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Jewish, Christian – or What?
Questions of Self-Designation in the *Ascension of Isaiah*

Meghan Henning & Tobias Nicklas

The Question of the “Parting of the Ways” between Jews and Christians has become a matter of debate again:¹ is it really appropriate to speak about two more or less coherent groups going two different ways from a certain point in history – perhaps after Paul’s mission, after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE), or after the Bar-Kokhba War (132-135 CE)?² Does the image of a tree with one root and two different trunks going into two different directions really fit what the extant sources tell us about the complexities of the past?³ Or shouldn’t we distinguish between the situations at different geographical places and times, under different social and political circumstances, and of partly very different groups? Do categories like “Jew,” “Christian,” or “pagan” help us to understand how real people and real groups understood themselves?⁴ Of course, we have to use “categories” if we want to describe the past – we should, however, always be aware that our categories are likely not the categories of people living hundreds of years ago, and that, in any case, they are *only* heuristic tools which can even impede proper understanding, if we use them too schematically.

In an important article David Frankfurter⁵ has challenged the (difficult and sometimes problematic) category of “Jewish Christianity”⁶ by pointing to a few ancient documents which

¹ See for example the important books of D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004), and A.H. Becker/A. Yoshiko Reed (eds), *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

² Regarding different models of “imagining” the relationship see the essay by M. Goodman, Modeling the ‘Parting of the Ways,’ in Goodman (ed.) *Judaism in the Roman World: Collected Essays* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007) 175-185 (with many more and more complicated images).

³ During the 2013 *Annual Deichmann Lectures* Tobias Nicklas developed the more complicated image of a “the image of a very robust bush with a lot of bigger and smaller, stronger and weaker branches, who not only influence each others’ growing in many ways, but partly block each other in their mutual way to catch as much as possible from the sun. Perhaps this bush is already very old, we see that parts of it suffered from fire, others from aridity, some have been cut out or died while other parts are green and growing. If we look at it from a certain distance we have the image that this bush is cut into two main parts, but as soon as we look closer we see that there are much more divisions than only two parts, but there have always been veins connecting the different parts of this plant. Even, however, if some branches seem stronger than the others and even if some of them try to block the others in their way to the sun, all of them drink from the same source, and all of them want to reach the same light.” See T. Nicklas, *Connections Cut – Connections Working: Second Century ‘Christian’ Images on the ‘Parting of the Ways’* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2014) [forthcoming].

⁴ In her recent dissertation J.A. Snyder, *Language and Identity in Ancient Narratives: The Relationship between Speech Patterns and Social Context in the Acts of the Apostles, the Acts of John and the Acts of Philip* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2014) [forthcoming] has pointed to socio-linguistic theories showing how far even the language of individuals changes in different social contexts and situations.

⁵ D. Frankfurter, ‘Beyond ‘Jewish Christianity’: Continuing Religious Sub-Cultures of the Second and Third Centuries and Their Documents,’ in A.H. Becker / A. Yoshiko Reed (eds), *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 131-143.

⁶ Regarding this (surely problematic) category see also the complex definition of F. Stanley Jones, Jewish Christians, in F.S. Jones (ed.) *Pseudoclementina Elchesaiticaque inter Judaeochristiana*.

reflect groups of “Christ followers” who defy the usual categories, texts which have – for a long time – mainly been labelled as Jewish Pseudepigrapha containing some “Christian” elements like the *Apocalypses of Zephaniah and Elijah*, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the *Life of Adam and Eve* and – especially important – the *Ascension of Isaiah*.⁷ For quite a long time these (and other) texts have been classified as so-called “Jewish Pseudepigrapha,” i.e. “Jewish” texts from the Second Temple or later periods which were preserved and more or less slightly reworked in “Christian circles.”⁸ At least in some cases, research of the last decades made it clearer that we can not (or only with greatest difficulties) distinguish between a “Jewish” text or source and “Christian” redaction(s).⁹ Instead we need a novel methodology for reading these texts if we want to take them seriously. After having examined several of the texts mentioned above (plus others) Frankfurter reconstructs different “types of social worlds in which Christ-orientation was a feature of the belief system, but Judaism deeply informed practice, sense of group boundaries, and the discourse of authority, whether in visions or literary composition. Moreover, the literature of these social worlds – such as we have it – did not regard Christ as the *raison d’être* for texts or even as the singular focus of ideology. Other concerns, claims, and problems seem to have preoccupied the authors besides apologetics for Christ and Christian identity.”¹⁰ Continuing the work of Enrico Norelli and Robert Hall, Frankfurter regards the *AscIsa* as belonging to a special prophetic milieu that he describes in the following way: “The cluster of prophetic texts here attributed to Asia Minor revolve principally around the claims and problems of prophetic milieus: (1) visions of and access to the heavenly world; (2) the authority a prophet *claims* from such experiences; (3) the prophet’s *general* authority to clarify the nature of present crises and afflictions; and (4) the inevitable conflicts over purity, status, and rival authorities in a prophetic subculture. For these prophetic milieus, Judaism provides the framework for imagining the heavenly world and gaining entry to it, for constructing prophetic authority and its heroes, for prophetic speech, and for the notions of the purity of the Elect and the sins of the enemy.”¹¹

Collected Studies (Leuven: Peeters, 2012) 453-455, and the complex classification used by P. Luomanen, *Recovering Jewish-Christian Sects and Gospels* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012) 8-14.

⁷ Even *Joseph and Aseneth* has been recently discussed as a book of “Christian” provenance. See the important volume by R. Nir, *Joseph and Aseneth: A Christian Book* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012).

⁸ See for example the classical collections of J.H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. 2 Vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1983), and the German collection *Jüdische Schriften aus Hellenistisch-Römischer Zeit* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher).

