

## CHAPTER 30

## EARLY FORMS OF JEWISH MYSTICISM

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## I INTRODUCTION

The mystical-poetical Hebrew works of the first five centuries of the Common Era, known collectively as *heikhalot* (heavenly sanctuaries) and *merkavah* (throne-chariot) literature remain on the whole a closed book to readers and students, although the first scholarly studies were published more than a century ago.<sup>1</sup> It is not known precisely when this literature was composed, and the identity of the authors and editors of the *heikhalot* tradition is anonymous, pseudepigraphic, or disputed, although these works were written in the first person as if by eyewitnesses to the supernal worlds and attributed by the authors to the High Priest Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha (BT *Ber.* 7a) and Rabbi Akiva, who entered the *pardes* (that is, engaged in esoteric speculation pertaining to the heavenly sanctuaries; see BT *Hag.* 14b). Anonymous or pseudepigraphic as they are, these works, which carry such enigmatic names as *Heikhalot Zutarti*, *Heikhalot Rabbati*, *Seven Holy Sanctuaries*, *Maase Merkavah*, *Shiur Qomah*, *Masekhet Heikhalot*, and *Merkavah Rabba*, display a distinct affinity with mystical traditions that envisioned humans and angels moving freely between the terrestrial and celestial realms. The bulk of this literature is preoccupied with supernal worlds whose hidden essence, measured in cosmic numbers and figures amounting to thousands of myriads of parasangs between the different parts of the *merkavah*, became known to humanity via angelic and human testimony, the latter conveyed by the “descenders to the *merkavah*.”

Despite the broad research of recent decades, commencing with Gershom Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941), and his later study, *Jewish*

<sup>1</sup> The pioneering studies of *heikhalot* literature in the nineteenth century were as follows: H. Graetz, *Gnosticismus und Judenthum* (Krotoschin, 1846); idem, “Die mystische Literatur in der gaonaischen Epoche,” *MGWJ* 8 (1859), 67–78, 103–18, 140–53; P. Bloch, “Die *Yordei Merkava*, die Mystiker der Gaonenzeit und ihr Einfluss auf die Liturgie,” *MGWJ* 37 (1893), 18–25, 69–74, 257–66, 305–11; M. Friedlander, *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus* (Göttingen, 1898); and L. Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden* (Berlin, 1832).

*Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (1960), and the important and varied research of his students and followers in the last forty years, many puzzles regarding this material remain. Questions such as the origins of *Heikhalot* literature, the time and milieu of its composition, the identity of its authors, and the motivation that inspired them to write it are still subjects of scholarly disagreement.<sup>2</sup> Since the earliest efforts of modern scholars in this area, such basic questions as the definition of *heikhalot* literature, the significance of its unique stylistic features, and its connection to contemporary rabbinic traditions have been disputed. Some authorities have dated its composition to a late phase of the geonic period, while others have considered it to be remnants of mystical lore from the end of the Second Temple period or an integral part of rabbinic literature.<sup>3</sup> Each school has found its proponents and opponents; some scholars, although admitting certain points of contact between *heikhalot* literature and tannaitic and amoraic literature, prefer to underline the considerable disparities<sup>4</sup> and to support earlier claims of a late date.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars have pointed to links with Qumran, apocalyptic literature, ancient liturgy, and the rabbinic world in general, and therefore argued for a relatively early origin.<sup>6</sup> The chronological gap between the different schools may be ascribed to the fact that *heikhalot* literature departs so radically

<sup>2</sup> Modern *heikhalot* research dates from the work of G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1941), 40–79; and idem, *Jewish Gnosticism Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1965). For research of the last few decades, see nn. 9 and 12 and the bibliography for this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> See Scholem, *Trends*, 45, 72–3; idem, *Merkabah*; 9–13, 24. For a historical survey on research into *Heikhalot* literature, see J. Dan, *Ha-Mistikah ha-ʿIvrit ha-Kedumah* (Tel-Aviv, 1989), 7–14. For a partial bibliography on the subject, updated to the mid-1980s, see D. J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot* (Tübingen, 1988), 567–73.

<sup>4</sup> See M. Meg. 4.10; M. Hag. 2.7; Tos. Hag. 2.1–7; PT Hag. 77a–d; BT Hag. 11b–16a. See also E. E. Urbach, “Ha-Masorot’al Torat ha-Sod be-Tekufat ha-Tannaim,” in *Mekkarim be-Kabbalah ube-Toledot ha-Datot Muggashim le-G. Scholem* (Jerusalem, 1965), 1–28; D. J. Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven, 1980), 3ff., 183ff.; and idem, *Chariot*, ch. 1.

<sup>5</sup> M. S. Cohen, *The Shiʿur Qomab: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> On *Merkavah* in Qumran works (Dead Sea Scrolls), see the following: G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London, 1987), section 12; F. García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated* (Leiden, 1994), 419–31; M. Wise, M. Abegg, and E. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco, 1996), 365–77 (includes the “Masada Fragment”); C. A. Newsom, “Merkabah Exegesis in the Qumran Sabbath Shirot,” *JJS* 38/1 (1987); idem, *4Q Serek Shirot ʿOlat Hassabbat (The Qumran Angelic Liturgy: Edition, Translation, and Commentary)* (PhD thesis, Cambridge, MA, 1982), see especially ch. 8, “4QSir and the Tradition of the Hekhalot Hymns”; L. Schiffman, “Merkavah Speculation at Qumran,” in J. Reinartz and D. Swetschinski (eds.), *Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians* (Durham, 1982); L. Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Philadelphia, 1994), ch. 22, “Mysticism and Magic.” See the additional bibliography in nn. 21–2

from other literary traditions of late Second Temple times and the mishnaic and talmudic periods. It represents, by virtue of its language, style, and editorial structure, as well as by its new spiritual freedom and the new mystical, mythical, and magical message it conveys, something quite distinctive and apart.<sup>7</sup> The historical allusions contained in the *heikhalot* tracts, purporting to refer to the tannaitic period, conflict with accepted views of the people and events involved; they are therefore believed to be pseudepigraphic, transcending borders of historical reality and representing a meta-historical outlook.<sup>8</sup>

