

A Buried Pentateuchal Allusion to the Resurrection in Mark 12:25

MATTHEW THIESSEN

Saint Louis University

St. Louis, MO 63108

THE DEBATE between Jesus and the Sadducees regarding the resurrection of the dead highlights an important issue faced by both ancient and modern readers of the Hebrew Bible: the Pentateuch is virtually silent on the topic of a beatific afterlife, particularly the belief in the resurrection of the dead.¹ In spite of the seeming pentateuchal silence on resurrection, early rabbis argued that anyone who claimed that the Torah did not teach the resurrection of the dead had no portion in the world to come (*m. Sanh.* 10.1). Consequently, the Babylonian Talmud lists numerous passages from the Pentateuch that purportedly demonstrate the resurrection from the dead (*b. Sanh.* 90b-92a).²

In contrast, the Sadducees, Mark informs his readers, say that there is no resurrection. Though no known Sadducean writings exist, numerous ancient sources claim that they did not believe in the resurrection. Matthew 22:23 and Luke 20:27, following Mark 12:18, make this claim, as does Luke in Acts 23:6-8. Outside of the NT, Josephus states that the Sadducees deny not only the bodily resurrection

¹ The issue of resurrection in Jewish Scripture has been taken up most recently by N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 3, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 85-128; and Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). See also Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

² On these arguments, see Otto Schwankl, *Die Sadduzäerfrage (Mk 12, 18-27 parr): Eine exegetisch-theologische Studie zur Auferstehungserwartung* (BBB 66; Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1987) 278. For the hermeneutical principles that guide rabbinic interpretation, see Dan M. Cohn-Sherbok, "Jesus' Defense of the Resurrection of the Dead," *JSNT* 11 (1981) 64-73.

but also the postmortem existence of the soul (ψυχή, *B.J.* 2.8.13 §165; *A.J.* 18.1.4 §16).³ In order to demonstrate the absurdity of a bodily resurrection, they confront Jesus with a potentially problematic situation brought about by pentateuchal law (Deut 25:5-6; Gen 38:8): what will happen in the resurrection to a woman who through levirate marriage had been married seven times? If Origen and Jerome are correct, the Sadducees viewed only the Pentateuch as Scripture, which perhaps led them both to conclude that there was no resurrection of the dead and to use the case of levirate marriage in order to disprove the resurrection (Origen *Cels.* 1.49; Jerome *Comm. Matt.* 22:31-32).⁴ Regardless of whether the Sadducees held only to the authority of the Torah, the reader expects Jesus' response to them to provide pentateuchal evidence for his claims in order to meet the pentateuchal challenge they issue him. We get this explicitly in Mark 12:26-27, since Jesus asks, "Have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage of the bush, how God said to him, 'I [am] the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob [ἐγὼ ὁ θεὸς Ἀβραὰμ καὶ ὁ θεὸς Ἰσαὰκ καὶ ὁ θεὸς Ἰακώβ].' He is not God of the dead, but of the living." Jesus cites God's words to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:6),⁵ concluding that this verse demonstrates the resurrection, since God can only be a God of the living, not of the dead. Regarding Jesus' selection of this verse, Jerome states matter-of-factly, "He could have used other far clearer examples to prove the truth of the resurrection" (*Comm. Matt.* 22:31-32).⁶

Yet Jesus begins his rebuttal of the Sadducees by claiming that in the resurrection "they are neither married nor given in marriage, but they are like the angels in the heavens" (ὅταν γὰρ ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναστῶσιν οὔτε γαμοῦσιν οὔτε γαμίζονται, ἀλλ' εἰσὶν ὡς ἄγγελοι ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς [Mark 12:25]).⁷ Jesus first provides an answer to a question implicit in the argument of the Sadducees: how will the dead be

³ Significantly later, *Abot de-Rabbi Nathan* A 5 states that Antigonus of Soko, who denied the resurrection, was the founder of the Sadducees.

⁴ See also Josephus *A.J.* 13.10.6 §297, although this passage might imply that the Sadducees rejected only the oral law of the Pharisees, not other biblical books outside of the Torah. On the Sadducees, see Günther Baumbach, "Das Sadduzäerverständnis bei Josephus Flavius und im NT," *Kairos* 23 (1971) 17-37; and Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach* (1988; new ed.; Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁵ The quotation is imprecise, since LXX Exod 3:6 reads ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ θεὸς τοῦ πατρός σου, θεὸς Ἀβραὰμ καὶ θεὸς Ἰσαὰκ καὶ θεὸς Ἰακώβ. See John William Wevers, *Exodus* (Septuaginta 2.1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991).

⁶ Translation from St. Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* (trans. Thomas P. Scheck; FC 117; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008). Cf. Origen *On Matthew* 17.36.

⁷ Sjef van Tilborg argues that γαμέω signifies sexual intercourse, not marriage ("The Meaning of the Word γαμῶ in Lk 14:20; 17:27; Mk 12:25 and in a Number of Early Jewish and Christian Authors," *Hervormde Theologische Studies* 58 [2002] 802-10). If so, Jesus' response is more properly addressed to what John J. Kilgallen suggests is the real issue: "Whose wife will she be, so that a male heir may be raised up in the age to come, since they all have died to this age without male

raised?⁸ As Joel Marcus notes, “The Markan Jesus provides no biblical justification for his assertion that the resurrected saints will not marry because they will become like angels.”⁹ Verse 25 appears to be a response, therefore, that lacks pentateuchal warrant, leaving both the Sadducees and the readers of Mark’s Gospel, who are looking for an argument based on the Torah, dissatisfied. Consequently, F. Gerald Downing concludes that “Mark 12.25-26a (no marriage, but as the angels) thus reads like an intrusion, interrupting the continuity between ‘you have not known the scriptures, nor the power of God’ (v. 24) and then the necessary scriptural passage (v. 26b the ‘Bush’).”¹⁰ In a recent article, though, Bradley R. Trick has argued that Jesus’ response to the Sadducees’ example of levirate marriage demonstrates that they do not understand the scriptural passages to which they refer (Deut 25:5-6; Gen 38:8). The Sadducees believe that the levirate law demonstrates the absurdity of belief in the resurrection, for if the seven brothers and their wife are raised from the dead, the woman will have an overabundance of husbands. As Adela Yarbro Collins states, the hypothetical situation implies “that Moses did not teach resurrection, since he did not foresee such a problem.”¹¹ But, as Trick points out, the levirate law itself requires the belief that death annuls the covenant of marriage.¹² If death did not cancel a marital contract, levirate marriage would cause polygamy—the woman would remain married to her deceased husband even as she marries his brother. Jesus’ response assumes that death cancels marriages because he argues that there is neither marrying nor being married off.¹³ That is, Jesus assumes that after death all previous marriages cease to exist, and he then claims that there will be no future marrying after death.¹⁴ Thus, Trick provides a

heir?” (“The Sadducees and the Resurrection from the Dead: Luke 20,27-40,” *Bib* 67 [1986] 478-95, here 484).