⁹ Regarding the *Ascension of Isaiah* a collection of essays edited by M. Pesce has been groundbreaking: See M. Pesce (ed.), *Isaia, il Diletto e la chiesa. Visione ed esegesi profetica cristiano-primitiva nell’Ascensione di Isaia. Atti del Convegno di Roma, 9-10 aprile 1981* (Brescia: Paideia, 1983). - Besides the *Ascension of Isaiah*, the most spectacular shift of paradigm comes from the Leiden School of Marinus and Henk Jan de Jonge who more and more came to understand the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* as “Christian” writings. See M. De Jonge, *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament as Part of Christian Literature: The Case of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Greek Life of Adam and Eve* (Leiden et al.: Brill, 2003). Regarding the current discussion on these questions see the (almost classical) work of R.A. Kraft, ‘The Pseudepigrapha in Christianity,’ and Kraft ‘Pseudepigrapha and Christianity, Revisited: Setting the Stage and Framing Some Central Questions,’ both in Kraft (ed.) *Exploring the Scriptures: Jewish Texts and their Christian Contexts* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009) 3-33 and 35-60, and J.R. Davila, *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha. Jewish, Christian, or Other?* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005).

¹⁰ D. Frankfurter, ‘Beyond Jewish Christianity,’ 142.

¹¹ D. Frankfurter, ‘Beyond Jewish Christianity,’ 142.

We regard Frankfurter's text as a good starting point for further investigation and would like to ask the following questions:

What does the Ascension of Isaiah itself tell us about the group it addresses and its self-understanding? Which categories does it use itself? And: What does the pseudepigraphic character of the text mean for the self-understanding of the group behind our text?

Working with the *Ascension of Isaiah* is, of course, not an easy task. This has to do with the manifold problems of transmission of this text, but also with the problem of its unity. In the following paper, we will use the critical edition (+ commentary) of Enrico Norelli and others,¹² and read the text as a literary unity. Although the matter of the text's unity has been debated (and will continue to be debated),¹³ the text as we have it today at least makes sense: Even if chapter 6 marks a clear formal break there are a few points which connect the two parts in a way that makes such a reading possible. Specifically the emphasis on garments, the seventh heaven, the motif of "belief" as a unifying feature of the "righteous," and the roles of angels and prophets, are themes that are carried throughout the text.

1. The Community of the "Righteous"

While we never find "our" categories "Jewish" or "Christian" in the *Ascension of Isaiah* – at least certain times the text speaks about the "Children of Israel" (but not as a self-designation) – several other terms could be considered as important for the self-understanding of the group behind our text. As far as we see, the term "righteous" respectively "the righteous ones" is of highest import for the text: We read it – at least according to manuscripts D and E – already in *AscIsa* 1:5, a passage where some of the main issues of the following text are stated: the prophets have to "write out ... what he himself had seen ... concerning the judgment of the angels, and concerning the destruction of the world, and concerning the robes of the saints/*righteous* and their going out, and concerning their transformation and the persecution and ascension of the Beloved" (translation Knibb). This is not the last place where we read about the righteous or where questions of righteousness play an important role: *AscIsa* 2:5 speaks about the "persecution of the righteous" caused by King Manasseh. Beginning in chapter 8 we hear a lot about the future fate of the righteous in relation to God. We read about "robes, thrones and crowns" which are placed in the sixth heaven for the righteous (*AscIsa* 8:26), and together with Isaiah we see "the righteous from the time of Adam onwards" (*AscIsa* 9:7). Here, the text especially mentions Abel and Enoch (see also 9:28 where Adam, Abel and Seth are mentioned). *AscIsa* 9:17 says that "many righteous" will together with the Lord Christ, the Beloved, ascend to the Seventh Heaven. *AscIsa* 9:38 and 41 describe the Righteous worshipping God together with the angels. Finally, *AscIsa* 11:32

¹² P. Bettolo *et al.* (eds), *Ascensio Isaiae*. (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995).

¹³ While for example E. Norelli would divide the text in two parts – chapters 1-5 and 6-11 – and understand them as going back to different sources, R. Bauckham, 'The Ascension of Isaiah: Genre, Unity and Date,' in Bauckham (ed.) *The Fate of the Dead. Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Leiden: Brill, 1998) 363-390, understands the text as a literary unity and comes to an extremely early dating. See also R. Bauckham's article in the present volume.

speaks about the Righteous praising the Beloved who has ascended to the seventh heaven again.

Interestingly, however, the text does not develop clear ethical criteria for what it means to belong to the righteous. There are some great righteous figures of the past mentioned, and of course, the text offers some catalogues of the sins of the followers of Manasseh (*AscIsa* 2:5). Yet the *AscIsa* does not present any concrete ethical commandments that could be understood as a kind of *halakha* of the righteous. *AscIsa* 9:22-3, however, mentions books where the *deeds* of the children of Israel are written down – but, again, it does not make clear what kind of deeds are expected. Perhaps, our group is not dis-interested in correct ethical behaviour, but simply presumes that the Torah has to be done.¹⁴ The *AscIsa* adds, however, a clear emphasis on “belief”: *AscIsa* 2:9 speaks about belief in ascension as unifying feature of prophets. According to *AscIsa* 3:18 those who believe on his cross will be saved, and in *AscIsa* 4:13 the “many faithful and saints” not only see “Jesus the Lord Christ,” but they also “believed in him.” The idea that belief leads to a particular position in heaven is implied in *AscIsa* 9:26. In addition, at least twice the text connects “belief and righteousness.” Although *AscIsa* 6:3, where we hear Isaiah speaking “words of belief and righteousness,” seems to be of lower significance, 8:26 is interesting because it could be understood as a kind of a definition of “righteousness”: the text speaks about the robes, thrones and crowns “which are placed (there) for the righteous, *for those who believe in the Lord who will descend in your form.*” Here we gain the impression that the group behind our text understands itself as “the righteous” and they define this category in terms of “belief in the Beloved.” In this, they are not fully separated from the “children of Israel” who did not see or believe in him (see 6:27; 8:26; 9:6-18; 11:39), but they are in one line with a long list of “righteous ones” starting with figures like Adam, Abel, Seth and Enoch and (surely) including Isaiah and prophets like Micha ben Jimla (see *AscIsa* 2:12-16).

