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Ascension of Isaiah 6–11 (Ethiopic Version)

Introduction and Translation by
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INTRODUCTION

The *Ascension of Isaiah* imagines Isaiah's tour of the seven heavens, the descent of Christ through the divine realms in the form of an angel, and the death of the prophet at the hands of King Hezekiah's wicked son, Manasseh. This enigmatic work falls into two main parts: the martyrdom of Isaiah (chapters 1–5) and the vision of Isaiah (chapters 6–11). There is no consensus about the date, composition, or provenance of the *Ascension of Isaiah*. A 1996 monograph on the text stresses the unity of the work and locates it in the second century CE, probably in Syria.¹ This all, however, remains disputed.

The entire text of the *Ascension of Isaiah* likely once existed in Greek, but the only extant Greek text is a papyrus, probably from the fifth or sixth century, which preserves 2.4–4.4 with lacunae. A Latin codex preserves 2.14–3.13 and 7.1–19 (=Lat¹), and there are also smaller fragments in Coptic. Fortunately, the entire text of the *Ascension of Isaiah* survives in Classical Ethiopic (Gəʿəz). The Ethiopic translation was likely made from Greek sometime during the Axumite period (fourth century–ca. 900). The earliest Ethiopic manuscripts, however, date from a much later time; in fact, the complete Ethiopic text is first found in manuscripts probably from the fifteenth century. Thus, though the Ethiopic version is an invaluable witness to the *Ascension of Isaiah*, it must be stressed that there is a large chronological gap between the Ethiopic version, as we now have it, and its Greek *Vorlage*, not to mention the linguistic and cultural distance between the two.

¹ Jonathan Knight, *Disciples of the Beloved One: The Christology, Social Setting and Theological Context of the Ascension of Isaiah*, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 18 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

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In addition to the *Ascension of Isaiah*, two related texts should be noted here that are useful for reconstructing the original text: a work in Latin (=Lat²) and Slavonic (=Slav), which is based on the second part of the *Ascension of Isaiah* (6.1–11.40); and the Greek *Prophecy, Martyrdom, and Apocalypse of Isaiah* (sometimes called the *Greek Legend of Isaiah*), which contains a shorter account of Isaiah's heavenly journey and martyrdom.

The selection translated here consists of the account of Isaiah's vision of the heavenly realms (chapters 6–11). The text is notable for its elaborate angelology. As Isaiah traverses the seven heavens, he encounters increasingly glorious and more numerous angels, brighter lights, and more splendid praise. When the prophet climactically reaches the seventh heaven, he even momentarily sees the "great glory" of God. Throughout his ascension, the glory of the angels that Isaiah encounters is meticulously described and ranked. Scholarship on the vision has focused especially on the description of Christ in angelomorphic terms. In the seventh heaven, Isaiah sees Christ transform and become "like an angel," whom the prophet worships (9.30–31). Isaiah also encounters the enigmatic "angel of the Holy Spirit," who is likewise worshiped (9.33–36). Of particular Christological interest is the fact that the lord and the angel of the Holy Spirit join in worshipping God (9.40).

This translation is based on the edition of the Ethiopic version of the *Ascension of Isaiah* published by Lorenzo Perrone and Enrico Norelli, "Ascensione di Isaia profeta: Versione etiópica," in Paolo Bettio et al. (eds.), *Ascensio Isaiae: Textus*, Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995), 1–129. We have occasionally emended the text, but not all emendations have been noted here.

TRANSLATION

The Vision that Isaiah, Son of Amoz, Saw

6, 1. In the twentieth year of the reign of Hezekiah, king of Judah, Isaiah, the son of Amoz, and Josab, the son of Isaiah, came to Hezekiah in Jerusalem from Gilgal. 2. Isaiah sat on the king's bed. They brought a throne for him, but he did not want to sit on it. 3. When Isaiah began to discuss the word of faith and righteousness with King Hezekiah, all the rulers of Israel, the eunuchs, and the king's advisors were sitting. There were also forty prophets and sons of prophets there; they had come from the surrounding areas,