Basic questions of textual identity, the literary nature of the works involved, and the mutual relationships among them are also disputed,<sup>9</sup> and so too is the relationship of *heikhalot* literature to post-biblical and rabbinic literature.<sup>10</sup> The scholarly world, preoccupied with the historical difficulties concerning the definition of *heikhalot* literature, its textual obscurity, and its doubtful editorial identity, as well as its departure from the more familiar patterns of traditional writing, has devoted little attention to the circumstances of its composition or to its internal and external motivation. Neither have any attempts been made to suggest an overall contextual explanation for its unique spiritual qualities. Its peculiar stylistic features have gone virtually unnoticed, and little thought has been given to the nature of the mystical impulse that inspired its creation.<sup>11</sup> This chapter centers on suggesting a

below; and R. Elijor, *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford, 2004). For the links with apocalyptic literature, see I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkabah Mysticism* (Leiden, 1980); on the relationship with rabbinic literature, see Scholem, *Merkabah*, 9–13, 24; Urbach, “Ha-Masorot”; Halperin, *Rabbinic Literature*; and I. Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism* (Berlin, 1982). For the connection to ancient liturgy, see below.

<sup>7</sup> See R. Elijor, “Yihudah shel ha-Tofa’ali ha-Datit be-Sifrut ha-Heikhalot: Demut ha-El ve-Harhavat Gevulot ha-Hassagah,” in J. Dan (ed.), *Ha-Mistikah ha-J’ebudit ba-Kedumah: Proceedings of the First International Congress on the History of Jewish Mysticism = Mehkerei Y’erushalayim be-Mahshevet Yisra’el*, vi/1–2 (1987), 13–64; and the English translation, R. Elijor, “The Concept of God in Merkabah Mysticism,” in J. Dan (ed.), *Binab: Studies in Jewish History, Thought, and Culture*, 11: *Studies in Jewish Thought* (New York, 1989). On the mystical, mythical, and magical characteristics of *Heikhalot* literature, see nn. 11 and 12 below.

<sup>8</sup> See J. Dan, “Tefisat ha-Historiah be-Sifrut ha-Heikhalot ve-ha-Merkabah,” in *Be-Orah Mada’: Mebkirim be-Tarbut Isra’el muggashim le-A. Mirsky* (Lod, 1986), 117–29.

<sup>9</sup> See the synoptic edition of the various works comprising *heikhalot* literature by P. Schäfer in co-operation with M. Schluter and H. G. von Mutius, *Synopse zur Heikhalot Literatur* (Tübingen, 1981); see *ibid.*, x–xvii, for a detailed list of previous editions to the end of the 1970s, indicating the correspondence between the paragraphs of the new edition and the chapter divisions of earlier editions. See also P. Schäfer (ed.), *Geniza Fragmente zur Heikhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> For conflicting arguments, see n. 13 below.

<sup>11</sup> The mystical section of *heikhalot* literature includes *Heikhalot Rabbati* (also known as *Sefer Sheva Hekhalei Kodesh*, *Heikhalot de-R. Yishmael* (cf. Schäfer, *Synopse*, para. 81–276);

possible explanation for some of the most prominent characteristics of the mystical section of *heikhalot* literature, taking into consideration its pseud-epigraphic features, its undefined chronological-historical setting, and the dearth of independent external evidence of any relevance, on one side, and its distinctive mystical message on the other side. Relying on linguistic and cultural indications, this chapter will attempt to sketch a spiritual portrait of the authors of this material and outline the background of their work.

Much of *heikhalot* literature is written as a description of a mystical ascent to the heavenly sanctuaries. The description is focused on the angelic splendor and is offered in the sublime language of poems, hymns, and the sacred prayers of angels serving in the supernal sanctuaries where the angels minister. The authors of this literature describe the heavenly sanctuaries in visionary language, elaborating biblical prophecies as well as new mythical and mystical ideas concerning the heavenly *merkavah* with its four sides, myriads of parasangs, seven *heikhalot*, twelve gates, and twenty-four regiments of angels, all combining time and place in cosmic proportions; they make these hidden cosmic structures the direct object of mystical experience, of active speculation. Hence, they use such active verbs as “observe,” “gaze,” “descend,” “ascend,” “enter,” and “exit” in relation to prayer, song, and blessing.

The reality described in the various texts of *heikhalot* literature is a numinous, mystical, visionary reality, that refers both to a seemingly pseudepigraphic tannaitic world on the terrestrial plane and to the angelic world in the heavenly sanctuaries on the supernal plane.<sup>12</sup> This mystical

*Heikhalot Zutarti* (Synopsis, paras. 335–74, 407–26); *Maaseh Merkavah* (Synopsis, paras. 544–96); *Sefer Heikhalot* (3 *Enoch*; Synopsis, paras. 1–80); *Shiur Qomah* (Synopsis, paras. 376–7, 468–84) and various untitled fragments relating to Metatron (*Shivbei Metatron*, Synopsis, paras. 384–406, 484–8). For the characteristic features of these works, see J. Dan, “Gilluy Sodo shel ’Olam: Reshitah shel ha-Mistikah ha-Ivrit ha-Kedumah,” in *Da’at* 29 (1992), 12–16. The works are not always named in the manuscripts; some of the titles were arbitrarily added by late editors. Quotations cited below from *heikhalot* literature refer to paragraph numbers in Schäfer, *Synopse*.