2. The Community of Angel-Like “Saints”

The text of *AscIsa* 1:5, however, is not transmitted unambiguously – it is well possible that the text instead speaks about the “Saints.” We cannot go into matters of textual transmission here, but this is perhaps even not necessary because the terms “holy” and “saint” also play a role as an important category which could describe the group’s self-designation (or at least something of its “self-understanding”). Of course, we know that since Paul’s times, the “saints” has been an important salutatory address for members of communities of believers in Christ. Romans is addressed to “God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints” [a[giōj] (1:7); “saints” is used as a general designator like “brethren” or “beloved” in Rom 8:27; 12:13; 15:25, 26, 31; 16:2, 15; 1 Cor 1:2; 6:1, 2; 14:33; 16:1, 15; 2 Cor 1:1; 8:4; 9:1, 12; 13:12; Phil 1:1, 4:22; 1 Thess 3:13. In Matt 27:52 the bodies of the dead saints are raised at the moment of Jesus’ death.¹⁵ In Revelation, the “saints” appear as characters

¹⁴ This does not exclude the possibility that this group followed a special *halakha* we cannot reconstruct any more. In addition, *AscIsa* 3:8-9 mentions the prophet Moses: while, however, Belchira, one of the pseudo-prophets accuses Isaiah of being a liar, because of the alleged difference between Exod. 22:30 and Isa 6:5, the text obviously sees both prophets in harmony with each other.

¹⁵ This, however, is connected to Zech 14:4-5 where we read about the Lord coming “together with his Holy Ones.” See D.C. Allison, ‘The Scriptural Background of a Matthean Legend: Ezekiel 37, Zechariah 14, and Matthew 27,’ in W. Weren *et al.* (eds), *Life Beyond Death in Matthew’s Gospel: Religious Metaphor or Bodily Reality* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011) 153-188, esp. 161-77.

throughout (see for example Rev 5:8-9).¹⁶ In the *Ascension of Isaiah* we read about the robes of the “saints” (*AscIsa* 3:25), and the saints who see *and* believe in Jesus Christ who will come from the seventh heaven in their saintly robes with the Lord at his second coming (*AscIsa* 4:13-16). Isaiah is called a “saint” in 6:14 and 9:2, Abel is called a “saint” when Isaiah sees him in the seventh heaven (*AscIsa* 9:8), and when the Father is worshiped by the six lower heavens, he is described as “the Most High of the high ones, who dwells in the holy world, who rests among the holy ones, who will be called by the Holy Spirit in the mouth of the righteous the Father of the Lord” (*AscIsa* 10:6 cf. Isa 57:15).

This description of the Father and his dwelling among the “holy ones” in chapter 10 indicates that there could, however, also be something different at stake. If we take into account that the term “holy” is first an attribute for God alone, while “the holy ones” in early Judaism usually meant God’s angels, then the roles of the angels in the *AscIsa* are very interesting. According to *AscIsa* 7:9-12 there is an enormous battle under the firmament where evil angels like Sammael are involved, and according to *AscIsa* 1:5 the judgment of the angels is one of the important themes of the text. At several instances, the text warns about adoration of angels or beings coming from lower heavens (see, e.g., *AscIsa* 7:21 and 9:31). But even more striking, the text establishes a positive relation between the believers and the good angels.

First, the text indicates that Isaiah is considered an equal to the good angels. The angel admonishes Isaiah when he calls the angel “Lord,” implying that there is not a hierarchical relationship between Isaiah and the angel, but that they are “companions” (*AscIsa* 8:6). Then, the reader learns that when Isaiah leaves the body he will receive the robe he sees and be “equal to the angels who are in the seventh heaven” (*AscIsa* 8:14-15), and that “saint” Isaiah is permitted to enter the seventh heaven because his robe is there (*AscIsa* 9:2).¹⁷ Not only is the holy Isaiah equated with the angels, but when he sees Enoch and “saint” Abel in their robes in the seventh heaven, they too are “like the angels who stand there in great glory” (*AscIsa* 9:9). Parallel to this angel-like existence in the seventh heaven that Isaiah is to enjoy, the text also implies that in the future the believers will undergo the same process of donning robes, and thus enjoying equality with the angels. Those that believe in this incarnate Lord are deemed “righteous” and will receive robes, thrones, and crowns in the seventh heaven (*AscIsa* 8:26); many righteous will ascend with the Lord Christ and will receive their robes and crowns in the seventh heaven (9:18); robes, thrones, and crowns are set aside in the seventh heaven for “believers” in the words of Jesus Christ, in his cross, and for those who keep his words (*AscIsa* 9:24-26); and finally, the readers of the text are exhorted to “be in the Holy Spirit that you may receive your robes and the thrones and crowns of glory, which are placed in the seventh heaven” (*AscIsa* 11:40).

The background of the idea that believers will become like angels (or play a role comparable to angels) in the future could perhaps be seen in Jesus’ statement in Mark 12:25 (par. Matt 22:30 and Luke 20:36), in which he says that after the resurrection people will be “like angels.” This idea had a long *Nachgeschichte* in ancient Christian literature. While

¹⁶ In addition, Rev 22:21 could be mentioned where at least parts of the textual tradition mention “saints.” Probably, however, the short text closing with the words *meta . pa , ntw n* is original.

