

John J. Pilch, *Flights of the Soul: Visions, Heavenly Journeys, and Peak Experiences in the Biblical World*. Grand Rapids, Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2011. xiii + 238 pages. Paperback. Price US\$24 ISBN 978-0-8028-6540-3.

The current volume brings together 14 essays which Pilch had published between 1993 and 2009 in various books and journals. They all in one way or another address the phenomenon of alternate states of consciousness as they appear in biblical and pseudepigraphical material. They attempt to provide the reader in constructing “an appropriate scenario for reading and interpreting biblical reports containing references to alternate states of consciousness” (xiii). The articles appear as published previously with minimal revision. For each essay Pilch appended an updated bibliography, which refers mainly to the anthropological and social-scientific literature which was consulted in the research process. He also included biblical studies that incorporate social-scientific insights in the interpretation of the Bible. In his research Pilch moved from the designation “altered” state of consciousness to the phrase alternate state of consciousness as

Psychological anthropologists note that the continuity of consciousness is an illusion. Our levels of consciousness change many times during the day, so it is best to speak of alternate states. The word ‘altered’ falsely suggests that there exists a ‘stable’ state of consciousness that changes. Not so. Consciousness shifts all the time (xiii).

In the introductory essay, “Alternate States of Consciousness: A ‘Kitbashed’ Model” (1-13), Pilch describes and critiques the model of Bourguignon, discusses the question of supernaturalistic or naturalistic, of etic and emic understandings of cultures, the model of Pattison and the approach of “kitbashing” various models (kitbashing is the process of taking a number of individual models and constructing a new model from the useful parts of those other models, 8).

Part one is devoted to accounts of alternate states of consciousness in the OT. The articles focus mainly on the prophet Ezekiel, and on Enoch, one of the pre-flood Patriarchs (Gen 5:21-24). According to Pilch, Ezekiel, along with Daniel and the author of the book of Revelation resemble astral prophets: “The Israelite tradition believed that God left indications of his will in the stars and constellations of the sky at creation. Astral prophets seek to learn God’s will by studying the sky” (15). Pilch describes the contributions as follows (15):

The first two chapters devoted to Ezekiel explore one means of inducing an alternate state of consciousness (using a breathing technique) and situate Ezekiel’s call to be a prophet in the context of an alternate state of consciousness experience. Chapters 3 to 5 focus on the alternate state of consciousness experience known as a trip to the sky. Related experiences include soul-loss,

out-of-body experiences, and near death experiences. Chapter 3 presents a social science model that I designed for investigating these reports in literature both ancient and modern. Chapters 4 and 5 apply the model to an analysis of the sky journey experiences attributed to Enoch. Music, the specific topic of ch. 5, provided me with an opportunity to include a NT topic in this segment. What is the purpose of flute music at a funeral in biblical literature?

The essays are as follows: “The Nose and Altered States of Consciousness: Tascodrugites and Ezekiel” (17-29; aiming at designing a feasible and appropriate reading scenario for giving the reports of Epiphanius, Ezekiel, and Luke’s Jesus the most plausible Mediterranean cultural interpretation available); “The Call of Ezekiel (Ezek 1-3): An Altered State of Consciousness (ASC) Experience” (30-47; drawing on insights from cultural or social anthropology and cognitive neuroscience; Pilch argues that the literary forms used here are

culturally specific wording patterns that derive from the social system. Genre always derives from the social system since genres are not part of language or the linguistic system. Since the social system also specifies the behavioural pattern by which ASCs are experienced and interpreted, it is quite plausible that visionaries did behave in just the way the literary pattern reports. The report of Ezekiel’s call vision fits the pattern of ASC experiences, 45f.

In “Holy Men and Their Sky Journeys: A Cross-Cultural Model” (48-60), Pilch argues that his cross-cultural model for analysing sky journeys (the term includes destinations of journeys other than the sky as well) which draws on insights about alternate states of consciousness in general promises to be a useful tool for interpreting such reports in ancient literature. The model was designed inductively from a scholarly review of ethnographic literature. Its hermeneutical value can be tested by applying it to the interpretation of journeys reported in biblical and extra-biblical literature (58).

In “The Holy Man, Enoch, and His Sky Journeys” (61-72), Pilch discusses Siberian Shamanism, sky journeys in the Mediterranean world, describes his own sky journey model (as developed in the previous essay) and analyses Enoch as a biblical sky traveller. Pilch concludes:

Within the Israelite tradition, only God knew the entire story, so someone would have to learn it from God and God’s associates. God’s principal vehicle for communicating with human beings is alternate states of consciousness (1 Sam 3:1). What better candidate could there be for learning this Information from God and communicating it with those still living in consensual reality than Enoch, the human person who was taken up to the sky to reside with God in alternate reality? He learned his information in the customary style, through alternate state of consciousness experiences like dreams and

visions but especially by taking sky journeys. Totally fictitious as this account may be, the tradition and/or the narrator had little choice but to present the insight in terms of alternate states of consciousness experiences if he wanted his listeners or readers to take the information seriously (71).

In “Music in Second (Slavonic) Enoch” (73-88), Pilch applies his model to 2 Enoch and concludes that the author of 2 Enoch was a holy man (shaman), singer, seer, and priest all in one. The essay “Flute Players, Death, and Music in the Afterlife (Matt 9:18-19, 23-26)” (89-105) examines the flute as a musical instrument in antiquity and proposes some culturally plausible explanations for the use of flutes in connection with mourning for the dead as reported in Matthew’s Gospel (musical instruments in antiquity, aerophones in the Bible, naming the Bible’s aerophones, the probable sounds of biblical aerophones, the use of aerophones at funerals, life in the afterlife).

Part two examines instances of altered states of consciousness in the NT: “Altered States of Consciousness Events in the Synoptics” (109-123); “The Transfiguration of Jesus: An Experience of Alternate Reality” (124-145); “Appearances of the Risen Jesus in Cultural Context: Experiences of Alternate Reality” (146-162); “The Ascension of Jesus: A Social-Scientific Perspective” (163-173), “Paul’s Ecstatic Trance Experience near Damascus in Acts of the Apostles” (174-190); “Paul’s Call to Be a Holy Man (Apostle): In His Own Words and in Other Words” (191-204); “Paul’s Call to Be an Apostle” (205-215) and “Visions in Revelation and Alternate Consciousness: A Perspective from Cultural Anthropology” (216-230). The volume closes with an index of authors (231-234) and of Scripture and other ancient literature (235-238).

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