of Adam: 'And when God appeared in Paradise, mounted on the chariot of his cherubim, with the angels proceeding before him and singing hymns of praises, all the plants of Paradise both of your father's lot and mine, broke into flowers. And the throne of God was fixed where the Tree of Life was' (Apoc. Mos. 22.3—4).

The greatest of the biblical apocalypses is that of St John, which had all the features of those other visions. The setting for the whole apocalypse was the heavenly throne visions. The Feasts of Tabernacles which was the time of the enthronement of the ancient kings (Rev. 7.9—12), the golden incense altar before the throne (Rev. 8.3; 8.5; 9.13) and the ark of the covenant (Rev. 11.19). He saw the judgement as the great harvest (Rev. 14.14—16). He heard the heavenly music (Rev. 4.8, 11; 5.9; 11.17; 15.3—4; 19.6—7). He saw the beast rise from the primeval sea (Rev. 13.1). He saw the throne (Rev. 4.1—4), in front of which were the seven torches, the seven spirits of God, Zechariah's 'eyes of the Lord' (Rev. 4.5). Round the throne were the cherubim (Rev. 4.5—8) and in front of it was the sea (Rev. 4.6; 15.2). On the throne was one who appeared like jasper and carnelian (Rev. 4.3), not described as a man figure, though he had a hand (Rev. 5.7) and we are probably to assume a human form. The heavenly judge was revealed (Rev. 5.6—7), and he was the one who had the seven spirits of the Lord, i.e. he was the one represented by the ancient menorah. He was also a sacrificed lamb. The anointed one was revealed and his kingdom proclaimed (Rev. 11.15). The judgement began, and the heavenly agents, the four horsemen, went out from the holy place onto the earth (Rev. 6.1—8). As in Ezekiel's vision, the chosen were marked with the name of the Lord (Rev. 14.1). (Ezekiel's scribe marked them with a letter tau, the sign of the sacred name (Ezek. 9.4), which in the ancient Hebrew script was a cross. This was doubtless the origin of the Christian custom of signing with a cross, even though it later became associated with the cross of the crucifixion.) Fire was cast upon the earth from the altar of incense (Rev. 8.5), as in Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. 10.2). The divine warrior rode out from heaven to fight upon the earth (Rev. 19.11—16). His eyes were like fire and he had a secret name, which must have meant the sacred name. He was called the Word of God, the name given to the divine warrior in an almost contemporary text, the Wisdom of Solomon. On the night of the Exodus the angel of death had passed through Egypt and the original Exodus account says that this had been the Lord himself (Exod. 12.12, 29). The writer of the Wisdom of Solomon, however, described the death of the firstborn thus: 'Thy all powerful Word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into
the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword of thy authentic command, and stood and filled all things with death, and touched heaven while standing on the earth' (Wisd. 18.15–16). The warrior of Revelation was also named King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He had the sword and rod of judgement (as did the messianic figure of Isa. 11), and he was to tread the winepress of the wrath of God Almighty. Now the one who trod the winepress in Isa. 63 was the Lord himself. As in other throne visions, the seer was commissioned to prophesy (Rev. 10.11), and as in other visions, the seer wrote his words at the command of the angel. In John's case the angel was the angel of Jesus (Rev. 22.16).

The Mystics' Visions of the Throne

Angel voices ever singing
Round thy throne of light.
   F. Pott

One of the most remarkable descriptions of the heavenly throne is to be found in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, which were found in fragments at Qumran and at Masada. Too little has survived for any extensive or certain translation to be made, but where there are substantial readable portions, the picture which emerges must alter forever what we understand as the background to Revelation or Hebrews. This must have been the way that the people of first-century Palestine regarded their temple cult. The heavenly deibir was envisaged as a place of elohim (i.e. gods or angelic beings), spirits of truth and knowledge who were many-coloured and surrounded the throne.

The cherubim bless the image of the throne chariot above the firmament and they praise the majesty of the luminous firmament beneath his seat of glory. When the wheels advance, angels of holiness come and go. From between his glorious wheels there is as it were a fiery vision of most holy spirits. About them the appearance of rivulets of fire in the likeness of gleaming brass, and a work of . . . radiance in many coloured glory, marvellous pigments, clearly mingled.