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the mountains, and the plains when they heard that Isaiah was coming to Hezekiah from Gilgal. 4. They came to welcome him and to hear his words, 5. and that he might lay his hand upon them, that they might prophesy, and that he might hear their prophecy. They were all before Isaiah. 6. When he discussed the words of righteousness and faith with Hezekiah, they all heard a door that had opened and the voice of the Spirit.² 7. The king called all the prophets and all the people who were there, and they came. Micah, the elderly Ananias, Joel, and Josab were sitting on his right. 8. When they all heard the voice of the Holy Spirit, they bowed down on their knees and praised the lord of righteousness, the exalted one who is in the exalted world, the one who sits on high, the holy one, the one who takes rest among the holy ones. 9. They gave praise to the one who had, in this way, granted humanity a door in a strange world. 10. As he was speaking through the Holy Spirit while they all listened, he became silent. His mind was taken from him, and he could not see the men standing in front of him. 11. His eyes were open, his mouth was silent, and the mind of his flesh was taken from him. 12. However, he was still breathing, for he was seeing a vision. 13. The angel who had been sent to show him [the vision] was not of that firmament, nor was he one of the glorious angels of this world, but he came from the seventh heaven. 14. The people who were standing by, except for the circle of prophets, thought that the holy Isaiah had been taken up.³ 15. The vision that he saw was not from this world, but from the world hidden from the flesh. 16. After Isaiah had seen this vision, he recounted it to Hezekiah, to Josab, his son, and to the other prophets who had come. 17. The officials, the eunuchs, and the people did not hear it, apart from Samnas, the scribe, Jehoiakim, and Asaph, the record keeper, for they were doers of righteousness, and they had the fragrance of the Spirit. The people did not hear it, since Micah and Josab, his son, had led them out when the wisdom of this world had risen from him as if he had died.

7, 1. The vision that Isaiah saw, he told Hezekiah, Josab, his son, Micah, and the other prophets. 2. It was this: When I prophesied according to the message that you heard, I saw a splendid angel. He was not like the splendor of the angels that I would frequently see, but he had a great splendor and rank, such that I am unable to describe the splendor of this angel. 3. I saw as he took me by the hand, and I said, “Who are you? What is your

2 See Rev 4:1. 3 That is, they thought that Isaiah had died.

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name? Where are you bringing me?” For the strength to speak with him had been given to me. 4. He said to me, “When I have led you up the ascension and I have shown you the vision for which I have been sent, then you will understand who I am, but you will not know my name, 5. for you must return to this flesh. You will see where I am bringing you, for I have been sent for this purpose.”

6. I rejoiced because he had spoken to me gently. 7. Then he said to me, “Do you rejoice because I have spoken to you gently?” He said, “You will see how one greater than me will speak with you gently and peacefully, 8. and you will see the Father of this greater one because I have been sent to explain all this to you.”

9. We ascended, he and I, to the firmament, and there I saw Samael and his hosts. There was a great battle therein, and the words of Satan, and they were envying one another⁴ 10. — as above, so also on earth, for the form of that which is in the firmament is here on earth. 11. I said to the angel, “What is this envy?” 12. He said to me, “It has been like this since the world came to be until now, and this battle [will continue] until the one whom you shall see comes and destroys him.”

13. Then he brought me above the firmament — this is heaven. 14. There I saw a throne in the middle, and there were angels on the right and left of it. 15. The angels on the left⁵ were not like the angels standing on the right, but those on the right had more splendor. They all offered praise with one voice. The throne was in the middle, and they praised it, while those on the left [offered praise] after them. Their voice was not like the voice of those on the right, and their praise was not like the praise of those [on the right]. 16. I asked the angel who was guiding me, “To whom is this praise sent?” 17. He said to me, “It was sent to the glory of the seventh heaven for the one who takes rest in the holy world and for his beloved, from where I was sent to you.”