¹⁷ In later readings of *AscIsa* 9:31, Isaiah is transformed into an angel-like figure. M.A. Knibb, ‘The Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah,’ in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha II* (New York: Doubleday, 1986) 143-176, esp. 171, however, argues that the more difficult, and thus probably the earlier reading is that it is Jesus who is transformed into an angelic figure here.

according to the second-century *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 3:5 those “who have heard of God ... will be angels of God” (in the future),¹⁸ we also know of later Christian writings where monks interpreting (mainly) Luke 20:36 understood the ideal of their *present* lives as living “angel-like”.¹⁹ the oldest clear example is Cyprian of Carthago’s *De habitu virginum* 22-23 speaking about sexually abstinent women. Perhaps, in addition, the *Gospel of Judas* with its polemics against members of the Church calling themselves “angel-like” could be mentioned as another very old example.²⁰

In this context, at least some other aspects of *Ascension of Isaiah* would make sense. Our text could perhaps be a very old witness for a community that we could almost call “monastic” if we wanted to use another anachronistic term. Provisionally, the following points paint an interesting tableau of the life of a community that is “set apart” from the world:

AscIsa 2:7-8 tells us that Isaiah had to flee all the unjustness brought by Manasseh – and that’s why he withdrew first from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and then to “a mountain in a desert place” (*AscIsa* 2:8), where a group of prophets and believers are gathered with him. Perhaps the situation described here opens a window into the community behind our text. Whether we understand it literally or just as an image – in any case, going to “the desert” means trying to lead a life away from the rest of the world, which is understood as full of sin.

In addition to this, matters of purity seem to play a decisive role: according to *AscIsa* 2:11, Isaiah’s followers only wore sack-cloth and ate nothing but cooked herbs they found on the mountains where they lived. While sexual matters are not directly addressed we hear at least nothing about women as part of this community. Does this mean we should speak about a group of people who wanted to live a life in absolute chastity, in an observance of the Torah that gave them the chance to become righteous and holy like the angels in heaven? In this context food regulations perhaps played a certain role. While it is possible that the description only mirrors the community’s situation of pressure and even persecution,²¹ one could at least speculate about a connection between this kind of vegetarian diet and the living of an “angelic life.” This is, however, quite difficult to establish, because early Judaism allowed very different ideas about angelic food which do not simply correspond to each other – and which do not correspond closely enough to what we read in the *AscIsa*. In a study of the motif of angelic food, Tobias Nicklas writes: “Several texts contradict quite clearly the idea that angels would nourish themselves and point to the difference between humans and angels. One of the reasons is surely the ‘holiness’ of angels who stand in front of God’s glory (for example

¹⁸ Perhaps, however, even in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* we find the idea that aspects of this angel-like status can already be part of this life. See, for example, the text’s description of Paul as a person who at times “had the face of an angel” (*Acts of Paul and Thecla* 3:3; translation: J.W. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2009) 73.

¹⁹ For more details see K.S. Frank, *Angelikos Bios: Begriffsanalytische und begriffsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum ‚engelgleichen‘ Leben im frühen Mönchtum* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1964) and P. Brown, *Die Keuschheit der Engel: Sexuelle Entsagung, Askese und Körperlichkeit im frühen Christentum* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994).

²⁰ For later examples see also John Chrysostom, *Hom.* 10 (on Matt 3:1-2: about John the Baptist); Ps.-Serapion von Thmuis, *ep. ad mon.* 7; Ps.-Basilius von Ancyra, *virg.* 51 or Eznik von Kolb. For a broader discussion of this motif in the *GosJud* see T. Nicklas, ‘Die andere Seite: Das Judasevangelium und seine Polemik im Kontext altkirchlicher Diskurse,’ in: J. Schröter (ed.), *The Apocryphal Gospels within the Context of Early Christian Theology* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013) 127-155.

²¹ We are grateful to Jan N. Bremmer for this suggestion. This idea could, of course, also be supported by the connection between fasting and mourning the text establishes.

ApAbr; Tob): Moreover, *TestAbr* 4 [A] 4:9 and Philo point to the incorporeality of heavenly angels, who therefore cannot (or need not) eat *earthly* food. Texts like Ps 77:24-25 LXX and others, however, developed the image of the angels actually eating a kind of heavenly food. At least one of these heavenly dishes is the manna, which also was allotted to Israel during their wandering through the desert. At least some texts express the hope that it will again be the food for the righteous in the eschatological times.²²

One could also think about the fragments of the *Gospel of the Ebionites* where Jesus and John the Baptist²³ are described as vegetarians.²⁴ In the *Ascension of Isaiah*, however, the motif could also be vaguely related to Hebrew Bible ideas where comparable kinds of asceticism quite often are connected with visions and revelations: while 2 Kings 4:38-41 tells about a meal of wild mallows prepared for the disciples of Elishah, Daniel has a revelation after a period of fasting (Dan 10:2-3). In 4 Ezra 9:26, Ezra's fourth vision is introduced by a period of seven days where Ezra does not eat anything but flowers and plants of the field (see also 4 Ezra 12:51).²⁵

3. A Community Surrounding Some Prophetic Scribes and Mystics

The motifs mentioned above, however, connect the idea of living an ascetic life with images of prophets of the past. This seems to be a key idea for our text: According to *AscIsa* 2:10, all the followers of Isaiah "were prophets" who had nothing with them. Prophets as groups following Isaiah and in close proximity to Isaiah play an important role throughout the text: we hear about them in 2:9-10; 3:10, 31; 4:22; 6:3, 7 and perhaps again in 11:40. According to *AscIsa* 6:14, they form a special circle within the people of Israel – only they and the king are allowed to hear about Isaiah's special revelations. In the present, it seems, however, that "there are not many prophets" any more (*AscIsa* 3:27), if one, again, is allowed to read the passage as a window into the community's reality. That opens the door for two possibilities – either we imagine a small community of "prophets" or a community *nearby* and connected to a few prophets who understand themselves as "the last prophets." Perhaps it is not necessary to decide between both options – and we can hypothesize a group around some charismatic prophetic leaders in which, however, everybody was expected to have the chance of mystical experiences and / or prophetic revelations.