⁸ As noted by John P. Meier, “The Debate on the Resurrection of the Dead: An Incident from the Ministry of the Historical Jesus?” *JSNT* 77 (2000) 3-24, here 14. Meier argues that early Christians explain the *how* and the *that* of resurrection only by pointing to the risen Christ, noting Paul’s discussions in Phil 3:21 (for the *how*) and 1 Cor 15:12-20 (for the *that*). This understanding of 1 Corinthians is not precisely correct, since shortly after 15:12-20, in a way similar to the claims I believe Jesus to be making in Mark 12:25, Paul discusses celestial bodies in order to illuminate the *how* of resurrection (1 Cor 15:36-49).

⁹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB 27A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 828.

¹⁰ F. Gerald Downing, “The Resurrection of the Dead: Jesus and Philo,” *JSNT* 15 (1982) 42-50, here 45.

¹¹ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 560.

¹² Bradley R. Trick, “Death, Covenants, and the Proof of Resurrection in Mark 12:18-27,” *NovT* 49 (2007) 232-56.

¹³ See Schwankl, *Sadduzäerfrage*, 366-75.

¹⁴ The belief that death cancels a marital covenant, as Trick (“Death, Covenants,” 243) notes, coincides with the arguments of Paul (Rom 7:1-3; 1 Cor 7:39).

pentateuchal explanation for the belief that marriages in this age do not continue in the life to come.¹⁵

Consequently, the only aspect of Jesus' answer that does not appear to have pentateuchal support is the statement that in the resurrection people will be like the angels in the heavens (ὡς ἄγγελοι ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς). One is thus left to wonder how such a statement would have fared with the Sadducees.¹⁶ Larry W. Hurtado claims that "Jesus may have deliberately chosen an analogy designed both to gall the Sadducees, who did not believe in angels (so Acts 23:8), and to point out to them that their inability to understand the resurrection was related to their unwillingness to accept such beliefs as the existence of angels."¹⁷ This assertion is questionable, as it is based solely on Hurtado's understanding of Acts 23:8, which states, according to the RSV: "For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all." The belief that the Sadducees denied the existence of angels flies in the face of the incontrovertible evidence of the Pentateuch, which frequently mentions angelic beings.¹⁸ While this

¹⁵ Though it is not central to my point here, I find the remainder of Trick's argument compelling. In brief, he states that, although death annuls the covenant of marriage, it does not annul God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as Jesus' quotation of Exod 3:6 demonstrates. The very fact that in Exodus 3 God can refer back to the covenant made with people long dead "*must imply that the three patriarchs are in some sense still alive to God*. Otherwise their deaths would have annulled the covenant" (Trick, "Death, Covenants," 250; emphasis original). Or, to put it another way, Trick states, "Because it is based on God's faithfulness to his covenant with the patriarchs, the Exodus out of Egypt proves that the patriarchs are in some sense still alive to God, the conclusion drawn in [Mark] 12:27a. But if they are still alive, then God remains obligated to fulfill all of his covenantal promises" (p. 252).

¹⁶ Although the argument of this article does not require that this story go back to the historical Jesus, Meier ("Debate on the Resurrection of the Dead") has made a strong case that it does. Central to his conclusion is the observation that "it never occurs to any Christian author in the New Testament to base the Christian hope of a general resurrection of the dead on a single verse from the Jewish Scriptures—especially not Exod. 3.6. The whole approach to speaking about and arguing for the general resurrection in Mk 12.18-27 is remarkably lacking in a specifically Christian viewpoint" (p. 10). See also the lengthy discussion of arguments for authenticity by Schwankl (*Die Sadduzäerfrage*, 466-587), who ultimately concludes, "Die Authentizität in dem Sinn, daß der Text ein bestimmtes, einmaliges Gespräch festhält, bleibt letztlich unsicher, ist aber anzunehmen" (p. 587). Craig A. Evans, on the other hand, doubts the historicity of the story, asking, "Why would Sadducees take any interest in an itinerant teacher from Galilee?" (*Mark 8:27-16:20* [WBC 34B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001] 251).

¹⁷ Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1989) 195.

¹⁸ Robert H. Gundry is wrong to say that "because angels and demons do not appear in the Pentateuch, the Sadducees also deny the existence of angels and demons, the angel of the Lord not being a true exception, but the Lord's alter ego" (*Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993] 705). As Camilla Hélena von Heijne concludes after examining interpretations of the angel of the Lord in early Judaism, "there is no unambiguous or homogeneous interpretation of 'the angel of the Lord' and his identity in our sources. He is sometimes depicted as a divine emissary separate from God, while in other cases he appears to be seen as a manifestation or a hypostasis of God himself" (*The Messenger of the Lord in Early Jewish Interpretations of*

could mean that Luke was misinformed about the beliefs of the Sadducees,¹⁹ David Daube, Benedict Viviano, and Justin Taylor have argued that this understanding of Acts 23:8 is incorrect.²⁰ Viviano and Taylor argue that the Greek of the passage (Σαδδουκαῖοι μὲν γὰρ λέγουσιν μὴ εἶναι ἀνάστασιν μήτε ἄγγελον μήτε πνεῦμα, Φαρισαῖοι δὲ ὁμολογοῦσιν τὰ ἀμφοτέρα) requires a different translation because the final word (ἀμφοτέρα) normally means “both,” not “all” as the RSV and other translations have it (but see Acts 19:16). This understanding suggests that the μήτε . . . μήτε construction refers back to ἀνάστασις. That is to say, the phrase μήτε ἄγγελον μήτε πνεῦμα describes the type of ἀνάστασις envisaged. Consequently, a better translation would be similar to the following: “The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angelic nor pneumatic; but the Pharisees confess both.” Acts 23 suggests that the Sadducees denied any sort of resurrection, however it be conceived. Thus, the Sadducees would have found Jesus’ claim that the resurrection would consist of an angel-like existence no better than a resurrection in which people were married off.²¹ To be sure, early Jews and Christians could compare the resurrected life to angelic life (e.g., *1 Enoch* 104:4; *2 Apoc. Bar.* 51:5, 10; *Mart. Pol.* 2.3; *Herm. Sim.* 9.25.1-2; 9.27.3), but was there pentateuchal support for such a belief?²² The answer, in short, is yes, at least if one understands angels in the way that many ancient Jews did.

Genesis [BZAW 412; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010] 377). Additionally, there are three instances of multiple angels in the Pentateuch (Gen 19:1-15; 28:12; 32:1), as well as the popular story of the בְּנֵי עִלְיָהוּ/υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ in Genesis 6, who were widely thought in Second Temple Judaism to be angelic beings.