18. Again he brought me to the second heaven. The height of that heaven is like that from heaven to earth to the firmament. 19. I saw there, as in the first heaven, angels on the right and on the left, a throne in the middle, and the glory of the angels in the second heaven. The one who was sitting on

4 The text is possibly corrupt. Lat¹ reads, “and the angels of Satan were envious of each other.”

5 The text is likely corrupt, lacking “the angels on the left,” which is supplied here from Lat¹.

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the throne in the second heaven had more splendor than all [of them]. 20. There was great splendor in the second heaven, and their glory was not like the glory of those in the first heaven. 21. I fell down on my face so that I might bow down to him, but the angel who was guiding me did not let me. Instead, he said to me, “Do not bow down to a throne or an angel from the six heavens, from where I was sent to guide you, until I tell you [to do so] in the seventh heaven,⁶ 22. because your throne, your garments, and your crown, which you shall see, reside above all the heavens and their angels.” 23. I rejoiced greatly since, at their end, those who love the exalted one and his beloved will ascend there by the angel of the Holy Spirit.

24. He brought me to the third heaven, and similarly I saw those on the left and on the right, a throne there in the middle, and one sitting [on it]. But no mention of this world was made there. 25. I said to the angel who was with me, since the splendor of my face was changing as I was ascending each heaven, “The vanity of that world is not named here at all.” 26. He replied, “On account of its weakness, it is not named at all. But nothing done there is hidden.” 27. I wanted to learn how it is known, but he replied, “When I have brought you to the seventh heaven, from where I have been sent, which is above these, then you will know that nothing is hidden from the thrones, from those who reside in the heavens, or from the angels.” The praise that they offered and the splendor of the one sitting on the throne were great, and the angels on the right and on the left had more splendor than the heaven below them.

28. Again he led me to the fourth heaven. The height from the third to the fourth heaven exceeds that from earth to the firmament. 29. There again I saw those on the right and those on the left, and the one who was sitting on the throne was in the middle. There too they were offering praise. 30. The glory and splendor of the angels on the right was greater than those on the left. 31. Again the splendor of the one who was sitting on the throne exceeded that of the angels on the right, while their splendor exceeded that of those below.

32. He led me to the fifth heaven. 33. Again I saw those on the right and on the left, and the one who was sitting on the throne had more splendor than those of the fourth heaven. 34. The splendor of those on the right exceeded [that of] those on the left, from the third to the fourth.⁷ 35. The splendor of the one on the throne was greater than the angels on the

6 See Rev 19:10, 22:8–9.

7 The text is possibly corrupt.

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right, 36. and their glory had greater splendor than the fourth heaven. 37. I praised the one who is not named and the unique one who dwells in the heavens, whose name is not known by any flesh, who has thus given splendor to each heaven, who makes the splendor of the angels great and the splendor of the one who sits on the throne greater.

8, 1. He led me still farther up into the air of the sixth heaven, and I saw glory such as I had not seen in the five heavens as I ascended. 2. The angels were greatly splendid. 3. The glory there was holy and wonderful. 4. I said to the angel who was guiding me, “What am I seeing, my lord?” 5. He said, “I am not your lord but your equal.”⁸ 6. Again I asked him, “Why not an equal of angels?” 7. He said to me, “From now on, from the sixth heaven upwards, there are no longer those on the left, nor a throne residing in the middle, but [they have their order]⁹ by the power of the seventh heaven, where the one who is not named dwells along with his chosen one, whose name is not known – none of the heavens can know his name, 8. because he is the only one whose voice all the heavens and thrones answer. Now, I have been empowered and sent to bring you here so that you may see this glory. 9. You will see the lord of all these heavens and these thrones 10. being transformed until he is like you in appearance and in form. 11. So I will tell you, Isaiah, that no one who will return into the flesh of that world has seen or ascended or understood what you have seen and what you must see, 12. because you must come here by the lot of the lord, by the lot of the tree. The power of the sixth heaven and its air is from there.” 13. I extolled my lord in praise because I will come here by his lot. 14. He said to me, “Hear this also from your equal: When, by the angel of the Spirit, you have ascended here from a strange body, then you will receive the garment that you will see, and you will see a set number of other garments residing [there]. 15. Then you will be equal to the angels in the seventh heaven.”

16. He brought me up to the sixth heaven. There were none on the left and no throne in the middle, but all had one appearance, and their glory was equal. 17. It¹⁰ was given to me. I offered praise with them, along with that angel too. Our praise was like theirs. 18. All of them named there the

8 See Rev 19:10, 22:8–9.

9 The text seems to be corrupt; some such phrase should probably be supplied on the basis of Lat² and Slav.

10 The antecedent of this pronoun is unclear: Is it “appearance”? Or “glory”? Or perhaps more circuitous for “I was allowed to offer praise ...”, that is, “It was given to me to offer praise ...”.