<sup>12</sup> For a characterization of the mystical reality in *heikhalot* literature, see Scholem, *Trends*, 40–79; A. Altmann, “Shirei Kedushah be-Sifrut ha-Heikhalot ha-Kedumah,” in E. Robertson and M. Wallenstein (eds.), *Melilah* 11 (Manchester, 1946), 1–24; M. Smith, “Observations on Heikhalot Rabati,” in A. Altmann (ed.), *Biblical and Other Studies* (Cambridge, 1963), 149–56; Scholem, *Merkabah*, 20–64; and see S. Lieberman, “Mishnat Shir ha-Shirim,” in Scholem, *Merkabah*, 118–26; Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic*, 98–126; idem, “Shirat ha-Mal’akhim, ha-Kedushah’ u-Vea’yat Hibburah shel Sifrut ha-Heikhalot,” in A. Oppenheimer, U. Rappaport, and M. Stern, (eds.), *Perakim be-Toledot Yerushalayim bi-Yimei Bayit Shenii: Sefer Zikkaron le-Avraham Schalit* (Jerusalem, 1981), 459–81; Elior, “Mysticism”; Halperin, *Chariot*, 11–37, 359–447; idem, “Three Types of Ancient Jewish Mysticism,” in *The Seventh R. L. Feinberg Memorial Lecture in Judaic Studies* (Cincinnati, 1984); J. Dan, “The Religious Experience of the Merkavah,” in A. Green (ed.), *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible to the Middle Ages* (New York, 1986), 289–307; J. Dan, *Ha-Mistikah*, 154–62; and P. Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God* (Albany, 1992).

reality can furnish no direct information regarding actual, historical circumstance, nor can it provide anything definite about the identity of the writers. Nevertheless, it testifies most strikingly to the supernal world that the religious imagination created and points to the disparity between that ideal reality and the empirical reality of their time and place.<sup>13</sup> The visionary, supernal existence is intertwined in *heikhalot* literature with the beauty and majesty of nature and with wondrous phenomena and cosmic upheavals; at its core are the eternal entities of *Sbiur Qomab* (the magnanimous divine posture, described with cosmic measures, referring to the divine person), the Throne of Glory, the numinous essence of the Ineffable Names, and the mysterious *heikhalot* with their innumerable angelic beings.<sup>14</sup> This existence, drawing on the priestly-prophetic vision of Ezekiel and the priestly-mystical tradition of the *merkavah* (the Divine Chariot), is composed of firmaments and angels, shrines and chariots, heavenly legions and such angelic hosts as *cherubim* and *seraphim*, *ofannim*, and *galgalim*, creatures of flame and holy living beings – all amazing sights of eternal wondrous beauty, brilliance, and magnificence.<sup>15</sup> All the numerous creatures of the *merkavah*, described in this literature in a degree of detail unparalleled in any other Jewish source, officiate in the celestial shrines and participate in the heavenly ritual. They praise and exalt, extol, glorify and magnify, intone prayers, and utter benedictions. They sing and play musical instruments, officiate before the Throne of Glory, and tie crowns to one another's heads; they are awesome in their beauty, unparalleled in their majesty, and terrifying in their magnitude. They are described in a transcendental human-like fashion that paradoxically distances them from the human world.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For a summary of the different views of the time reflected in *heikhalot* literature and its realistic historical background, see Scholem, *Trends*, 40–1; idem, *Merkavah*, 1–5, 9–13; Dan, *Ha-Mistikah*, 9–19; and Halperin, *Chariot*, 360–3. For a view that *heikhalot* literature reflects a class struggle against a background of social revolution, consult Halperin, *Chariot*, 377–87, 427–39; and for critiques of this view, see R. Elijor, “Merkabah Mysticism: A Critical Review,” *Numen* 37 (1990), fasc. 2, 233–49; and M. Mach, “Das Ratsel der Hekhalot im Rahmen der jüdischen Geistesgeschichte,” in *JSJ* 21/2 (1990), 236–52.

<sup>14</sup> See *Sefer Heikhalot*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, paras. 1–80; *Heikhalot Rabbati*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, paras. 94–106, 152–62.

<sup>15</sup> For an explanation of the terms used here, see the sources and studies cited in the previous notes. For typical examples of the celestial retinue, see Alexander, *Enoch*; Elijor, *Heikhalot Zutarti*, 24–35 and nn. 59–78; Cohen, *Sbi'ur Qomab*; Schäfer, *Hidden God*, 21–36, 62–5, 129–35; and Elijor, “Mysticism,” 27–43.

<sup>16</sup> On the celestial beings' sacred service, see Elijor, “Mysticism,” 45–51.

The poetic impact, liturgical inspiration, and visionary language of *beikhalot* literature represent a mystical worldview that transcends biblical tradition, raising serious questions regarding the background and meaning of this literature and its connection to earlier tradition. The spiritual boldness required to create this arcane, visionary, heavenly world with its unprecedented angelology, the mystical freedom reflected in a new perception of the Divine Person subjected to the human gaze of the mystic, the highly detailed accounts of the esoteric tradition of Divine Names and angelic liturgy – none of these could have emerged *ex nihilo*.<sup>17</sup> Such preoccupation with supernal worlds, such speculation concerning the secrets of the Godhead and study of Divine Names, extends beyond the limits of biblical tradition and breaches the bounds of rabbinic esoteric tradition, as proscribed in the Mishnah (*Hag.* 2), which asserts that the mysteries of the divine world, described as the deeds of the chariot, should not be discussed and taught publicly. The sheer volume of *beikhalot* literature, with its myriad descriptions of the world of the chariot represented in heavenly shrines, thousands of verses purporting to represent the song of the heavenly beings, and the praises uttered by the “descenders to the *merkavah*,” is astonishing. Reading these tracts, one wonders about the circumstances that could have inspired such unprecedented mystical creativity on this grand scale. How could its creators have contemplated so freely the hidden secrets of the supernal worlds? Given the extent and variety of *beikhalot* literature, it could not possibly have been written by a single individual. On the contrary, it was certainly the work of some group or groups of people responding to an extraordinary experience that inspired them to violate conventions regarding human apprehensions and limitations.