¹⁹ This possibility is noted by R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 474.

²⁰ David Daube, “On Acts 23: Sadducees and Angels,” *JBL* 109 (1990) 493-97; and Benedict T. Viviano and Justin Taylor, “Sadducees, Angels, and Resurrection (Acts 23:8-9),” *JBL* 111 (1992) 496-98.

²¹ Caroline Vander Stichele cautions that Jesus does not say that “they will become angels, but that they will be ‘like’ angels” (“Like Angels in Heaven: Corporeality, Resurrection, and Gender in Mark 12:18-27,” in *Begin with the Body: Corporeality, Religion and Gender* [ed. Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Maaïke de Haardt; Leuven: Peeters, 1998] 215-32, here 223).

²² For early Jewish evidence, see John J. Collins, “The Angelic Life,” in *Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity* (ed. Turid Karlsen Seim and Jorunn Økland; Ekstasis 1; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009) 291-310. See also the first-century B.C.E. or first-century C.E. work Pseudo-Phocylides, which preserves the hope that those who have died will come out of the earth “and after they will become gods” (ὁπίσω δὲ θεοὶ τελέθονται; 103-4), a reference to a resurrection of the dead that is characterized as a semidivine, angelic existence. Kilgallen acknowledges the pertinence of the pentateuchal basis for this claim: “Jesus is carefully adapting himself at all points possible to the framework out of which the Sadducees fashion their problem; he lets them determine the limits [i.e., the Torah] within which he will respond to them. This is a cardinal principle by which Jesus’s words are to be understood” (“Sadducees and the Resurrection,” 480). This fits with the observation of James Luther Mays, who notes that Mark 12:18-27 is the middle of “three stories in which the opponents test Jesus as an interpreter of scripture” (“Is This Not Why You Are Wrong?: Exegetical Reflections on Mark 12:18-27,” *Int* 60 [2006] 32-46, here 34).

I. The Angels as Celestial Bodies

In an insightful essay on the star that led the magi to Jesus (Matt 2:2-10), Dale C. Allison has provided strong evidence that many early Jews believed stars to be angelic beings.²³ He points to numerous passages in Jewish Scripture that either identify or closely associate stars and angelic beings. For example, the Song of Deborah portrays stars fighting on Israel's behalf, "From heaven the stars fought, from their courses they fought with Sisera" (Judg 5:20). It appears that the song envisions these stars to be sentient beings of great power.²⁴ Other passages that condemn the practice of worshiping the stars confirm that this description of the stars was not merely metaphorical (Deut 4:19; 17:3-5; 2 Kgs 21:3, 5; 23:4-5; Jer 7:18; 44:17-19, 25;²⁵ 8:20; Amos 4:20; and Zeph 1:5). These portrayals of the nations or Israelites worshiping the stars of heaven confirm that some people, if not the prophets themselves, thought that the stars were divine beings. While Jeremiah, likewise, condemns the worship of the sun, moon, and "host of heaven" (8:20), he implies that they are gods: many in Judah and Israel have offered incense on their roofs "to all the host of heaven" (לְכֹל צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם) and drinking offerings "to the other gods" (לְאֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים) (19:13).²⁶ In conjunction with Deut 4:19, it appears that, though Jeremiah conceded the divine nature of the stars, he nonetheless thought it was wrong for Israel to worship them. Significantly later, Dan 8:10 portrays a horn that had grown as high as the "host of heaven" (צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם) throwing down some of the stars. As scholars recognize, these stars are likely angelic

²³ Dale C. Allison Jr., *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 17-41.

²⁴ Moshe Weinfeld notes an Egyptian parallel in the Gebel Barkal Stela of Thutmose III, which portrays a star, possibly the god Resheph, fighting on behalf of Egypt, and a Greek parallel in the *Iliad* (4.75), where the goddess Athena descends in the form of a star as a sign to warriors of the defeat of the Trojans ("Divine Intervention in War in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East," in *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures* [ed. H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1983] 121-47, here 125-27).

²⁵ Jeremiah mentions the worship of the "queen of Heaven," a reference to Venus, who was considered a star, as we will see below.

²⁶ For archaeological confirmation of astral worship, see Frances Klopper, who states, "Iconographic images show a preference for deities of the night. Their astral forms, especially the crescent moon, the seven stars, or seven sisters, of the Pleiades and the eight-pointed star of Venus appear repeatedly on iconographical images" ("Iconographical Evidence for a Theory on Astral Worship in Seventh- and Sixth-Century Judah," in *South African Perspectives on the Pentateuch between Synchrony and Diachrony* [ed. Jurie le Roux and Eckart Otto; LHB/OTS 463; London: T&T Clark, 2007] 168-84, here 174). See also Hans-Peter Stähli, *Solare Elemente im Jahweglauben des alten Testaments* (OBO 66; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1985); and J. Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel* (JSOTSup 111; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

beings.²⁷ We see this close connection between stars and angelic beings also in Hebrew poetry. For instance, when God appears to Job, he asks him,

Where were you when I established the earth?
 Tell me, if you have understanding.
 Who set its measurements—surely you know!
 Or who stretched the line above it?
 On what were its bases fastened,
 or who laid its cornerstone,
 when the stars of the morning [כוכבי בקר/ἄστρα] sang together,
 and all the sons of God [בני אלהים/ἄγγελοι μου] shouted? (38:4-7)

The LXX translator of Job understands the phrase בני אלהים to be equivalent to angelic beings. If one understands the latter two stichs of Job 38:7 to be parallel, then the stars are identified with sons of God/angels:

when the stars of the morning [כוכבי בקר/ἄστρα] sang together,
 and all the sons of God [בני אלהים/ἄγγελοι μου] shouted?

As Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger state, God “asks Job if he was present when Yahweh set the cornerstone of the world’s foundations, an ancient event celebrated by the divine beings, here specified as stars.”²⁸ The clearest parallels to this verse can be found in two Ugaritic texts: one refers to “the sons of El” as “the assembly of the stars” (*KTU* 10.1.3-4), and the other refers to a category of gods as “star-gods” (*KTU* 2.1.43.2-3). Similarly, Ps 148:1-3:

Praise Yah!
 Praise Yhwh from the heavens,
 praise him in the heights!
 Praise him, all his angels [מלאכיו/ἄγγελοι],
 praise him, all his host.
 Praise him, sun and moon,
 praise him, all you stars of light [כוכבי אור/τὰ ἄστρα]!

Although the psalmist could be distinguishing between angels and heavenly bodies, one could understand these statements to be parallel:

Praise him all his angels, praise him, all his host,
 Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all stars of light.

In other words, the psalmist may be identifying angels, the heavenly host,²⁹ with the sun, moon, and stars.

²⁷ See George Foot Moore, “Daniel viii.9-14,” *JBL* 15 (1896) 193-97.