²² T. Nicklas, 'Food of Angels (Wis 6:20),' in G.G. Xeravits & J. Zsengellér (eds) *Studies in the Book of Wisdom* (Leiden: Brill, 2010) 83-100, esp. 99-100.

²³ During the discussion, Mauro Pesce raised the question of a possible connection between the group behind the *AscIsa* and followers of John the Baptist. We hesitate to give an answer, even if the synoptic Gospels describe John the Baptist as a prophetic figure, and in their reception history, his diet has been interpreted as a pre-figuration of later monastic diets. For further details see M. Tilly, *Johannes der Täufer und die Biographie der Propheten: Die synoptische Täuferüberlieferung und das jüdische Prophetenbild zur Zeit des Täufers* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994) and J. Kelhoffer, *The Diet of John the Baptist* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2005).

²⁴ Regarding the *Gospel of the Ebionites* (and *Ebionite* ethics) see J. Frey, 'Die Fragmente des Ebionäerevangeliums,' in C. Marksches & J. Schröter (eds), *Antike christliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung I: Evangelien und Verwandtes* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2012) 607-620, esp. 615-16 on dietary practices.

²⁵ We are grateful to Richard Bauckham, for his suggestion that this practice may also recall the restricted diet that accompanied mourning in the Hebrew Bible Ezek 24:17; Zech 7:3.

Does the text, however, give us a bit more information about the special form of prophecy which is of import for envisioning the group behind the text? We would like to highlight three different points:

3.1 If Isaiah and a few other “Old Testament” prophets are our group’s heroes, then they must have understood themselves in a certain sense in line with these heroes of the past. This must have gone even so far that they could claim their own ideas as revealed to Isaiah.

3.2 In their own experience the “Angel of the Holy Spirit” seems to have played a highly important role – a theme which culminates in *AscIsa* 11:40, the parting command in which the audience is exhorted to “be in the Holy Spirit” in order to receive their robes and crowns in the seventh heaven. The Holy Spirit is an important figure throughout the text, primarily because of its prophetic themes. The Holy Spirit is mentioned several times as the power which enables or even creates prophetic or righteous speech. In *AscIsa* 1:7 Isaiah authorizes his words against Manasseh by alluding to the living Spirit which “speaks in me.” Likewise, in the scene of his martyrdom Isaiah’s mouth “speaks with the Holy Spirit” up until he is sawed in two (*AscIsa* 5:15). Finally, when Isaiah speaks to Hezekiah those nearby repeatedly heard “the voice of the Holy Spirit” (*AscIsa* 6:6, 8, 10).

Not only is Isaiah’s own prophetic speech enabled by the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit is responsible for the correct speech of all of the prophets or righteous ones.²⁶ Immediately after the Beloved ascends to the seventh heaven, “many who believe in him will speak through the Holy Spirit” (*AscIsa* 3:19-20). In chapter 3:21-31 the reader learns about the chaos that will ensue leading up to the return of the Beloved, a time that will be characterized by a lack of prophets or those who “speak reliable words” because the Holy Spirit will “withdraw from many,” allowing a spirit of “error” or “lying” to reign instead.²⁷ In the absence of Holy Spirit empowered speech, the last days are characterized by chaotic speech as “everyone will speak whatever pleases him in his own eyes” or “what bursts out of their heart,” rendering the prophecy of those who came before (including Isaiah) “ineffective” (*AscIsa* 3:31). In addition to this stark contrast between Spirit inspired speech and the tumult that ensues in its absence, the *AscIsa* 4:21-22 also emphasizes that specific writings are inspired by the angel of the Spirit, providing a list of works that includes the minor prophets as well as a reference to one pseudepigraphic work (PrJos.).²⁸ While we cannot be sure about the significance of this list, we know that the group behind our text likely thought that the angel of the Holy Spirit played an important role in the composition of specific texts, authorizing both the spoken and the written words of “the righteous.”

²⁶ See also *AscIsa* 9:33-36 in which Isaiah is told that the Angel of the Holy Spirit has spoken in him and the “other righteous.”

²⁷ While B, C, and Gk have “error” A and D report “lying,” perhaps correcting the text to include a reference to the “false witnesses” against the martyrs. See for example, the insertion of *yeudo,menoi* in Matt 5:11 This variant is absent in the Western tradition (D, Tertullian) yet this reading is present in earliest traditions a, B, (D), thus there is every reason to believe that *Ïyeudo,menoi* is part of the Matthean tradition. In the trial scene of Matt 26:59-60 *yeudomartu, rwn* come forward to testify against Jesus. In the text of the *AscIsa* the Holy Spirit is opposed to evil forces at work on the earth, such as “Satan and his angels” (see *AscIsa* 2:2, for example).

²⁸ The *AscIsa* 4:21-22 marks specific works as “inspired” by this angel, comparable to the list in 4 Ezra 1:39ff, but with the omission of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah, in keeping with the fiction of the text.