At their marvellous stations are spirits, many-coloured like the work of a weaver, splendid engraved figures. In the midst of a glorious appearance of scarlet, colours of the most holy spiritual light, they hold to their station before the King, spirits of pure colours in the midst of an appearance of whiteness. The likeness of the glorious spirit is like a work of art of a weaver. These are the Princes of those marvellously clothed for service, the Princes of the kingdom, the kingdom of the holy ones of the King of holiness in all the heights of the sanctuaries of his glorious kingdom. (4Q 405. 23.ii)

There is nothing in the surviving texts to say who was observing these heavenly places. Other texts, however, describe a mystical ascent to contemplate the chariot throne; indeed the divine throne chariot became the central theme of early and medieval Jewish mysticism, which was known as Merkabah Mysticism (from the Hebrew merkabah meaning chariot). Such ascents were thought to be dangerous and to need the special protection of a guiding angel. They also became the centre of great controversy; the figure who appeared in human form on, or off, the divine throne was seen to present a threat to monotheism, and the argument raged over whether or not there were two powers in heaven. It is not easy to date these mystical texts or references to them. The existence of 1 Enoch and the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice at Qumran show that their roots go back at least to the first century BC in Palestine, and the rabbis associated with the controversies are all Palestinian. (A full account of this can be found in A. F. Segal, Two Powers in Heaven.)

The Hebrew Book of Enoch (3 Enoch) was originally called the Sepher Hekalot, the Book of the Palaces. It was not the work of a single author but rather the accumulated tradition of a school of mystics. There is no agreement as to the date of the form we now have, although the fifth/sixth century AD has much to commend it. The tradition purports to go back to Rabbi Ishmael, the Palestinian scholar who died in AD 132. He ascended in a mystical trance and passed through six heavens. At the door of the seventh heaven, R. Ishmael prayed for protection from the angels who might throw him down, and the Holy One sent him Metatron to be his protector. He entered and saw the throne. Later he asked Metatron who he was, and discovered that he was the exalted Enoch, transformed into a great angel with
seventy names. Metatron described how he had been lifted from
the earth as an Elect One and transported in a fiery chariot. He
was then installed as a Prince of the Presence:

After all this, the Holy One, blessed be he, made for me a
throne like the throne of glory and spread over it a coverlet of
splendour, brilliance, brightness, beauty, loveliness and grace,
like the coverlet of the throne of glory, in which all the varied
splendour of the luminaries that are in the world is set. He
placed it at the door of the seventh palace and sat me down
upon it. And the herald went out into every heaven and
announced concerning me: I have appointed Metatron my
servant as a prince and a ruler over all the denizens of the
heights. (3 Enoch 10)

Metatron was then given a robe of honour and a garment of
glory; he was crowned with a splendid crown and given the
name the Lesser Yahweh. Finally, the Holy One wrote on his
crown the sacred letters by which the world had been created.
All the heavenly princes trembled at the sight (3 Enoch 12—14).

No matter what the date of this text, it is not hard to see where
it had its roots. Metatron was a human being who had been
exalted to the highest status in heaven. In this respect, 3 Enoch
gives the next stage of the tradition recorded at the end of the
Parables of Enoch, where Enoch had been named as the Son of
Man. Metatron was enthroned at the gate of heaven, behind a
glorious curtain, and installed as the great judge. He was given
the name of Yahweh, and the sacred name was put upon his
crown. 3 Enoch shows how the royal mythology was remembered
even at that late date. A human figure had been elevated to
heaven and enthroned as the divine judge; he had been given the
name Yahweh and had worn the sacred name on his crown,
exactly as did the high priest in the temple. He sat behind the
curtain on a throne at the gate of heaven, exactly as Philo’s Word
had been enthroned between the cherubim at the gate of Eden
and the Lord had been enthroned between the cherubim behind
the veil in the temple. Metatron, the human figure, the second
power in heaven, was at the centre of the two powers controversy.