The most plausible explanation for the emergence of this new approach to hitherto forbidden realms is apparently a visionary eruption that, drawing on a sanctified ancient ritual tradition, refused to accept a cruel, arbitrary reality in which the cultic center of a thousand years, the focus of centuries of religious worship from the days of David’s and Solomon’s First Temple (tenth to sixth centuries BCE) followed by the Second Temple (end of the sixth century BCE) no longer existed after the year 70. Denying

<sup>17</sup> On the visionary world of the heavens and the new angelology, see Dan, *Ha-Mistikah*, 93–102; Elior, “Mysticism,” 22–43; and Schäfer, *Hidden God*, 21–37, 62–5. On the new perception of the divine image, see G. Scholem, “Shi’ur Qomah,” in *P’irkei Yesod be-Havanat ha-Kabbalah U-SeMaleba* (Jerusalem, 1975); Elior, “Demut ha-El,” 15–31; and A. Farber-Ginat, “Iyyunim be-Sefer Shi’ur Qomah,” in M. Oron and A. Goldreich (eds.), *Masot: Umekkarim be-Sifrut ha-Kabbalah Ub-Mabashevet Isra’el Mukdashim le-Zikbro shel E. Gottlieb* (Jerusalem, 1994), 361–94. For the importance and implications of the tradition of Divine Names, see below.

the historical fact of the destruction of the Temple and the annihilation of the priestly service, this eruption created a new spiritual world that rested on a mystical-ritual fulcrum, a surrogate for the no longer extant Temple. This spiritual world, on the one hand, was associated with heavenly shrines and the vision of the *Merkavah*, the Divine Chariot; and on the other hand, it involved a transference and elevation of the priestly and levitical traditions of Temple worship to the supernal regions. Upon careful examination of *beikhalot* literature, one is led to suggest that the eternity and solemn beauty ascribed to the heavenly shrines, and the continuation of Temple worship in the firmament by the angels and the beings of the *merkavah*, constituted a foil to the finality of destruction and to the abolition of the priestly and levitical cult in the earthly Temple. These phenomena answered an urgent need: namely, to perpetuate in heaven and in mystical language the destroyed Temple, the focus of holiness and eternal contact between heaven and earth for many centuries during the biblical and post-biblical periods. It likewise responded to the profound desire to commemorate the priestly and levitical rites in the heavenly shrines and in the mystical liturgy, and to describe the hidden sanctuaries and their angelic service.<sup>18</sup>

Although it is clear from prophetic tradition, post-biblical literature, and Qumran writings that visions of a celestial Temple and angelic rites do not necessarily depend on destruction or loss, such visions not infrequently reflect, directly or indirectly, a negative attitude to the earthly sanctuary and represent criticism of the Temple service and priestly conduct. Indeed, at times such representations even indicate an open rejection of the earthly Temple and those who served in it; for the relationship between the earthly Temple and its priests, on the one hand, and the heavenly shrine and its angels, on the other, is one of analogy, drawing various parallel lines of identification and rejection between the two.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Johann Maier has compared the emergence of Ezekiel's *Merkavah* vision not long after the destruction of the First Temple to the appearance of the *merkavah* tradition after the destruction of the Second Temple, but his view has not been discussed seriously and no follow-up has been forthcoming. See J. Maier, *Vom Kultus zur Gnosis: Gnosis, Bundeslade, Gottestron und Mer-kabah* (Salzburg, 1964), 95–148. Consult also A. Neher, "Le Voyage mystique des quatre," *RHR* 140 (1951), 59–82; and I. Gruenwald, "Mekoman shel Masorot Kohaniyot bi-Yziratah shel ha-Mistikah shel ha-Merkavah ve-shel Shi'ur Qomah," in J. Dan (ed.), *Ha-Mistikah ha-Jebudit ha-Kedumah*, 6–120, especially 87.

<sup>19</sup> See Isa. 6:1–3; 1 Kgs. 23.19; 2 Chron. 18.18; 1 *Enoch* 14; 2 *Enoch*; *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, and the sources cited below, nn. 21–2. Compare Mal. 2.7, which links priests with angels: "For the lips of a priest guard knowledge, and men seek rulings from his mouth; for he is an angel (*malakh*) of YHWH of hosts"; and cf. the comparison of the Priest of the Congregation and the Angel of the Countenance as far back as Qumran – see

However, as proposed below, it was as a reaction to the destruction of the earthly Temple that the creators of the tradition of the “descent to the *merkavah*” and the “ascent to the *heikhalot*” conceived the heavenly shrines as depicted in the *Heikhalot* literature in a degree of detail and variety unparalleled in any Jewish literary work of late antiquity. These constructs of the religious imagination arose as a spiritual response to the sense of loss, desolation, and deprivation caused by the catastrophic events of contemporary history.<sup>20</sup>

This response could have occurred during the generations immediately following the Destruction, when the impact of the events themselves was still fresh and developments in the practical world demanded compensation in the spiritual realm. The previous suggestion does not claim, however, to set unambiguous chronological/historical limits, but rather to trace the relationship of a certain reality to the spiritual-mythical and mystical world described in *heikhalot* literature and to determine the meaning of the continued identification with the heritage of the Temple priesthood and the earthly Temple. The liturgical sections of the *heikhalot* texts bear the clear imprint of the priestly and levitical service; and their language is strongly influenced by various aspects of the sacred service and by literary traditions connected with the Temple rites. Therefore, although one may dispute the actual relationship between the historical circumstances (the destruction and abolition of the Temple service in 70) and their indirect literary expression (the tradition of the *heikhalot* and the *merkavah* in the following centuries), one cannot ignore the focal position of the ritual and liturgical heritage of the Temple in *heikhalot* literature.

The mystical literature that emerged after the Destruction did not materialize in a vacuum, but neither did it emerge completely formed as an immediate or delayed reaction to the historical crisis of the loss of the Temple cult alone. It also reflects crucial developments in religious

D. Diamant, “Benei Shamayim: Torat ha-Mal’akhim be-Sefer ha-Yovelim le-’Or Kitvei ’Adat Qumran,” in M. Idel, D. Diamant, and S. Rosenberg (eds.), *Minhab le-Sarah: Mebkarim be-Filosofia Yehudit ube-Kabbalah Muggashim le-Sarah Heller-Vilensky* (Jerusalem, 1994), 97–118, especially 111–12. For various contacts between the earthly Temple and the heavenly shrine, see A. Aptowitz, “Bet ha-Mikdash shel Ma’lah ’al pi ha-Aggadah,” *Tarbiz* 2 (1931), 137–53, 257–77; and Maier, *Vom Kultus zur Gnosis*, who noted that priestly traditions about heavenly counterparts of the terrestrial Temple are the source of the apocalyptic literature dealing with the divine throne and chariot.