In addition to enabling prophetic speech and the correct speech of the righteous, the Angel of the Holy Spirit performs other key functions within the visionary sections of the text. In the summary of Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 3, the reader learns that this angel works with Michael to open the grave of the Beloved on the third day, performing a crucial role in the resurrection (*AscIsa* 3:16). As we have already seen, the Angel of the Holy Spirit inspires sacred texts (4:21-22). While visiting the second heaven Isaiah rejoices that the Angel of the Holy spirit mediates the passage into the seventh heaven of those who love the Most High and the Beloved (*AscIsa* 7:22-23), and in his journey to the sixth and seventh heaven the angel of the Holy Spirit is compared to and worshiped along with the Beloved, Christ and the Lord (all are named with one voice in *AscIsa* 8:18; and Isaiah is instructed to worship the angel of the Holy Spirit who is described as "like" the Lord in *AscIsa* 9:33-36). The angel of the Holy Spirit also worships the Lord (*AscIsa* 9:40-41), witnesses other angels of the six lower heavens worshipping the Lord (*AscIsa* 10:4), and is seated at the left hand of the "Great Glory" (*AscIsa* 11:33). In this regard the angel of the Holy Spirit is comparable to the Beloved (also called Christ/Lord), who also worships the Lord alongside the Holy Spirit (*AscIsa* 9:40-41), and who is seated at the right hand of the "Great Glory" (*AscIsa* 11:33). While the Beloved is the figure in whom the community is to "believe," the Angel of the Holy Spirit is at work in his resurrection, mediating his followers' passage to the seventh heaven, and being worshipped and worshipping alongside him in the seventh heaven.

If we envision a community behind the text of the *AscIsa*, we imagine a group that itself aspires to, like Isaiah and the other prophets, ascend to the seventh heaven by "being in the Spirit" (*AscIsa* 11:40). This community's understanding of the Holy Spirit or the angel of the Spirit is grounded in the idea that the speech of the prophets is inspired by this Spirit, but goes beyond that basic idea to include all of the righteous believers in this group who can speak "reliable words" through contact with the Spirit. What is more, this group understands the angel of the Holy Spirit as part of the divine, and thus worthy of worship. Shall we imagine this group of "mystics" by way of comparison to the Merkava-Mystics, especially with their shared idea of a layered heaven, culminating in the seventh heaven, in which there is worship and praise of the Lord, or the shared idea that passwords were needed to traverse between the levels of heaven?²⁹ Also striking is the concept of the democratization of ascent, allowing anyone who believes in the Beloved to ascend with him to the seventh heaven. Whether our group knew about merkava mysticism or not, the text's interest in the readers being "in the Holy Spirit" (*AscIsa* 11:40) in order to "at their end go up there [to the seventh heaven] through the angel of the Holy Spirit" (*AscIsa* 7:22-23) certainly provides a mystical vision of this world and the next. Such a vision also presumes that its readership would know what it meant to "be in the Spirit" and would be comfortable with the theological importance that is assigned to the angel of the Holy Spirit.

3.3 Lastly, when considering the nature of the relationship between *AscIsa* and its readers, we cannot neglect the role of Biblical interpretation. The interpretation of Scripture seems to be a highly important dimension of our group's concerns. In a certain sense, our text wants to be a kind of a "secret" revelation in addition to what we already find in the Bible: the text not only expects its readers to know Israel's Scriptures and its protagonists quite well to understand what is happening. In several places it explicitly relates itself to the Scriptures – this is

²⁹ For ideas like this see P. Piovanelli's article in the present volume.

especially the case in *AscIsa* 2:6 (“And the rest of the acts, behold, they are written in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel.” – referring to the books of 1-2 Kings and/or Chronicles) or 4:19 (related to Isa 13) where we read: “And the rest of the words of the vision are written in the vision of Babylon.” The great vision of Isaiah in chapters 6-11, however, according to *AscIsa* 11:39, must be kept secret until the last days. In this way, the *Ascension of Isaiah* fits well with other apocalyptic texts like *4 Ezra* making a division between secret and more or less “public” revelation for everybody.

Even if parts of our text could be understood as a “narrative interpretation” of Scripture (or should we use the problematic term of “expanded” or “rewritten Bible”) in some sense, *AscIsa*’s interpretation of Scripture is to a surprisingly high degree using a more or less typical early Christian “hermeneutics” reading at least parts of the Scriptures as related to the Christ event.³⁰ A very nice example is Ignatius of Antioch, according to whom the prophets had not lived in agreement with Judaism (*Magn.* 8:1), but in accordance with Christ Jesus. That’s why, he called them “disciples of Christ who had annunciated Christ” (*Philad.* 5:2; 9:2) and “expected him as teacher” (*Magn.* 9:2). He goes even so far to say that “they also believed in him [= Christ], they were saved, since they belong to the unity centred in Jesus Christ, saints worthy of love and admiration, approved by Jesus Christ and included in the gospel of our shared hope” (*Philad.* 5:2; translation Holmes, 118). Even if we would not go so far to understand *AscIsa* as a reaction to Ignatius (or even in literary relation to his texts) it looks like *AscIsa* could be described as a kind of a narrative transformation of ideas like Ignatius’s. While other ancient authors, however, have to find “secret” hints to the Christ event, for example, in the “Songs of the Suffering Servant” (mainly Isa 52-53), the *AscIsa* community claims to have “secret” Isaianic visions where the main elements of the Christ event are clearly revealed.³¹

So perhaps our community understood itself as a group of “prophets of the last days” revealing Isaiah’s secret words at the end of time. At the very least, they appear to have had the idea that any person could attain to the same heights as Isaiah, as long as he or she was righteous, believed in the Beloved, and lived in the Spirit. But why did this community perceive itself this way? At least a few passages in the *AscIsa* point to possible conflicts with other groups, although we cannot be sure to what extent these conflicts were real, or simply in the minds of our authors. Nevertheless, we will briefly examine the two most suggestive passages. In *AscIsa* 2:12-16 we are introduced to the Pseudo-Prophets, a list of different people and groups of people who act out against the prophets, striking, abusing and killing them. This discussion of the “false prophets” immediately follows the description of the prophets dwelling on the mountains in their ideal community, juxtaposing the pseudo-prophets against our prophetic heroes, and accentuating the contrast between the pious asceticism of the prophets and the calumny of the false prophets. Are these pseudo-prophets

³⁰ For an excellent discussion of the need for care in crafting arguments about intertextuality see C. R. Moss, ‘Nailing Down and Tying Up: Lessons in Intertextual Impossibility from the Martyrdom of Polycarp,’ *Vigiliae Christianae* 67 (2013) 117-36.