Elisha b. Abuyah was also known as Acher (‘the other one’) to
avoid naming one who had been such a notorious heretic. He
lived in the early second century AD and had been a mystic. In
one of his visions he had seen Metatron in heaven sitting as the
heavenly scribe (just as Enoch had been, Jub. 4.23). Acher had
assumed from this sitting position that Metatron was enthroned.
The story, as recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, depicts Acher’s
horror at this idea: ‘He saw that permission was granted to
Metatron to sit and write the merits of Israel... Perhaps, God
forbids! there are two powers. Thereupon they led Metatron
forth and punished him with sixty fiery lashes, saying unto him:
“Why didst thou not rise before him when thou didst see him?”
(b. Hagigah 15a). The story is also told in 3 Enoch 16: ‘But when
Acher came to behold the vision of the chariot and he set eyes
upon me, he was afraid and trembled before me... Then he
opened his mouth and said: “There are indeed two powers in
heaven!”’. Aniyel the Prince then came and lashed him and made
him stand up, because he had been responsible for giving such
evil thoughts to Acher.

The account of Acher’s heresy in the Babylonian Talmud is
preceded by the widely told story of how four rabbis, Ben Azzai,
Ben Zoma, Acher and R. Akiba entered a ‘garden’, the first looked
and died, the second looked and was struck, the third ‘cut the
plants’ and the fourth, Akiba, ‘went up in peace and came down
in peace’. This mysterious account shows that the ascent was
recognized as a dangerous practice, and even though there is
nothing to say what they saw, they saw it in a garden and the
sight proved fatal for two of them. What they saw must have
been the chariot throne in the garden of Eden.

The two powers controversy was waged over certain passages
of Scripture and how they were to be understood. One of these
was Exod. 24:1: ‘And he said to Moses: “Come up to the Lord”.’
Why, it was asked by a heretic, did God not say, ‘Come up to
me’. Were the Lord and God two separate powers in heaven?
The official answer given, attributed to R. Idi in the early third
century, was that Lord here meant Metatron, the angel of whom
it was said, ‘My name is in him’ (Exod. 23.21). The fact that
there was this controversy shows that there were some at that
time who found two divine powers in the Old Testament. The
rabbis said that it was an angel who had been manifested there,
but the heretics must have said that that angel was the Lord
himself (b. Sanhedrin 38b).

The crucial text was Dan. 7.9, which says that thrones (plural)
were placed in heaven, one for the Ancient of Days and the other,
presumably, for the son of man figure when he was given
‘dominion and glory and kingdom’ (Dan. 7.14). The Babylonian Talmud records a dispute over interpretation between two rabbis who taught in the early part of the second century AD.

One passage says: His throne was fiery flames (Dan. 7.9) and another says: Until thrones were placed; and One that was ancient of days did sit . . . there is no contradiction; One (throne) for Him and one for David: this is the view of R. Akiba. Said R. Yosi the Galilean to him: Akiba, how long will you treat the divine presence as profane! Rather, one for justice and one for grace. Did he accept (this explanation) from him, or did he not accept it? Come and hear: One for justice and one for grace; this is the view of R. Akiba. (b. Hagigah 14a)

R. Akiba must at one time have said that the second throne was for the Davidic Messiah, but as a result of the dispute, he agreed that the two thrones were for two aspects of God, his mercy and his justice. These two aspects of God were eventually offered as the solution to the problem of the ‘two powers’; the name God in the Old Testament signified the aspect of justice, they said, and Lord the aspect of mercy.

The problem of the two thrones in Daniel was made more acute by other texts which seemed to show God in different aspects. Two texts in particular were used in the debate: Exod. 15.3, ‘The Lord is a man of war’, and Exod. 24.10, where they assumed that it was the Ancient of Days on the throne, as in Dan. 7. The later rabbis argued that this showed the two aspects of God, one like an old man and one like a warrior, not that there were two powers which is what these texts imply. The problem is that these texts require an exactly opposite allocation of the two attributes to those of the later rabbis; the Lord as the man of war would exhibit the justice, and the God of Israel on Sinai would exhibit the mercy. These were, in fact, how Philo had allocated the attributes of God one century before the dispute between R. Akiba and R. Yosi; he had said that Yahweh (Lord) signified justice and Elohim (God) signified mercy (Philo, Who is the Heir?, 166). Further, in Philo, both these were attributes of the Logos, the manifested God, and not of God Most High.