<sup>20</sup> For the significance of the destruction of the Temple – the focus of national life and the people’s spiritual and ritual center – see S. Safrai, *Ha-’Aliyah la-Regel be-Yemei ba-Bayit ha-Sheni* (Jerusalem, 1965), 8, 146–8, 178; M. D. Herr, “Yerushalayim, ha-Mikdash ve-ha-’Avodah ba-Mezi’ut uva-Toda’ah bi-Yemei Bayit Sheni,” in Oppenheimer et al. (eds.), *Perakim*, 166–78; and ch. 7 in the present volume.



consciousness that occurred in the post-biblical period, in particular, and in the religious creativity in certain priestly circles that were unable to participate in the priestly service since the Hasmonean period.<sup>21</sup> The varied religious currents that left their stamp on the outlook of the creators of the *heikhalot* and *merkavah* literature may be associated both with apocryphal literature, Qumran writings, the tradition of the books of *Enoch*, the book of *Jubilees*, and the *Testaments of the Twelve Tribes*, as well as conceptions of the heavenly liturgy and visionary images of the heavenly Temple and angelic priesthood.<sup>22</sup>

## II HEIKHAL AND HEIKHALOT

The two names, *heikhalot* and *merkavah*, used to describe this literature are directly related to certain major elements in the real, terrestrial Temple. The term *heikhalot* recalls the *heikhal*, the central part of the Temple (generally translated as “sanctuary” or “shrine”) accessible exclusively, according to the biblical tradition’s ascending order, to the priests, that is, to the sons of Aaron, son of Amram, son of Kehat, son of Levi, who were consecrated (Lev. 28.1; 29.44; Num. 3.38; *Jubilees* 30.18), and to the Levites, the various families of the tribe of Levi who performed various functions of the sacred

<sup>21</sup> On changes that occurred in the religious consciousness in the post-biblical period, particularly in the increased role attributed to angels and the self-awareness of the priests, see M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Age*, 1 (Philadelphia, 1974), 233ff. Major portions of Qumran literature bears an unmistakable priestly imprint: *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, *The Damascus Covenant*, the books of 1 and 2 *Enoch*, the *Testament of Levi*, *Jubilees*, and so on. For the link between priests and angels at Qumran and the perception of the heavenly temple, see C. Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice: A Critical Edition* (Atlanta, 1985), 1–81; and Diamant, “Benei Shamayim,” 97–118. For the central role of priests and Levites in the hierarchical structure of the Qumran sect, which considered itself a substitute for the Temple, see Y. Schiffman, *Halakbah: Halikbab u-Meshibbiut be-Kat Midbar Yehudah* (Jerusalem, 1993), 316. For angels at Qumran, see M. J. Davidson, *Angels at Qumran* (Sheffield, 1992); and S. R. Noll, “Angelology in the Qumran Texts” (PhD dissertation, Manchester, 1979). For the significance of the identification of the heavens as a Temple and the role of the angelic priesthood as the personnel of the heavenly Temple in apocalyptic literature, see M. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York and Oxford, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> On the links between *heikhalot* literature and Qumran literature, see Scholem, *Trends*, 43–6, 54; J. Strugnell, “The Angelic Liturgy at Qumran-4Q Serekh Shirot ‘Olat Ha-Shabbat,” *VTSup* 7 (1960), 318–45; and see Scholem, *Merkavah*, 29, 128; Newsom, *Songs*, 39–58; C. Newsom, “Merkavah Exegesis in the Qumran Sabbath Shirot,” in *JJS* 38/1 (1987), 11–30; and L. H. Schiffman, “Merkavah Speculation at Qumran: The 4Q Serekh Shirot ‘Olat ha-Shabbat,” in J. Reinharz et al. (eds.), *Mystics, Philosophers and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altmann* (Durham, 1982), 15–47.

service. *Merkavah*, “chariot,” or “the chariot of the cherubim,” alludes to the *devir* or *Holy of Holies*, the inner sanctum of the Temple where the holy ark of the covenant stood under the outspread wings of the cherubim as described in Scripture: “The weight of refined gold for the incense altar and the gold for the *pattern of the chariot – the cherubim – those with outspread wings screening the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord*” (1 Chron. 28.18).<sup>23</sup> The word *heikhal* is in fact used most commonly in the Bible to refer to the Temple, while the plural, *heikhalot*, reflects a priestly mystical worldview originating in post-biblical and Qumran literature, according to which the heavens are essentially a Temple containing a varying number of *heikhalot*, that is, shrines, *merkavot* or chariots, and *devirim* or *Holies of Holies*.<sup>24</sup> The chariot of the cherubim is the upper part of the ark of the covenant, called the *merkavah*, chariot, or *kapporet*, cover, seen as the throne of God, that is, the place where God reveals himself in the Temple to priests, prophets, and Levites. The same word, *merkavah*, is used to refer to the priestly prophetic vision of Ezekiel,<sup>25</sup> which is intimately connected with the First Temple and its destruction early in the sixth century BCE.

The two mystical protagonists of *heikhalot* literature, Rabbi Ishmael son of Elisha, and Metatron, the “Prince of the Countenance,” are also portrayed in an unmistakably priestly context. Rabbi Ishmael, the terrestrial protagonist, is the *tanna* described in the Babylonian Talmud (*Ber. 7a*) as the High Priest who entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to burn incense.<sup>26</sup> In *Heikhalot Rabbati* (section 151 of Peter Schäfer’s *Synopsis* to *heikhalot* literature), he is described in terms similar to those

<sup>23</sup> *Merkavah* (chariot or cosmic combined assemblage) mysticism developed from speculation on and expansion of the visions of Ezek. 1, 8, and 10, and to a lesser extent Isa. 6 and Dan. 2. In post-biblical literature, chariot visions are mentioned in Qumran literature in *Shirot Olat HaShabat* (Newsome, *Songs*); and in 1 *Enoch* 14 and *The Life of Adam and Eve* (including the *Apocalypse of Moses*); and see also the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. For the English translations of these traditions, see J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1 (Garden City, 1983).