³¹ According to D.E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983) 340, this should not be intermingled with the phenomenon he calls “charismatic exegesis.” Aune is surely right, when he says that “whatever an apocalypse is, it is not a commentary on the biblical text,” but we would not go so far to say “Nor ... can apocalyptic be viewed as interpretation of revelation previously given.” If, for example, the Book of Revelation is, in parts, a rewritten Ezekiel, both texts have to be related to each other – and Revelation gives its perspective (and thus: interpretation) of important parts of Ezekiel.

symbolic of some kind of real threat to our community?³² Or do they simply serve as a reminder for our readers that there are different kinds of prophecy, and they must take care to channel the Holy Spirit in their own lives? Either way, a clear community boundary has been set by this passage: the “true prophets” who dwell destitute on the mountains and “lament bitterly over the going astray of Israel” (*AscIsa* 2:11) are to be distinguished from the pseudo-prophets, who dwell in cities (*AscIsa* 2:12) and act out violently against the “prophets of the Lord.”

Like the Pseudo-Prophets, the corrupted church of *AscIsa* 3:21-31 also provides some possible clues as to how our community understood its group identity and boundaries. In this passage we learn about the Christians who will go astray during the last days, “abandoning the teaching of the twelve apostles, and their faith, and their love, and their purity” (*AscIsa* 3:21-22). As we have already mentioned, this group is characterized by slanderous and chaotic speech because the Holy Spirit has withdrawn from them, contrasting them with the prophets who speak “reliable words,” and accusing them of making prophecy “ineffective” (*AscIsa* 3:26-27, 30-31). In addition, Christian communities during the last days are plagued by bad leadership that is lacking in wisdom and rife with “love of the glory of this world” (*AscIsa* 3:24-26), leaders full of hatred towards one another (*AscIsa* 3:29), and believers who fall prey to the “spirit of error and of fornication and of vainglory, and of the love of money” (*AscIsa* 3:28). Are these lost and divided Christians of the last days representative of some kind of conflict between the readers of the *AscIsa* and other communities of Christ followers who were organized differently? Or, is this a warning for readers to take care to avoid these sins as the last days approach, an instruction for the maintenance of the community itself? Again, we cannot be precisely sure of the specific situation, but this description does indicate that our own community defines its ideal orientation as removal from the “glory of this world,” the “love of money” and “jealousy” (*AscIsa* 3:28-30).

4. The Plant under Persecution

In chapter 4 we come across another image which could be understood as the group’s self-designation. According to *AscIsa* 4:3 the “incarnate” Beliar, that is, quite probably Nero, “will persecute the *plant* which the twelve apostles of the Beloved will have planted.” The “plant” as an image for the “Church” – if we may use this term – is only rarely used in ancient “Christian” literature: Enrico Norelli mentions 1 Cor 3:6-8 where Paul describes the foundation of the Corinthian community in matters of “planting”, and *Dionysios of Corinth* (ard. 170 CE) who according to Eusebius, *Hist.eccl.* 2:25:8 spoke about the communities of Rome and Corinth as “plants” (*futei, a*) founded by Paul and Peter.³³ At least the last of the two images seems to be quite clearly related to what we find in *AscIsa*.

What is, however, much more interesting is that the group behind our text seems to feel persecuted. Perhaps in a certain sense comparable to what we see in the Book of Revelation there are hints of a double pressure:

³² As Knibb, ‘Martyrdom,’ 158, notes the textual tradition in *AscIsa* 2:12-16 is “corrupt and difficult in a number of places.”

³³ Cf. E. Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiæ*, 245.

Mainly in chapters 1-5 we read about pressure coming from Manasseh who is understood as a “follower of Beliar” (*AscIsa* 1:8) “who will dwell in him” (*AscIsa* 1:9; see also 2:1 on Manasseh’s relation to Sammael) and, in the end of times, the “incarnate” Beliar himself who will descend “from his firmament in the form of a man, a king of iniquity, a murderer of his mother” (*AscIsa* 4:2). Both situations – Isaiah’s situation under Manasseh, and the “plant’s situation in the end of times – are thus paralleled: both are – directly or indirectly – under the rule of Beliar. In any case, the situation in the world, “under the firmament” which is ruled by Beliar (see 2:4) is seen as extremely negative.³⁴ Is it possible to say something more about this situation? *AscIsa* 2:5 speaks about persecution of the righteous under Manasseh’s rule, but does not give any concrete details. Does *AscIsa* 4:4-9 only gather more or less “usual” motifs of pressure in the end of times, do we have just a more or less typical “Antichrist”-figure here, or are there at least a few motifs which can be deciphered as relating to aspects of the rise of the Emperor Cult?³⁵ At least claims like *AscIsa* 4:7, where we find Beliar saying “I am the Lord, and before me there was none” and the motif of “sacrificing to Beliar” (*AscIsa* 4:8) could point in this direction.