From this considerable confusion there emerges the fact that in the second century AD there was controversy over the differing ways God was described in the Old Testament, particularly over the manifestations in human form. Interpretations were being redone and positions being redrawn. This was just the period when Justin was arguing with the Jew Trypho in his Dialogue with Trypho that the Word had been manifested in the Old Testament in those places which had described the Lord as an angel in human form. This, combined with the tradition about the great angel named Metatron who also bore the divine name (as was the case with the angel of Exod. 23.21ff.), and was a human figure enthroned in heaven, shows that the throne visions were at the very heart of those controversies which separated Judaism from Christianity. One has only to think of early Christian claims such as ‘Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth’ (Phil. 2.9—10); or: ‘We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord’ (Heb. 8.1—2), to realize who the ‘two powers heretics’ must have been.

The Fiery Angels

My God, how wonderful thou art,
Thy majesty how bright,
How beautiful thy mercy-seat,
In depths of burning light!

F. W. Faber

The throne was a place of fire. Ezekiel’s is the earliest description of the great fire, ‘like torches moving to and fro among the living creatures; and the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures darted to and fro, like a flash of lightning’ (Ezek. 1.13—14). The fire was composite and the living creatures were a part of the fire. Above the fire was a human form, also fiery; the upper part was like molten bronze but the lower part was not separated from the fire (Ezek. 1.26—7). When the figure was seen off the throne he was still a man of fire (Ezek. 8.2). The psalmist has implied something similar: ‘who maketh the winds thy messengers [i.e. angels], fire
and flame thy ministers' (Ps. 104.4). The Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice described the angels as fiery creatures:

From between his glorious wheels there is as it were a fiery vision of most holy spirits. About them, the appearance of rivulet of fire in the likeness of gleaming brass, and the work of... radiance in many-coloured glory, marvellous pigments, clearly mingled. (4Q 405.20.ii 221–2)

In the midst of a glorious appearance of scarlet, colours of the most holy spiritual light, they hold their holy station before [the King], spirits of [pure] colours in the midst of an appearance of whiteness. The likeness of the glorious spirit is like a work of art of sparkling fine gold. All their pattern is clearly mingled like the work [of art] of a weaver. (4Q 405.23.ii).

They too were a part of the glory, the coloured flames which mingled into the great fire. On his heavenly journey. Enoch was taken to a place 'where there were (the ones) like the flaming fire. And when they (so) desire, they appear like men' (1 Enoch 17.1). When he contemplated the throne he saw 'the holy sons of God. They were stepping on flames of fire: Their garments were white [and their raiment]. And their faces shone like snow' (1 Enoch 71.1). The angels of fire around the throne which were aspects of the Lord were also mentioned in the Apocryphon of John, a gnostic text found at Nag Hammadi. Since the teachings of this work were known to Irenaeus, it must have been in use by the end of the second century AD. It described the origin of Yaltebaoth, the son of Wisdom, in whom we recognize the God of the Old Testament, though he is described with the hostility characteristic of the gnostic texts. Wisdom rejected her offspring when she saw him, and cast him from the highest heaven.

And she surrounded it [her offspring] with a luminous cloud, and she placed a throne in the middle of the cloud so that no one might see it except the holy spirit who is the mother of all living. And she called his name Yaltebaoth. (CG. II.1 10)

But Yaltebaoth had a multitude of faces... so that he could bring a face before all of them according to his desire, being in the middle of the seraphs. He shared his fire with them; therefore he became Lord over them. (CG.II.1 12)

The weird distortions of this gnostic text are distortions of a familiar picture: the fire which separated into the living beings who became the visible forms of the Lord.

These angels of fire also explain the remarkable descriptions of how the mystics were themselves transformed into the angelic state. When Enoch saw the throne and its fires, 'my whole body mollified, and my spirit transformed' (1 Enoch 71.11). As Isaiah ascended, 'the glory of my face was being transformed as I went up from heaven to heaven' (Asc. Isa. 7.25). Enoch was transformed in the same way into Metatron:

When the Holy One, blessed be he, took me to serve the throne of glory, the wheels of the chariot and all the needs of the Shekinah, at once my flesh turned to flame, my sinews to blazing fire, my bones to juniper coals, my eyelashes into lightning flashes, my eyeballs to fiery torches, the hairs of my head to hot flames, all my limbs to wings of burning fire and the substance of my body to blazing fire. (3 Enoch 15.1)

From one of the later mystical hymns, a text known as the Greater Hekalot, comes this description of the experience of contemplating the robe of God:

His garment is engraved inside and outside and entirely covered with YHWH YHWH. No eyes are able to behold it, neither the eyes of flesh and blood nor the eyes of his servants. Whoever beholds it, whoever glimpses and sees it, his eyeballs are seized by balls of fire, his eyeballs discharge fiery torches which burn him and consume him. For the very fire that springs out of the man beholding the garment burns him and consumes him.