<sup>24</sup> See *Encyclopedia Talmudit* (Jerusalem, 1959), 1X 40–61, s.v. *Heikhal*; and see Newsome, *Songs*, Concordance, s.v. *Heikhal*, *Heikhal YHWH*. For the perception of the heavens as a Temple and references to discussions of the terms *heikhalot*, *merkavot*, *devirim*, see Newsome, *Songs*, Concordance, 402–4, 408, 430; and also Himmelfarb, *Ascent*, 4–6.

<sup>25</sup> For the term “He who sits on the cherubim,” see *Midrash Tanb, Va-Yakbel* 7; and Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* (London and New York, 1930) 3.6.5 [137] (381). See also N. H. Tur-Sinai, “Merkavah ve-Aron,” “Kapporet ve-Keruvim,” in his *Ha-Lashon ve-ha-Sefer . . . Kerekh ha-Emunot ve-ha-Deot* (Jerusalem, 1956), 4–5, 20–8; M. Haran, “Ha-Aron ve-ha-Keruvim,” in *Erez-Yisra’el* 5 (1959), 83–90; and cf. I. Weinstock (ed.), *Re’uyot Yebezkel*, in *Temirin*, 1 (Jerusalem, 1972), 134.

<sup>26</sup> The Hebrew term used in the Mishnah to denote the Holy of Holies is *lifnai ve-lifnim*, literally, “in the innermost part” (see BT *Yoma* 61a).

used in the Talmud, that is, as a priest burning an offering on the altar. Moreover, as depicted here, he frequents the Temple, entering at the third entrance to the House of the Lord, and convenes the Sanhedrin in the Chamber of Hewn Stone (*Lishkat ha-Gazit*). However, the historic Rabbi Ishmael son of Elisha (according to the Mishnah and the Talmud), who died around the middle of the second century, could not have officiated as a High Priest in the Temple that was destroyed in the year 70. In the introduction to *Sefer Heikhalot*, he is described as being permitted, by dint of his Aaronide ancestry, to enter the heavenly shrines. It seems that he is understood as representing the link between the historical high priesthood that served in the earthly sanctuary before the destruction and the mystical high priesthood of the “descenders of the chariot” serving in the heavenly sanctuaries after the Destruction. Other passages of *heikhalot* literature refer to his priestly origins and to the duties and privileges thus bestowed upon him.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha, who lived in the first half of the second century, was one of the sages of Yavneh, a colleague and disputant of Rabbi Akiva. He was a priest (BT *Ket.* 105b) and a pupil of Nehunyah ben Hakanah. *Heikhalot* literature also portrays Rabbi Ishmael as a priest, a disciple of Nehunyah ben Hakanah, and a colleague of Rabbi Akiva. A *baraita* in BT *Ber.* 7a describes him as High Priest. For his priestly attributes in *heikhalot* literature, see *Heikhalot Rabbati*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, para. 151, “R. Ishmael said: Once I was offering a burnt-offering upon the altar, and I saw Akhatriel YH YHWH of Hosts seated on a high and lofty Throne . . .” This should be compared with the aforementioned *baraita* (BT *Ber.* 7a). Ishmael ben Elisha may have been perceived in mystical tradition as the last High Priest to serve in the Temple before the Destruction and as the first High Priest to ascend in the *Merkavah*. Judah Halevi (*Sefer ha-Kuzari* 1.65) already identifies Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha the High Priest with the Rabbi Ishmael of the *Heikhalot* and the *Merkavah*. For additional information, see Scholem, *Trends*, 356. On the third entrance to the Temple, see Jer. 38.14, and *Heikhalot Rabbati*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, para. 202. For Rabbi Ishmael’s priestly origins, see *Synopse*, paras. 3, 586, 681. On his service in the Chamber of Hewn Stone in the Temple, see *Synopse*, para. 678. Rabbi Ishmael figures in a great majority of *heikhalot* works. His colleague Rabbi Akiva, who does not appear in all of the traditions, is not a priest, but his entry into the “grove,” as described in tractate *Hagiga* of the Babylonian Talmud and his ascent to the heavenly shrines, described in terms similar to those of Moses’ ascent to the heavens and associated with the tradition of Divine Names, entitle him to minister at the sacred service in general and make him privy to the tradition of mystical Names in particular. On Rabbi Akiva’s entry into the “grove” and ascent to the heavens “by means of a Name,” see BT *Hag.* 146 and Rashi ad loc. Cf. C. R. A. Morray-Jones, “Paradise Revisited (2 Cor. 12.1): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul’s Apostolate, Part I: The Jewish Sources,” in *HTR* 86/2 (1993), 177–217. For his similarity to Moses, see Elior, *Heikhalot Zutarti*, 61. Rabbi Ishmael forms a link between the traditions associated with the song of the descenders to the *merkavah* who assemble in the terrestrial Temple and those concerning song in the heavenly shrine (see *Heikhalot Rabbati*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, paras. 94, 202).

Metatron, the heavenly protagonist of *heikhalot* literature,<sup>28</sup> known previously as Enoch son of Jared, who was taken to heaven (Gen. 5.21–4), also appears in previous apocryphal priestly literature, in Qumran, in the Pseudepigrapha, and in the Midrash and Genizah documents as a High Priest who offers sacrifices on the heavenly altar.<sup>29</sup> In *heikhalot* literature, Metatron is also the High Priest who enunciates the Ineffable Name at the climax of the heavenly rites; his audience responds aloud, with exactly the same benediction that was once uttered in the earthly Temple when the High Priest pronounced the Ineffable Name on the Day of Atonement.<sup>30</sup>

Both Rabbi Ishmael (earthly High Priest and ascending mystical High Priest) and Metatron (the angelic High Priest and Prince of the Countenance) perform the sacred service – one in the earthly Temple and the other in the heavenly shrines. Both represent transitions and

<sup>28</sup> For the many-faceted figure of Metatron, see H. Odeberg, 3 *Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1973), 79–146 (the new edition includes an introduction by J. C. Greenfield); Scholem, *Trends*, 67–70, 366; and idem, *Merkabah*, 43–55. On Metatron in *heikhalot* literature, see Y. Liebes, *He r'o shel Elisba': Arba'ab she-Nikhnesu la-Pardes ve-Tiv'ab shel ha-Mistikah ha-Talmudit*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 1990), 18ff.; Schäfer, *Hidden God*, 29–32; and, for an up-to-date bibliography for Metatron, see Mach, *Entwicklungsstudien* (21), 394–6.