²⁸ Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 195.

²⁹ The heavenly host (צבא) is itself a rather ambiguous term, at times referring to angels and at other times to stars. The ambiguity of the term disappears once one realizes that stars were thought to be angelic beings.

These passages demonstrate the strong connection between stars and divine beings in at least some Israelite thinking, a connection that fits well with ancient Near Eastern conceptions of celestial bodies. Taking just one example from the panoply of ancient Near Eastern deities, the goddess Inana/Ishtar was often connected to the planet Venus. Yet Venus was not thought to be a planet in the modern sense but rather to be one of the brightest of stars. Sumerian hymns from the third millennium B.C.E. address her “as ‘the great lady of the horizon and zenith of the heavens’ and she was addressed as ‘the radiant star, Venus, the great light which fills the holy heavens.’”³⁰ In the *Great Prayer to Ishtar*, Ishtar is called “star of the battle-cry.”³¹ Stars played an important role in ancient Near Eastern conceptions of the divine; in fact, “the first cuneiform sign used to designate the word ‘god’ appears in the image of a star.”³²

The literature of early Judaism, while commonly renaming these gods “angels,” still frequently attests the belief that they were connected to stars. For instance, in rewriting Gen 6:1-4, the author of *1 Enoch* 86 portrays the sons of God (בני האלהים/οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ) of Genesis 6 as heavenly stars who descend from heaven to mate with humans (portrayed as cattle) (vv. 1-6; cf. *1 Enoch* 19). For this offense, these stars are cast into the pits of the earth (88:1-3). Similarly, *1 Enoch* 18:11-14 portrays God punishing the stars who “transgressed the commandments of God.” That God punishes these stars by throwing them into a deep pit suggests that the author views them as sentient, semidivine beings. While one might dismiss this connection between angels and stars as merely metaphorical, other Jewish literature makes this same connection. For instance, IQHodayot^a states,

You have stretched out the heavens for your glory. You [established] all [their hosts] according to your will, and the mighty spirits (רוחות) according to their statutes, before they became [holy] angels (מלאכי) [. . .] as eternal spirits (רוחות עולם) in their domin-

³⁰ Francesca Rochberg, “Mesopotamian Cosmology,” in *A Companion to the Ancient Near East* (ed. Daniel C. Snell; Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World; Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 316-30, here 326. As Rochberg states, “All celestial bodies, stars, constellations, and planets were called stars” (p. 326). See also eadem, “‘The Stars Their Likeness’: Perspectives on the Relation between Celestial Bodies and Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *What Is a God? Anthropomorphic and Non-anthropomorphic Aspects of Deity in Ancient Mesopotamia* (ed. Barbara Nevling Porter; Transactions of the Casco Bay Assyriological Institute 2; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009) 41-91.

³¹ E. Reiner and H. G. Güterbock, “The Great Prayer to Ishtar and Its Two Versions from Bogazköy,” *JCS* 21 (1967) 255-66, here 258. See also Wolfgang Heimpel, “A Catalog of Near Eastern Venus Deities,” *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 4 (1982) 9-22.

³² Scott B. Noegel, Joel T. Walker, and Brannon M. Wheeler, “Introduction,” in *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World* (ed. Scott B. Noegel, Joel T. Walker, and Brannon M. Wheeler; Magic in History; University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003) 1-18, here 13.

ions, luminaries (מאורות) for their mysteries, stars (כוכבים) according to [their] paths” (9:11b-14a).³³

Here we see very clearly that the author equates angels and stars.³⁴

Jewish authors writing in Greek also provide evidence of this belief. The author of the *Exagoge of Ezekiel* portrays Moses’ ascension to and enthronement in heaven, where the stars fall to their knees (ἀστέρων πρὸς γούνατα) before him and pass by him “like armed ranks of mortals” (ὡς παρεμβολὴ βροτῶν; *Ezek. Trag.* 77-81). The author of *Joseph and Aseneth* likewise links and possibly identifies the morning star with an angel who visits Aseneth:

When Aseneth finished confessing to the Lord, behold, the morning star arose out of the eastern sky [ἀνέτειλεν ὁ ἑωσφόρος ἀστήρ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατὰ ἀνατολάς]. And Aseneth saw it, and rejoiced and said: “Then the Lord God has indeed heard me—for this star is an angel and herald of the light of the great day [ὁ ἀστήρ οὗτος ἄγγελος καὶ κήρυξ ἐστὶ φωτὸς τῆς μεγάλης ἡμέρας].” And behold, the heaven was split near the morning star [πλησίον τοῦ ἑωσφόρου ἐσχίσθη ὁ οὐρανός] and an unspeakable light shone. And Aseneth fell upon her face in the ashes. And a man from heaven [ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ] came to her. (14:1-4)

Although it is possible to translate ἄγγελος as “messenger,” not “angel,” the fact that the star takes on the appearance of a man from heaven suggests that this star is an angelic figure who changes forms in order to address the human Aseneth.³⁵ Philo, although he does not call stars “angels,” claims that they are living creatures

³³ James R. Davila (*Liturgical Works* [Eerdmans Commentaries on the Dead Sea Scrolls 6; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000] 240) states that “the word ‘luminaries’ [מאורות] refers to the heavenly bodies that regulate times and seasons (Gen 1:14-18; cf. 1QS x:3), but the Qumran literature also uses the word to mean angels” (cf. 1QM 10:11). See also 4Q186, which connects the angel of darkness to astronomy.

³⁴ For a fuller treatment of angels at Qumran, see Maxwell J. Davidson, *Angels at Qumran: A Comparative Study of 1 Enoch 1–36, 72–108 and Sectarian Writings from Qumran* (JSPSup 11; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992); and Cecilia Wassen, “Angels in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Die Dämonen: Die Dämonologie der israelitisch-jüdischen und frühchristlichen Literatur im Kontext ihrer Umwelt/Demons: The Demonology of Israelite-Jewish and Early Christian Literature in the Context of Their Environment* (ed. Armin Lange, Hermann Lichtenberger, and K. F. Diethard Römheld; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 499-523.

³⁵ As Ross Shepard Kraemer notes (*When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998] 101), *PGM* 1.74-77 provides an interesting parallel: “[A blazing star] will descend and come to a stop in the middle / of the housetop, and when the star [has dissolved] before your eyes, you will behold the angel whom you have summoned and who has been sent [to you], and you will quickly learn the decisions of the gods.” So, too, *PGM* 1.154-55, which contains a spell to the moon: “. . . you will see some star gradually free itself from [heaven] and become a god.” Translations taken from Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, vol. 1, *Texts* (2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

(*Plant.* 12; *Gig.* 8; *Somn.* 1.135; *Opif.* 73). Finally, in the opening vision of Revelation, John claims to see one like a son of man with a radiant appearance and seven stars in his hand (1:16). The loud voice that speaks to John explains to him that the mystery of these seven stars (τὸ μυστήριον τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀστέρων): the “seven stars are the angels of the seven churches” (οἱ ἑπτὰ ἀστέρες ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν εἰσιν, 1:20). To be sure, this opening vision is highly symbolic, but the work reinforces this connection between the angelic and the astral, since John later sees a star that has fallen from heaven to earth, who had been given a key to the abyss (9:1-2), a reference to an evil angelic being (cf. *1 Enoch* 86:1; *Sib. Or.* 5:158-61).