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primal Father, the beloved, Christ, and the Holy Spirit – all with one voice. 19. It was not like the voices of the angels in the five heavens. 20. It was not like their speech, but there was a different voice there, and there was abundant light there. 21. Then, when I was in the sixth heaven, I likened those lights that I had seen in the five heavens to darkness. 22. I rejoiced and praised the one who has granted such lights to those who await his promise. 23. I implored the angel who was guiding me that from this time forward I should not return to the world of flesh. 24. Thus, I will tell you, Hezekiah, Josab, my son, and Micah, that there is abundant darkness here. Abundant darkness indeed. 25. The angel who was guiding me knew what I was thinking. He said, “If you rejoiced over these lights, how much more will you rejoice in the seventh heaven when you see the lights where the lord is, along with his beloved, from where I have been sent – he who will be called Son in the world. 26. The one who will be in the passing world has not been revealed, nor the garments, nor the thrones, nor the crowns, which reside [there] for the righteous who believe in that lord who will descend in your likeness, because the light there is great and wonderful. 27. Now, as for your not returning to the flesh, your days are not yet completed for coming here.” 28. When I heard [that], I grew sad. He said to me, “Do not be sad.”

9. 1. He led me to the air of the seventh heaven, and then I heard a voice saying, “How far should this one who dwells among the strangers ascend?” I was afraid and trembling. 2. He said to me as I trembled, “Another voice, which was sent, has come forth from there, and it says that the holy Isaiah is allowed to ascend to here because his garment is here.” 3. I asked the angel who was with me, “Who prevented me? Who allowed me to ascend?” 4. He said to me, “The one who prevented you is the one on whom the glory of the sixth heaven is. 5. The one who allowed you is your lord God, the lord Christ, who will be called in the world Jesus but whose name you are unable to hear until you ascend from this flesh of yours.”

6. He brought me up to the seventh heaven, and I saw there a wonderful light and angels without number. 7. There I saw all the righteous from the time of Adam. 8. There I saw the holy Abel and all the righteous. 9. There I saw Enoch and all those who were with him, who were stripped of garments of the flesh, and I saw them in the garments of above,¹¹ and

¹¹ That is, heavenly garments (cf. Rev 3:4–5).

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they were like angels, who were standing there in great glory. 10. However, they were not sitting on their thrones, and their crowns of glory were not upon them. 11. I asked the angel who was with me, “How have they taken garments, but they are not on thrones with crowns?” 12. He said to me, “They do not take crowns and magnificent thrones now – but they see and know which thrones and which crowns are theirs – until the beloved descends with the appearance in which you will see him descend. 13. The lord who will be called Christ will descend at the end of days. After he has descended and takes on your appearance, they will think that he is flesh and a human. 14. The lord of that world will stretch out through the hand of his son,¹² and they will bring their hands down upon him and crucify him on a tree without knowing who he is. 15. Then his descent, as you will see, will be hidden even from the heavens, so that it is not known who he is. 16. When he robs the angel of death, ascends on the third day, and remains in that world for five hundred and forty-five days, 17. many of the righteous, whose spirits will not have taken garments until the lord Christ ascends and they ascend with him, will ascend with him. 18. Then they will take their garments, thrones, and crowns when he has ascended to the seventh heaven.”

19. I said to him what I had asked him in the third heaven.¹³ 20. He told me that everything done in that world is known here. 21. While I was speaking with him, one of the angels who was standing [there], more glorious than the glory of that angel who had brought me up from the world, 22. showed me [some] books. The books were not like the books of this world. He opened them, and there was writing there. They were not like the books of this world. They were given to me, and I read them. The deeds of the children of Israel were written there – the deeds which you know, my son, Josab. 23. I said, “Truly, the things done in the world are not hidden in the seventh heaven!”

24. I saw there many garments, thrones, and crowns. 25. I said to the angel who was guiding me, “Whose are these garments, thrones, and crowns?” 26. He said to me, “Many from that world will receive these garments after having believed in the word of that one who will be called what

¹² The text is not entirely clear. Alternatively, it could be emended to: “stretch out his hand against his son.”