<sup>29</sup> Concerning Enoch as High Priest and founder of the priestly dynasty, see 2 (*Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch* 71.32, in Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:208 (On the Jewish origin of this work, see Scholem, *Merkabah*, 17); and also *Jubilees* 4.25, in J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 11 (Garden City, 1985) 30: “And he offered the incense which is acceptable before the Lord in the evening (at) the holy place on Mount Qater.” Enoch is also described as a priest in the Ethiopian book of *Enoch* and in the Aramaic book of *Levi*; see Himmelfarb, *Ascent*, 25. Metatron took Michael’s place as High Priest of the heavenly Temple and is known as the “youth (or lad, Heb. *naar*) who serves in the sanctuary.” See *Bemidbar Rabba*, *Naso* 12: “R. Simon said: When the Holy one, blessed be He, told Israel to build the Tabernacle, he motioned to the ministering angels that they, too, should make a Tabernacle. So when it was built below, it was built on high, and that is the Tabernacle of the youth whose name is Metatron, in which he offers up the souls of the righteous to atone for Israel during their exile.”

<sup>30</sup> Scholem noted that the figure of Metatron in *heikhalot* literature includes elements previously identified with the angel Yahoel, “whose name is like that of his Master,” and the angel Michael, who was considered priest in the upper regions and prince of the universe. In Scholem’s view, the book known as *Re’uyot Yehezkeel* is the earliest and most important source for the identification of Michael and Metatron, as it describes Metatron taking Michael’s place. See Scholem, *Merkabah*, 44–6; and see also the argument that the figure of Metatron is a composite of Michael, Enoch, and “the lesser YHWH,” advanced by P. S. Alexander, “The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch,” *JJS* 28 (1977), 162; and Odeberg, *Enoch*, 79–96. In *heikhalot* literature, Metatron is a composite of features ascribed in different traditions to different angels.

transformations between the terrestrial and supernal worlds, ongoing links between the divine and the human realms. For Metatron, as already indicated, is none other than Enoch son of Jared, a human being transformed into an angel (see Gen. 5.24; Ben Sirah 54; 3 *Enoch* 1–20), the founder of the priestly tradition, an earthly righteous man who was converted into a heavenly, angelic priest (1 *Enoch* 72–82; 2 *Enoch* 71.32; *Jubilees* 4.25) who serves in the supernal shrines according to 1 and 2 *Enoch* and the book of *Jubilees*, and who dwells in Paradise according to *Genesis Apocryphon*. Furthermore, Metatron brings mysteries of the calendar from heaven to earth, according to 1 and 2 *Enoch* and *Jubilees*, a work written before the Common Era; according to 3 *Enoch* and other traditions of *heikhalot* literature written after the destruction of the Temple, he instructs the “descenders to the *merkavah*” in the secrets of the heavenly Temple and the angelic service. Rabbi Ishmael is the last earthly High Priest who ascends as mystical High Priest from the earthly Temple to the heavenly shrines, descends to the *Merkavah* and observes the sacred service in heaven, participates in the angelic chant, and returns to instruct the “descenders to the *merkavah*” in the details of the eternal divine service.

The *heikhalot* tradition lists in detail the esoteric knowledge without which no human being may approach the sanctuary or learn the secrets of the *merkavah*, and reveals the secrets of the heavenly Temple that Metatron, the heavenly-mythical High Priest born in the seventh generation of the world (Gen. 5.21–4), reveals to Ishmael, the earthly-mystical High Priest. It attributes to both the knowledge of the order of the heavenly world; the Names of God; the secrets of *Shiur Qomah*; the tradition of the *merkavah*; the order of the sacred service, and the texts of the angelic liturgy.

### III PRAYER AND SACRED SONG IN *HEIKHALOT* LITERATURE

The writers of the *heikhalot* literature, who call themselves “descenders to the *merkavah*,” built complex ritual bridges between the earthly community now deprived of its ritual center and the celestial beings who perpetuated the cult in the heavens. They created liturgical prototypes drawn directly from the ceremonial priestly tradition and the numinous Temple service. They were not concerned, however, with preserving the sacrificial rite itself or the priestly laws, perhaps because these had already been committed to writing in considerable detail in the Torah and the Mishnah; perhaps because the sacrificial rites had been abolished while the accompanying liturgy could be continued; or perhaps because the writers of *heikhalot* literature belonged to circles that had frowned on the sacrificial cult as observed in the last three centuries of the Temple period

and were therefore reluctant to perpetuate it.<sup>31</sup> Alternatively, they considered it necessary to preserve all the vocally and orally expressed ceremonial and numinous elements that had been denied written documentation because of their esoteric nature. Among these elements were the musical and vocal liturgical tradition of the Temple; the tradition of Names and benedictions accompanying the Temple rites; and the hidden nature of the calendar issues that were connected to the eternal cycles of the priestly courses and their angelic counterparts. The ritual and liturgical prototypes described in detail in the different traditions recorded in *heikhalot* literature maintained a mystical-poetic link with the sacred ritual, or, perhaps more accurately, with a mystical, mythical, and visionary abstraction of the destroyed Temple and those who served in it. The main thrust of this visionary abstraction centered on transferring the relevant components of the priestly ritual – liturgy, song, music, the blowing of trumpets, reference to angels, and recitation of the *kedushah* prayer (*Sanctus*, a prayer that originated in the Temple and was uttered by the angels) – from the terrestrial to the supernal plane and to perpetuate in heaven various ceremonies associated with the priestly blessing, the pronunciation of the Ineffable Name, and the use of Divine Names of God and the angels, all of which were activities practiced in the Temple.<sup>32</sup> The liturgical and ritual prototypes associated with this visionary abstraction of the Temple service are represented in *Heikhalot* literature by three interrelated modes of prayer: mystical prayer, shared prayer, and heavenly prayer.