This brief survey demonstrates that numerous early Jews understood the stars to be angelic beings. While the Sadducees may not have deemed any of these writings to be authoritative, they are representative of a very diffuse understanding of the stars in antiquity, one that was also prevalent in non-Jewish Greco-Roman thinking.³⁶ If the Sadducees did not share this common cosmological assumption, they were in the minority.

II. The Angelification/Astralization of the Righteous

At the end of the first century C.E., the author of *2 Baruch* connected this identification of celestial bodies and angelic beings to his portrayal of God’s vindicated and glorified people: “They will live in the heights of that world and they will be like the angels and be equal to the stars” (51:10).³⁷ This description of the glorification of the righteous at the eschaton suggests that the righteous become starlike; that is, they become like angels. Yet the belief that the righteous would become like the stars is found in much earlier apocalyptic literature. Daniel 12:2-3, for instance, states, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, some to eternal life and some to reproach and eternal contempt. And those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the firmament [עֲשֶׂה כְּזֹהַר הַרְקִיעַ / ὡς φωστῆρες τοῦ οὐρανοῦ] and those who turn many to righteousness will shine like the stars [כְּכֹכְבִים / ὡσεὶ τὰ ἄστρα τοῦ οὐρανοῦ] forever and ever.” Daniel 12 envisions the resurrected living an astral-like existence in the eschaton. In light of the

³⁶ For Greek thinking, see Martin P. Nilsson, “The Origin of Belief among the Greeks in the Divinity of the Heavenly Bodies,” *HTR* 33 (1940) 1-8; and Alan Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars: A History of an Idea* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Clarendon, 1991). Scott concludes, “Aside from the Epicureans, all the major philosophical schools in the Hellenistic era believed in the divinity of the stars” (p. 55).

³⁷ Translation from A. F. J. Klijn, “2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch,” *OTP* 1:615-52. On the afterlife in *2 Baruch*, see Daniel J. Harrington, “Afterlife Expectations in Pseudo-Philo, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, and Their Implications for the New Testament,” in *Resurrection in the New Testament: Festschrift J. Lambrecht* (ed. R. Bieringer, V. Koperski, and B. Lataire; BETL 165; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002) 21-34; and Liv Ingeborg Lied, “Recognizing the Righteous Remnant? Resurrection, Recognition and Eschatological Reversals in *2 Baruch* 47-52,” in *Metamorphoses* (ed. Seim and Økland) 311-35.

fact that the vision of Daniel 10–12 makes use of Daniel 8,³⁸ the remark in 12:3 that certain people will be like the stars needs to be read in light of the stars in 8:10, where the arrogant horn exalts itself to the heights of heaven: “And [the horn] made itself great to the host of heaven [MT: צבא השמים; Greek: τῶν ἀστέρων τοῦ οὐρανοῦ], and he caused to fall to the earth some of the host [MT: הַצְּבָא/ἀστέρες], that is,³⁹ some of the stars [הַכּוֹכָבִים], and he trampled them.”⁴⁰ Here it is clear that the stars of heaven are divine or semidivine (that is, angelic) beings. Consequently, the statement of Daniel 12 that the wise, those who turn the many to righteousness, will be like the stars, is a claim that they would become like angelic beings in their splendor. As Hans Clemens Caesarius Cavallin states, “the comparison with the stars could hardly only be an *ad hoc* similitude from nature. They are very often cited together with angels as sharing the transcendent glory of heaven, and sometimes they are more or less identified with them.”⁴¹

Similarly, the second- or first-century B.C.E. Epistle of Enoch states, “[B]ut now you will shine like the luminaries of heaven; you will shine and appear, and the portals of heaven will be opened for you. . . . For you will have great joy like the angels of heaven. . . . For you will be companions of the host of heaven” (*1 Enoch* 104:2, 6; cf. *1QS* 11:7-8; *1QH^a* 11:19-21).⁴² *2 Baruch*, Daniel, and *1 Enoch* illustrate the belief that the glorified afterlife will be angelic or starlike. Yet, having made this connection, we are still left with the question of where such a belief in angelification/astralization can be found in the Pentateuch.

³⁸ Bernhard Hassberger argues that Daniel 10–12 is an interpretation of Daniel 8 (*Hoffnung in der Bedrängnis: Eine formkritische Untersuchung zu Daniel 8 und 10-12* [Arbeiten zu Text und Sprache im Alten Testament 4; St. Ottilien: EOS, 1977] 190-91). On this passage and starlike resurrection, see John J. Collins, “Apocalyptic Eschatology as the Transcendence of Death,” *CBQ* 36 (1974) 21-43, esp. 34-37.

³⁹ Following Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. Di Lella (*The Book of Daniel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 23; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978] 225) and contrary to John J. Collins (*Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993] 332 n. 44), I take the *waw* preceding הַכּוֹכָבִים to be a *waw explicativum*, and thus a gloss on what is meant by צבא. The Old Greek translator identifies the צבא השמים with οἱ ἀστέρες τοῦ οὐρανοῦ in v. 10a.

⁴⁰ Collins (*Daniel*, 332), following Moore (“Daniel viii.9-14,” 193-97), notes that Dan 8:10 is an allusion to Isa 14:12-15, which portrays the Day Star/Son of the Dawn (בן שחר/היילל) attempting to ascend to heaven and rise above the stars.

⁴¹ Hans Clemens Caesarius Cavallin, *Life after Death: Paul's Argument for the Resurrection of the Dead in I Cor 15*, part 1, *An Enquiry into the Jewish Background* (ConBNT 7; Lund: Gleerup, 1974) 27.

⁴² Translation follows George W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch, Chapters 1–36; 81–108* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001). See also Deborah Dimant, “Men as Angels: The Self-Image of the Qumran Community,” in *Religion and Politics in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Adele Berlin; Studies and Texts in Jewish History and Culture 1; Bethesda: University of Maryland Press, 1996) 93-103.