(Trans. in The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse, p. 199)

It may be that the very earliest reference to this transformation before the throne of God is in Exod. 34.29–35, which says that Moses had to veil his face after meeting with the Lord. His face was glowing, which suggests that the fiery transformation was a very ancient belief.

The angels of fire around the throne were also the earliest expression of the idea which became the Christian Trinity. There were two angels on either side of the great throne in early visions; perhaps these were the cherubim whom Philo knew as
the two aspects of God. These two angels were variously described, as can be seen by comparing the Ascension of Isaiah, 2 Enoch and the Shepherd of Hermas, three approximately contemporary texts from the first century AD. Hermas described a glorious man flanked by six others: 'The Glorious Man is the Son of God and those six are the glorious angels supporting him on the right hand and the left' (Parables, 9.xii.8). This is the sevenfold pattern on the menorah here used of the angels/spirits of the Lord it had always represented. Elsewhere the glorious man was named as the angel of the Lord (Parables, 8.x.i), Michael (Parables, 8.xiii.3), and the Lord of all the Tower (Parables, 9.vii.1). St John had named both Michael and the Word as the heavenly warrior (Rev. 12.7–9; 19.11–16). In 2 Enoch Michael was the angel who guided Enoch into the presence of God; in the Apocalypse of Abraham the guiding angel was Jaoel (i.e. Yahweh-el) the angel in whom was the name of the Lord.

Similar comparisons show that Gabriel was also the Holy Spirit; 2 Enoch described the angel on the left of the throne: 'And the Lord called to me; and he said to me, “Enoch, sit on the left of me with Gabriel”' (2 Enoch 24.1). Isaiah said that this angel was the angel of the Holy Spirit: 'And I saw the Lord and the second angel, and they were standing, and the second one whom I saw was on the left of my Lord. And I asked the angel who led me and I said to him, “Who is this one?” And he said to me, “Worship him, for this is the angel of the Holy Spirit who has spoken in you and also in the other righteous”' (Asc. Isa. 9.36). Both the Lord and the angel of the Holy Spirit worshipped the Lord who was called the Great Glory. This strange vision is one of the earliest descriptions of the Trinity, as the angels on either side of the throne.

These two angels were also identified with the two living creatures on either side of the throne. Two passages of the Old Testament were used: Isa. 6.2–3 and Hab. 3.2, which in the Greek has the additional line 'in the midst of two living creatures you shall be known'. Origen, who wrote in the first half of the third century, said that both these texts referred to the Son and the Holy Spirit and that he had learned this from a Jewish teacher: 'The Hebrew master used to say that the two seraphim, whom Isaiah describes ... were to be understood as the only-begotten Son of God and the Holy Spirit. For our part we think that what is said in the Psalm of Habakkuk, “In the midst of the

two living creatures you shall be known”, is also to be taken as referring to Christ and the Holy Spirit' (Origen, De principiis, 1.3.4). In his commentary on Romans he also identified the two cherubim on the ark with the Word and the Spirit which both dwelt in Christ, the mercy seat (Rom. 3.25).

All these angels were the fiery ones around the throne, aspects of the presence and powers of God which could be made visible. This accounts for one of the earliest images used to explain the Trinity. Justin was a native of Palestine, born near Shechem about AD 100. In his Dialogue with the Jew Trypho he explained the relationship of the Father and the Son:

God has begotten as a Beginning before all His creatures a kind of Reasonable Power from Himself, which is also called by the Holy Spirit the Glory of the Lord, and sometimes Son, and sometimes Wisdom, and sometimes Angel, and sometimes God, and sometimes Lord and Word ... as we see in the case of fire another fire comes into being, without that one from which the kindling was made being diminished, but remaining the same, while that which is kindled from it appears as self-existing, without diminishing that from which it was kindled. (Trypho, 61)