¹³ See 7.24–27 above.

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I have told you, and they will keep them and believe in his cross – they reside here for them.”¹⁴

27. I saw standing one whose glory surpassed all – his glory was great and wonderful. 28. Seeing him, all the righteous ones, whom I saw, as well as the angels came to him. Adam, Abel, Seth, and all the righteous ones first approached and bowed down to him. All of them praised him in one voice. I was praising him along with them, and my praise was like theirs. 29. Then all the angels approached, bowed down, and praised him. 30. He was transformed, and he became like an angel. 31. Then the angel who was guiding me said to me, “Bow down to this one!” I bowed down and offered praise. 32. The angel said to me, “This is the lord of all glory, whom you have seen.”

33. While I was still speaking, I saw another glorious one, who resembled him. The righteous ones approached him, bowed down, and offered praise. I offered praise along with them. His glory was not transformed into their appearance. 34. Then the angels approached and bowed down. 35. I saw the lord and the second angel, and they were standing. 36. The second one, whom I saw, was on the left of my lord. I asked, “Who is this one?” He told me, “Bow down to him because this is the angel of the Holy Spirit, who is upon you and who has spoken to other righteous ones.”

37. I saw a great glory after the eyes of my spirit had been opened.¹⁵ I was unable then to see, as was the case with the angel who was with me and all the angels whom I had seen bowing down to my lord. 38. However, I saw the righteous with great power seeing the glory of that one. 39. My lord and the angel of the Spirit approached me and said, “See, it has been given to you to see God, and, on account of you, power has been given to the angel with you.” 40. I saw that my lord and the angel of the Spirit bowed down, and the two of them praised God together. 41. Then all the righteous approached and bowed down. 42. All the righteous and the angels approached and bowed down. All the angels offered praise.

10, 1. Then I heard the voices and praises that I had heard in the six heavens, which I had heard when I was ascending there. 2. All this was being directed to that glorious one, whose glory I was unable to see, 3. but I was hearing and seeing his praise. 4. The lord and the angel of the

¹⁴ That is, the garments, thrones, and crowns are here for people who have believed.

¹⁵ See John 12:41 (and also Isa 6:1–6).

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Spirit were hearing and seeing everything. 5. All the praise that was being directed from the six heavens was not only heard but seen. 6. I heard the angel who was guiding me say to me, “This is the exalted of the exalted ones, who dwells in the holy world and takes rest among the holy ones,¹⁶ who is called Father of the lord by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of the holy ones.” 7. I heard the voice of this most exalted one, the Father of my lord, saying to my lord, Christ, who is called Jesus, 8. “Go out and descend through each of the heavens. You will descend through the firmament and that world until the angel in Sheol, but you will not go to perdition. 9. You will resemble the form of everyone in the five heavens. 10. You will be careful to resemble the appearance of the angels of the firmament as well as the appearance of the angels who are in Sheol. 11. None of the angels of that world will know that you are lord with me of the seven heavens and of their angels. 12. They will not know that you were with me when with the word of the heavens I called you along with their angels and lights, exalting you to the sixth heaven so that you would judge and destroy the judges, angels, and lords of that world as well as the world that is ruled by them 13. because they denied me and they said, ‘We are alone. There is no one except for us.’ 14. Afterwards, you will ascend from the lords of death to your place, without being transformed in each of the heavens, but in glory you will ascend and reside at my right hand. 15. Then the judges and hosts of that world will bow down to you.” 16. I heard this great praise as he was commanding my lord.

17. In this way, I saw my lord go out from the seventh heaven to the sixth heaven. 18. The angel who led me from this world was with me, and he said to me, “Understand, Isaiah, and make sure to see the transformation of the lord and his descent.” 19. I saw that, when the angels of the sixth heaven saw him, they praised and worshiped him because he was not transformed into the appearance of the angels there. They praised him, and I praised him with them. 20. I saw that, when he descended into the fifth heaven, he resembled those who were in the fifth heaven according to the appearance of the angels there, and they did not praise him because his appearance was like theirs. 21. Then he descended into the fourth heaven, and he resembled the appearance of the angels there. 22. When they saw him, they did not praise or worship him because his appearance was like

¹⁶ See Isa 57:15.