III. The Patriarchs and the Promise of Starlike Seed in Early Jewish Interpretation

Trick has rightly argued that “God’s faithfulness to his continuing covenant with Abraham provides the key to understanding Jesus’ line of reasoning.”⁴³ But whereas he links this faithfulness to the covenant to God’s promise of land, I believe Jesus’ reasoning focuses on a very different aspect of the covenant, one that he thought actually promised the resurrection, not merely assumed it. If God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, presumably it is in the ancestral narratives (Genesis 12–50) that God has revealed the fact that those descended from Abraham would be like the angels or stars, that is, resurrected. And, in fact, we find this promise mentioned three times.⁴⁴

In Genesis 15, God asks Abram to number the stars if he is able, saying that his seed would be like them (כֹּה יִהְיֶה זַרְעֶךָ / οὕτως ἔσται τὸ σπέρμα σου, 15:5). Then, after the near-sacrifice of Isaac, the angel of Yhwh appears to Abraham, swearing an oath that God would increase Abraham’s seed like the stars of the heaven (הַרְבֵּה הַשָּׁמַיִם כְּכֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶת זַרְעֶךָ אֲרַבְּבָה / πληθύνων πληθυνῶ τὸ σπέρμα σου ὡς τοὺς ἀστέρας τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, Gen 22:17). After Abraham’s death, God appears to Isaac as well, reiterating the oath that he swore to Isaac’s father: “I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham, that is, I will increase your seed as the stars of heaven” (אֶת זַרְעֶךָ כְּכֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם / ἡרביתי πληθυνῶ τὸ σπέρμα σου ὡς τοὺς ἀστέρας τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, 26:3b-4a).⁴⁵ These three passages connect this promise of starlike seed to Abraham and his seed, Isaac, and Isaac and his seed, Jacob/Israel. To modern interpreters, though, these verses appear to refer only to numerical greatness. In Gen 15:5, God asks Abram to count the stars, seemingly stressing their innumerability. Similarly, in Gen 22:17 the promise of starlike seed is connected to a statement that Abraham’s seed would be like the sand of the seashore, again suggesting

⁴³ Trick, “Death, Covenants,” 235. Similar arguments that the quotation of Exod 3:6 is meant to evoke the ancestral narratives and the promises of God made therein are made by F. Dreyfus (“L’Argument scripturaire de Jésus en faveur de la resurrection des morts [Marc XII, vv. 26-27],” *RB* 66 [1959] 213-24) and J. Gerald Janzen (“Resurrection and Hermeneutics: On Exodus 3.6 in Mark 12.26,” *JSNT* 23 [1985] 43-58). As Janzen states, “Jesus is not just invoking in a general way the tradition of God’s protection and power; he is countering *their* [that is, the Sadducees’] story with a reminder of the *ancestors’* story” (p. 50; emphasis original).

⁴⁴ Contrary to Gundry’s assertion (*Mark*, 708) that “God did not promise them [i.e., the patriarchs] resurrection.” See also Dreyfus, “L’Argument scripturaire,” 221.

⁴⁵ Mark’s readers could connect all of these references to starlike seed (זרע/σπέρμα) to the Sadducees’ quotation of Gen 38:8, that levirate marriage was meant to “raise up seed [זרע/הקם/ἀνάστησον σπέρμα] for your brother.” If so, the story might contrast two ways of achieving “resurrection”—levirate marriage or a starlike resurrection, as Emmanuelle Main suggests (“Les Sadducéens et la résurrection des morts: Comparaison entre Mc 12,18-27 et Lc 20,27-38,” *RB* 103 [1996] 411-32, here 431).

uncountable descendants. Yet, regardless of the original intentions behind these stories, numerous early interpreters took God's oath to make Abraham's seed like the stars of the heaven to be a promise not (merely) of numerical likeness but also of qualitative likeness.⁴⁶

The Greek manuscripts of Sirach paraphrase God's oath to Abraham in Gen 22:16-18, saying that God assured him that "the nations would be blessed in his seed [ἐνευλογηθῆναι ἔθνη ἐν σπέρματι αὐτοῦ], and that he would multiply him as the dust of the earth, and exalt his seed as the stars [ὡς ἄστρα ἀνυψῶσαι τὸ σπέρμα αὐτοῦ], and cause them to inherit from sea to sea, and from the river to the end of the earth" (Sir 44:21).⁴⁷ Sirach's paraphrase modifies Gen 22:17 by linking God's multiplication (πληθύναι) of Abraham's seed to the sand of the seashore (Sir 44:21) and making no mention of numerically multiplying the seed like the stars. Instead, Sirach claims that God will exalt (ἀνυψῶσαι) Abraham's seed as the stars. Thus, Sirach relates the innumerability of Abraham's seed to the sand of the seashore, while relating his seed's exaltation to the stars.⁴⁸

Likewise, in his discussion of Gen 15:5, Philo claims that God's promise to Abraham that his seed would be like the stars is more than merely numerical:

When the Lord led [Abram] outside He said, "Look up into heaven and count the stars, if you can count their sum. So shall be thy seed" [οὕτως ἔσται τὸ σπέρμα σου]. Well does the text say "so" [οὕτως ἔσται] not "so many" [τοσοῦτον], that is, "of equal number to the stars" [τοῖς ἄστροις ἰσάριθμον]. For He wishes to suggest not number merely, but a multitude of other things, such as tend to happiness perfect and complete. The seed shall be, He says, as the ethereal sight [τὸ ὁρώμενον αἰθέριον] spread out before him, celestial [οὐράνιον] as that is, full of light unshadowed and pure as that is, for night is banished from heaven and darkness from ether. It shall be the very likeness of the stars [ἀστεροειδέστατον]. (*Her.* 86-87, slightly modified from LCL)

Significantly, in his argument that Abraham's seed will be starlike, Philo points to the LXX translator's use of οὕτως, arguing that this adverb conveys something more than numerical comparison: Abraham's seed will be ἀστεροειδέστατον. In *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, Philo again claims that the promise of being like the stars refers to quality of life. He states,

⁴⁶ In a note to an appendix to his discussion of the magi's star, Allison states that belief in astral immortality was "no doubt sometimes encouraged by tendentious readings of Gen. 15:5 and 22:17, where Abraham is told that his descendants will be as the stars" (*Studies on Matthew*, 40 n. 74).

⁴⁷ Manuscript B, the only Hebrew witness to the passage, lacks any reference to the dust of the earth and stars. See Pancratius C. Beentjes, *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew: A Text Edition of All Extant Hebrew Manuscripts and a Synopsis of All Parallel Hebrew Ben Sira Texts* (VTSup 68; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 78.

⁴⁸ So, too, Burkard M. Zapff, who states that Sirach "greift den Vergleich der Nachkommen Israels mit Sternen aus Gen 15:5 auf, allerdings nicht in quantitativer, sondern—vielleicht unter Einfluss von Num 24¹⁷—in qualitativer Hinsicht" (*Jesus Sirach 25–51* [NEchtB 39; Würzburg: Echter, 2010] 323).