Justin later explained to Trypho that 'Christ being the Lord, and ever God the Son of God, and appearing by His power in olden time as man and angel, appeared also in the glory of fire, as in the bush, so also in the judgement that was done to Sodom' (Trypho, 128). He would not accept any suggestion that God and the Word were identical:

But [they assert] that this power can never be cut off or separated from the Father, in the same way, as they say, the light of the sun on earth cannot be cut off or separated, though the sun is in heaven. And when the sun sets the light is borne away with it. So the Father, they affirm, makes, when he will, His power to spring forward, and when he will, He draws it back again to himself. They teach that in this way also he made the angels.* (Trypho, 128)

*This refers to a passage in the Babylonian Talmud expounding Ps. 33:6: 'Every single day the angels that minister to Him are created from the stream of fire, and they utter a song and cease to be ... From every single utterance that goeth forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, is created one angel, for it is said, By the word of the Lord were the heavens made and by the breath of his mouth all their host' (b. Hagigah 14a).
There were, and always had been, several ranks of angels, and could we but understand the angelology of this period we should better understand the origin of Christian thinking, especially in such passages as the first chapter of Hebrews, or this debate of Justin and Trypho.

Philo shows that there were Jews of the first century AD who believed that there were two powers in heaven: the Most High (the Father) and the Word (the Son, the Angel of Israel). This is a survival of the oldest temple tradition where the Angel of Israel had been manifested in several forms, just as the menorah had had seven lights. The Word, Philo had said, was the chief of the powers, and the two names for God in the Old Testament, Yahweh and Elohim, had indicated two of these powers, two of these aspects. Trypho represented another type of Judaism, the Judaism which had identified God most High and the Lord; he would no longer have accepted the old idea of the sons of God Most High who were the patron deities of the individual nations. For him and those he represented there could only have been one possible illustration, that of the sun and its rays. But Justin and the Christians were heir to the older beliefs and they held that Jesus had been the manifestation of the Lord, the Son of God Most High. For them the only possible illustration was that of the torch kindled from the fire and having a separate existence.

The human figure on the throne is fundamental to our understanding of what was meant by ‘Messiah’. Further, the hostility to this throne tradition explains the hostility between the first Christians and the Judaism from which they eventually separated. From the time of the monarchy when contemporary cultures had described their kings as the image of God, Israel’s anointed kings had also sat upon the divine throne in the temple as the visible manifestation of the Lord, the patron angel of Israel. Not all the angels had human form; the evil angel in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Testament of Amram (4Q Amram), for example, was a snake-like creature: ‘his appearance and his face was like that of an adder’. The evil archon of the Gnostics was a lion figure; in some texts he was described as a composite lion and human figure: ‘a ruler first appeared out of the waters, lion-like in appearance and androgynous’ (CG. II.5.100); and in others as a serpent-lion: ‘a form of a lion-faced serpent. And its eyes were like lightning fires which flash’ (CG. II.1.10). The human form is therefore significant. The angel whom the king had represented did not disappear with the demise of the monarchy, but survived in the non-biblical texts as the Great Angel, the high priest and warrior, the heavenly judge installed at the right hand of the Most High.

The great prophet of the exile, the Second Isaiah, had proclaimed that there was only one God and that all the others were nothing. What happened in fact was that the Most High and the patron angel of Israel were fused and appeared in subsequent texts and interpretations as one God with two names. Having lost his name in some circles, the Great Angel was not forgotten. Some gave him no name, some named him Michael, others remembered that he was Yahweh, the Lord. It was these people who kept the distinction between the Most High, whom they called the Father, and the Lord, whom they called the Son. They recorded the birth of one who was the Son of the Most High (Luke 1.32) and who was recognized as the Lord in human form. They interpreted his whole life and death in terms of the ancient messianic angel. From the beginning there was a consistent use of this temple imagery to describe and interpret the life, death, and ascension of Jesus. Those who had tried to suppress the Great Angel found the Christians a threat and the Merkabah Mystics a great problem. There could not be two powers in heaven, they said. But their most ancient traditions, as reflected in the temple cult, had said otherwise.

‘The person who contemplates the beauty of the image also achieves knowledge of the original model.’

Gregory of Nyssa