And are passages which speak about the children of Israel torturing and crucifying the Beloved (3:13; but see also 4:12 in relation to Isaiah) more or less to be seen as “stereotypes” as we find them in other second-century writings (like for example the *Gospel of Peter*)³⁶ as well? Or do they and others want to tell us more about a problematic relation with parts of Israel who do not believe in the Beloved: At least in two passages it seems that our text is concerned with the question of why the “children of Israel” do not believe in the Beloved. The text gives two answers: according to *AscIsa* 5:15-16, one gets the feeling that it was Manasseh who did not allow Isaiah’s visions to be known to the people, in 11:39 it seems as if the text wants to explain that Isaiah had special knowledge of the incarnation, that this knowledge, however, was not to be shared with the people of Israel. This does perhaps not mean that the “righteous” do not feel as part of Israel (or do not feel it any more); perhaps they feel like a kind of a “holy remnant” while the others’ beliefs have been corrupted by Beliar and his powers.

But this is not the only problem: there seem to be important conflicts with other groups of “followers of Christ” as well. Again, we do not want to go too far with speculation and reconstruction – and only ask a few questions: Is it possible that passages like *AscIsa* 3:23-24 speaking about “offices,” “presbyters” and “shepherds” (see also 3:29) mirror a conflict with groups of Christ-followers who did not accept the “righteous” prophetic self-understanding and were organized differently? And, finally, should we see the focus on pseudo-prophets and their role in Isaiah’s martyrdom as a pure motif in the storyline which is important because Isaiah had to struggle with pseudo-prophets, or is there more at stake – perhaps a conflict with other groups of “Christian” prophets who claimed that their visions and revelations were true or at least superior?

³⁴ We do not want to discuss whether this could be a hint to the text’s alleged “Gnosticism.” The term “Gnostic” has become so problematic during the last years that it is surely better to avoid it here.

³⁵ The motif of the “emperor cult” is, in our eyes, a bit too often and too quickly used as an overall explanation for the feelings of oppression and persecution we find, for example, in the Book of Revelation. This does, however, not exclude the possibility that some communities at some places suffered (in perhaps very different ways) from aspects of the Emperor Cult.

³⁶ T. Nicklas, *Parting of the Ways*, has shown that even these stereotypes were not always used in a stereotypical manner and can often be connected to very concrete situations.

5. Conclusion

Although we would hesitate to remove the question marks above, our reading of the *Ascension of Isaiah* has helped us to come a bit closer to answers to our introductory questions:

The *Ascension of Isaiah* never uses the term “Christian” or “Christianity” like we find it in 1 Pet, the book of Acts, the writings of Ignatius of Antioch or early Christian *Acts of the Martyrs*. We also do not read about “Jews,” “Pagans” or “Gnostics” there, although modern scholarly literature uses these terms quite often to describe what is going on in the *Ascension of Isaiah* (and quite obviously we also could not totally avoid these categories). For the group in the background of the *Ascension of Isaiah*, however, other categories seem to have mattered: they seem to have understood themselves as “the righteous” in the tradition of the great “righteous” of Israel’s history, and wanted to be – or at least: wanted to become – angel-like “saints.” In relation to the “children of Israel,” they obviously claimed to be part of a prophetic elite who had access to the secret revelations of Isaiah and who, through their own close relation to the Spirit, had their own mystical experiences; perhaps they felt like a “holy remnant” surrounded by “children of Israel” whose Scriptures provided only limited access to the real world of revelation. At least in *AscIsa* 3:13-31 one also gets the impression that there were troubles with other groups that we would call “Christians” today. Shall we put this conflict into the category of followers of a “prophetic elite” against “office-holders”? This seems to catch at least a part of what was going on, but a “prophets” against “other prophets” conflict also seems to be at stake. But who were the other groups? Did “the righteous” have communities in mind like we find them in the Pastorals and the Letters of Ignatius where offices started to become a stabilizing power for a church starting to become part of this world more and more? Did they perhaps also think about John’s Revelation whose Ezekelian vision of the Heavenly Throne room (Rev 4) seems to be much simpler than pseudo-Isaiah’s visions? Or do they imagine Paul who, according to 2 Cor 12:2-4 was captured (only) to the third Heaven and did not even know whether this happened with or without his body. Only very few stones of the great mosaic of the past are still extant, too few to allow sure answers to these questions – and we should be careful putting them too quickly at the places we would like to have them in our “constructions” of history.

Perhaps we can also call this group “prophets of the last days” and “disciples of the Beloved” fighting against the demons of this world – and especially the prince of all demons and this world, Beliar. In any case, they saw the world in which they lived under the rule of evil powers. That’s why Isaiah’s flight into the desert and on desolate hills and mountains (*AscIsa* 2:8, 11) could have been a kind of a model of an ascetic life. In this life, however, Scripture and new revelations played a highly important role.

But why did they choose Isaiah as their hero? Again, we can only speculate: to be sure, the figure of Isaiah helped our group to see itself not as a new and obscure movement, but as a group whose roots went back to the time of Israel’s prophets who were confronted with the powers of Beliar, his rulers and his pseudo-prophets like they were today. Perhaps Isaiah, among others, was especially attractive for two reasons: On the one hand, in his writings – mainly Deutero-Isaiah – we find the most clear and attractive sayings of the Lord enforcing Israel’s monotheism. If our group felt under pressure in a world where the Emperor Cult gained influence this could have been an important issue. And on the other hand, from

the earliest times believers in Christ have found Isaiah's writings as a treasure-box of hidden prophecies of the "Christ-event."³⁷ From there, one only has to take a small step in order to view Isaiah as a prophet who not only in his extant writings secretly prophesied Christ, but also had additional "secret" revelations where he, as Ignatius of Antioch would have stated, showed himself as a "disciple[s] of Christ who had annunciated Christ" (*Philad.* 5:2; 9:2).

³⁷ For a good overview see J.F.A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).