What is the meaning of the words, “I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven”? Two things are indicated, in which the nature of all things in general consists, (namely) quantity and quality—quantity in “I will multiply,” and quality in “as the stars.” So may (thy descendants) be pure and far-shining and always be ranged in order and obey their leader, and may they behave like the luciform (stars) which everywhere with the splendour of ethereal brightness also illumine all other things. (*Q.G.* 4.181; LCL)

Here Philo explains the promise God made to Isaac at Gerar (Gen 26:4). Consequently, it is not merely the wording of Gen 15:5 (οὐτως ἔσται) that leads Philo to understand the promise as a qualitative promise, but the reference to the stars themselves: “as the stars” (ὡς τοῦς ἀστέρων) suggests a life of ethereal, eternal brightness. Confirming the starlike nature of the patriarchs, Philo understands the twelve stones on the priests’ garments (Exod 28:21) as representing the patriarchs and the twelve signs of the zodiac, claiming that the stones demonstrate that the patriarchs do not “go about on the earth like mortals but become heavenly plants and move about in the ether, being established there” (*Q.E.* 2.114; LCL).

In his rereading of Genesis 15, the author of the late-first- or early-second-century C.E. work entitled the *Apocalypse of Abraham* portrays Abraham’s ascent to heaven in order to see the angels and stars of the firmament (*Apoc. Abr.* 19). God then says to Abraham, “‘Look from on high at the stars which are beneath you and count them for me and tell me their number!’ And I said, ‘When can I? For I am a man.’ And he said to me, ‘As the number of the stars and their power so shall I place for your seed the nations and men, set apart for me in my lot with Azazel’” (20:3-5).⁴⁹ This divine promise that Abraham’s seed would be like the stars is both numerical and qualitative: “as the number of the stars and their power.”⁵⁰ By raising Abraham above the stars, the author narrates the fulfillment of this promise already in the person of Abraham.⁵¹

Finally, patristic sources also interpret the comparison to the stars in this way. For instance, in the second century C.E., Irenaeus states of Gen 15:5: “And, that along with [its] multiplicity, Abraham might also know the glory of his seed, God led him outside at night and said to him, ‘look toward heaven and see if you can count the stars of heaven; so shall be your seed’” (*Epid.* 24).⁵² According to Irenaeus, then, the promise of Gen 15:5 has to do not only with multiplicity but also with

⁴⁹ Translations of the *Apocalypse of Abraham* come from R. Rubinkiewicz, “Apocalypse of Abraham,” *OTP* 1:681-711.

⁵⁰ Similarly, Belkis Philonenko-Sayar and Marc Philonenko (*L’Apocalypse d’Abraham: Introduction, texte slave, traduction et notes* [Semitica 31; Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1981] 83) translate the Old Slavonic as “le nombre et la puissance des étoiles,” but Rubinkiewicz (*OTP* 1:699) states that the Old Slavonic could also mean “host.”

⁵¹ Like the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *L.A.B.* 18:5 portrays Abraham enjoying the fulfillment of God’s promise of starlike seed in his ascent into heaven, the realm of the stars. Cf. *Num. Rab.* 2.12.

⁵² Translations of Irenaeus are from John Behr, *On the Apostolic Preaching: St. Irenaeus of Lyons* (Popular Patristics Series 17; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997).

the fact that Abraham's seed will become partakers of celestial glory. For Irenaeus, this promise comes to fruition in the person of Christ, whom, following Paul's argument in Galatians 3, he identifies with the seed of Abraham: "Moreover He fulfilled the promise made to Abraham, which God had promised him, to make his seed as the stars of heaven. For this Christ did, who was born of the Virgin who was of Abraham's seed, and constituted those who have faith in Him lights in the world" (*Epid.* 35; cf. *Haer.* 4.7.1-2).

A few decades later, in explaining why Jews do not worship the sun, moon, and stars, Origen points to Gen 15:5: "Concerning them the prediction was given to Abraham by the voice of the Lord to him: 'Look up to the heaven and number the stars, if you can count them. And he said to him, So shall your seed be.' A nation which had the hope to become as the stars in heaven would not have worshiped them; for they were to become like them as a result of understanding and keeping the law of God" (*Cels.* 5.10; cf. *Hom. Lev.* 5.2.3, as well as Origen's comments on Gen 22:17 in *Hom. Gen.* 9).⁵³ Origen argues that the Jewish people did not worship the celestial bodies because they were to become like them. Significantly, Origen proceeds to connect Gen 15:5 to Dan 12:3, demonstrating the way in which one could read the starlike resurrection in Dan 12:3 as the fulfillment of Gen 15:5 (and 22:17). Likewise, in his *Commentary on Romans*, Origen claims of Abraham and Sarah, "[W]hen they hear of such a hope of posterity and that the glory of their own offspring would be equal to heaven and its stars, when they hear these things, they do not think about their own goods" (4.6.7).⁵⁴ Here Origen claims that the promise of seed like the stars signifies that Abraham's seed would have a glory equal to the heaven and the stars. In his *Homilies on Ezekiel* Origen makes explicit his belief that this promise of starlike seed signifies humanity taking up angelic existence: "But you have become 'the light of the world' [Matt 5:14], you in his place have become Lucifer; one of the stars that fell from heaven was Lucifer, and you, if only you are of the seed of Abraham, will be reckoned among the stars of heaven. For 'God led Abraham outside and said to him: Look, so shall your seed be' [Gen 15:5]" (13.2.4).⁵⁵

Similarly, Ambrose, in commenting on Gen 15:5, states that "Abraham looked up to Heaven and perceived the splendour of his posterity as no less luminous than the radiance of the stars of heaven." Like Origen, he identifies Christ as the seed and claims that through faith in him "we are prepared for Heaven, we are united with the Angels, we are made equal to the stars," citing Gen 15:5-6 as evidence:

⁵³ Translation from Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

⁵⁴ Translation from Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1-5* (trans. Thomas P. Scheck; FC 103; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

⁵⁵ Translation from Thomas P. Scheck, *Origen: Homilies 1-14 on Ezekiel* (ACW 62; New York: Newman, 2010).

“Therefore, He said, ‘Thus shall thy seed be.’ And Abraham believed God” (*Abr.* 1.20-21; cf. 2.48).⁵⁶

The Greek translator of Sirach, Philo, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, and a number of patristic writers understand the promise that God would make Abraham’s seed like the stars in Gen 15:5 and 22:17 to be more than a mere statement of fecundity. To be like the stars means to be exalted like the stars, to have their power, to participate in their celestial life.

IV. Conclusion

We can now answer the question of how satisfactory Jesus’ response to the Sadducees might have been. Given the evidence presented here, if the Sadducees agreed with the vast majority of people in the Greco-Roman world, they would have believed stars to be angelic beings. Thus, Jesus’ assertion that those resurrected would be like the angels would have been understood to be a claim that the resurrected would in some way be astralized. In light of the common understanding current in early Judaism of God’s promises to the patriarchs of starlike seed, Jesus’ claim that the resurrected would be like the angels would have considerable pentateuchal support. Mark’s Jesus connects the belief in an astralized or angelified afterlife—a belief based on early Jewish understandings of God’s promises to the patriarchs in Gen 15:5; 22:17; and 26:4—to Exod 3:6, where God names himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Significantly, the connection between this glorified life and the God who is the God of the patriarchs is not unique to the Gospel of Mark but can be found also in the Prayer of Azariah and in 4 Maccabees. As noted above, Dan 12:3 envisions the astralization of the wise at the resurrection. While MT Daniel does not contain the Prayer of Azariah, most scholars believe the prayer to be an early addition to the work, likely added prior to its translation into Greek. Early readers would, therefore, have known it.⁵⁷ After being tossed into the raging furnace, one of the three young men, Azariah, addresses a lengthy prayer to God. The salient passage

⁵⁶ Quotations from Theodosia Tomkinson, *On Abraham: Saint Ambrose of Milan* (Etna: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2000). Similarly, in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Gregory of Nyssa states that the Lord said to Abraham: “[L]ook up to heaven and see these stars, if you can measure the loftiness of their minds” (ἐκμετρήσαι τῶν νοημάτων τὸ ὕψος; Homily 10). Thus, Gregory believes that the significance of looking at the stars is a matter not of their innumerable but of their elevated intellect. Quotation from Casimir McCambley, *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987).

⁵⁷ Although the Prayer of Azariah is not extant in any Hebrew manuscript, Moses Gaster discovered an Aramaic version of it in a medieval work entitled the *Chronicle of Jerahmeel* (“The Unknown Aramaic Original of Theodotion’s Additions to the Book of Daniel,” *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 16 [1894] 280-317; 17 [1895] 75-91). See the discussion in Collins, *Daniel*, 199.

is as follows: “For the sake of your name, do not hand us over completely and do not break your covenant. And do not remove your mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham, the one beloved by you, and Isaac, your servant, and Israel, your holy one⁵⁸—to whom you spoke, saying “to increase their seed as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore” (πληθύναι τὸ σπέρμα αὐτῶν ὡς τὰ ἄστρα τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ὡς τὴν ἄμμον τὴν παρὰ τὸ χεῖλος τῆς θαλάσσης [LXX Dan 3:34-36]). This prayer for protection from death refers to God’s promises to the patriarchs that their seed would be like the stars and most closely resembles God’s promise to Abraham after the sacrifice of Isaac: “I will surely increase your seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand upon the seashore” (πληθύνων πληθυνῶ τὸ σπέρμα σου ὡς τοὺς ἀστέρας τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ὡς τὴν ἄμμον τὴν παρὰ τὸ χεῖλος τῆς θαλάσσης [Gen 22:17]). Reading LXX Dan 3:34-36 and 12:2-3 together, as ancient readers would have done, could have led them to conclude that the promise of starlike seed in Gen 15:5; 22:17; and 26:4 was a promise of a beatific, angelic life at the eschaton. The author of the Prayer of Azariah links Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the belief that Israel would become starlike. Given the narrative context, in which the three young men find themselves in the midst of the fiery furnace unharmed and accompanied by an angel, it appears that these men already participate in this angelic life, albeit temporarily.

This connection is made even clearer in 4 Maccabees. As Dennis E. Nineham has noted, Mark 12:26-27 appears to have a close parallel in 4 Macc 16:25, which states of the seven sons tortured and killed by Antiochus IV: “For they also saw that those who die on account of God are living to God, just as Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the patriarchs” (οἱ διὰ τὸν θεὸν ἀποθνήσκοντες ζῶσιν τῷ θεῷ ὡσπερ Ἀβραὰμ καὶ Ἰσαὰκ καὶ Ἰακωβ καὶ πάντες οἱ πατριάρχαι).⁵⁹ After naming Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the author says regarding the sons’ mother, “Not so honorable does the moon stand in heaven with the stars as do you, guiding with light [φωταγωγῆσασα] to piety the seven starlike [ἰσαστέρους] children, standing precious before God and fixed with them in the heaven. For your childbearing is from Abraham the father [ἦν γὰρ ἡ παιδοποιία σου ἀπὸ Ἀβραὰμ τοῦ πατρός]” (17:5-6).⁶⁰ The author alludes to the promise that Abraham’s seed would be starlike

⁵⁸ As Collins (*Daniel*, 201) notes, the substantive term “the holy one” usually refers to a divine or angelic being (see MT Dan 4:10, 20). Thus, its use here might suggest Jacob’s angelic status.

⁵⁹ Dennis E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St. Mark* (Pelican New Testament Commentaries; New York: Penguin, 1963) 321. As Meier (“Debate on the Resurrection,” 12) points out, Luke 20:38b (πάντες γὰρ αὐτῷ ζῶσιν) is actually closer to 4 Maccabees.

⁶⁰ Commenting on the surprising juxtaposition of astralization and resurrection (4 Macc 18:17), Jan Willem van Henten states, “This implies that the author of 4 Maccabees has combined different views about the afterlife of the martyrs and has presented them together” (*The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees* [JSJSup 57; Leiden: Brill, 1997] 184).

(Gen 15:5; 22:17; 26:4), an allusion that is strengthened by the reference to a childbearing that was from Abraham.

Thus, the Prayer of Azariah and 4 Maccabees closely connect Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the belief in starlike seed. This parallels Mark 12:25-27, in which Jesus states that the resurrected will be like the angels (that is, starlike beings) and connects this claim to the first occurrence of the phrase “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob” (Exod 3:6) in the Pentateuch.⁶¹

Interpreters of Mark (and Matthew and Luke) have tended to neglect Jesus’ claim in 12:25 that the resurrected will be like the angels in favor of treating the explicit citation of Exod 3:6. Trick has recently filled part of this lacuna with his interpretation of Mark 12:25a-b in light of the consequences of death on a marital covenant. Yet no one has provided a detailed attempt to explain the pentateuchal basis of Jesus’ claim that the resurrected will be like the angels. This article fills that lacuna, arguing that, once one understands ancient Jewish perceptions of angels as stars, one can begin to see the way in which Jesus might have argued for this claim. Specifically, ancient readers of God’s promise to the patriarchs that he would make their seed like the stars of heaven (Gen 15:5; 22:17; 26:4) would have naturally concluded that this promise meant he would make Abraham’s seed qualitatively like the stars, enjoying a beatific and everlasting existence after death. For many, such an existence defined the resurrection life.

⁶¹ The only other pentateuchal references to God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are found in Exod 3:15-16; 4:5, which also occur in the story of the burning bush.

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