#### A MYSTICAL PRAYER

Mystical prayer is the type of liturgical recitation uttered during the descent to the *merkavah* or the ascent to the *Heikhalot*, thus expressing the transition from earthly to heavenly existence. Recited by the descenders to the *merkavah*, who learn it from the heavenly beings, it describes the magnificence and beauty of the heavenly shrines and the rites performed

<sup>31</sup> It is not without interest that the sacred service in the Temple as described in 2 Chronicles involves only song and music without sacrifices; see S. Japhet, *Emunot ve-De'ot be-Sefer Divrei ha-Iamim u-Mekoman be-'Olam ha-Mabashavah ha-Mikrait* (Jerusalem, 1977), 197. The Qumran *Songs of the Sabbath Service* also picture a heavenly Temple without sacrificial rites; see Newsome, *Songs*, 39–58.

<sup>32</sup> Associations with the priests and the Temple in *heikhalot* literature were mentioned from differing standpoints by Maier, *Vom Kultus zur Gnosis*, and Gruenwald, “Mekomen shel Masorot.” See also Chernus’s proposal to compare a pilgrimage to the Temple to an ascent to the *merkavah* (the Hebrew verb used for pilgrimage is *alyah*, lit. “ascent”); see I. Chernus, “The Pilgrimage to the *Merkavah*: An Interpretation of Early Jewish Mysticism,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6a–b (1987), 1–35 (English section).

there. In this prayer, the descenders to the *merkavah* try to imitate the rites of the heavenly beings, which, as described, are clearly inspired by the service of the priests and Levites in the Temple.<sup>33</sup> These rites are associated with the language of the liturgical song that accompanied the Temple ritual and the special, awesome, language of the esoteric Names used at the climax of the sacred service. Descent to the *merkavah* was conditional upon the recitation of mystical prayer, which involved a knowledge of the Divine Names and of the heavenly order of song, music, exaltation, *kedushah*, benediction, and praise. In addition, it also required initiates to purify themselves and to acquire esoteric knowledge of the celestial hierarchy, which was based on a scale of relative proximity to the Holy of Holies in the supernal shrines. Mystical prayer was reserved for exceptional individuals who constantly purified and sanctified themselves, emulating the models of heavenly ritual that, in turn, had been inspired by the earthly Temple service. In particular, the *heikhalot* material centers on material revealed to Rabbi Ishamel and Rabbi Akiva that enabled them to engage in the mystical passage or to “descend to the Merkavah.”

Rabbi Akiva is associated in *Heikhalot Zutarti* with the figure of Moses, who ascended to the heavens. He, too, is mentioned in the context of a mystical ascent to the supernal worlds or of entry into the *pardes* (the mystical realm). In addition, in *merkavah* traditions he is associated with heavenly song, the Song of Songs, and *Shiur Qomah*. Furthermore, he is associated with the Qumranic concept of “wondrous mystery/mysteries” (Heb. *raz/raze pele*) in the prologue to *Heikhalot Zutarti*, which is attributed to him: “If you wish to become One with the world, to discover for yourself eternal mysteries and secrets of the *merkavah* . . .” He thus continues the prophetic-mystical archetype of ascent to heaven, listening to the angels and returning to earth with the celestial knowledge of the secrets of the universe.

*Heikhalot* tradition views Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael as the mystical counterparts of Moses and Aaron. Akiva plays the role of the prophet, the man of God transcending the limits of time and space, who “descends to the *merkavah*,” achieves direct contact with God and the angels, learns the secrets of the *merkavah* (its dimensions and cosmic order), and hears and sees heavenly mysteries and celestial song. Upon returning to earth he transforms the invisible knowledge into an audible, verbal, and therefore communicable sacred textual tradition. Ishmael is the priest who “ascends” to the heavenly Holy of Holies and perpetuates the dynasty of Enoch, and of Levi, as well as of Aaron and his sons the priests. The divine revelation and

<sup>33</sup> See Elior, “Mysticism,” 43–51.

mystical exultation associated with the theophany are associated with the figures of Moses, Ezekiel, and Akiva (and with Sinai, the *merkavah* vision, Ps. 68.18, and the *pardes*), whereas the priestly sacred service is associated with the priests Enoch, Aaron, and Ishmael (and with the Sanctuary and Temple; the Holy of Holies; the *devir*/inner sanctum; and the chariot-throne of the cherubim).

All the prayers in *beikhalot* literature recited in a state of mystical elation were learned; the authors of that literature asserted that they derived from the liturgy of the angels ministering before the Throne of Glory. Indeed, the bulk of mystical prayer as represented in *beikhalot* literature, like the *kedushah* prayer, consists of descriptions of the angelic rites and songs performed by the denizens of the *merkavah* in the heavenly shrines. As previously shown, the angelic rites were based on the pattern of the priestly and levitical service in the Temple, except that they are clothed in a ritual and poetic abstraction of the sacred tradition of Divine Names and of liturgical hymnology; thus, the service, prayer, and rites performed by the descenders to the *merkavah* form a bridge linking the memories of the priestly service to its angelic sequel.

In *beikhalot* literature, the descenders to the *merkavah* experience mystical ecstasy when they repeat the angelic prayers, learn the songs and hymns of the celestial beings, and recite the heavenly *kedushah* and the various prayers involved in offering praise to the Divine Name and pronouncing it. The descenders to the *merkavah*, rendering in their prayer a detailed description of the prayer of the *merkavah* creatures, engage in the celestial ceremony by dint of their mystical prayer, and participate in the heavenly service and song, for “descent to the *merkavah*” is equivalent to the “ascent to the celestial shrine,” or the observation of the angelic rites and participation in the heavenly service occurring in the seven supernal shrines. Descent to the *merkavah* is indeed a mystical metamorphosis of a ritual heritage that sought to close the gap between the earth and the heavens. The use of Divine Names, the singing of hymns, knowledge of celestial secrets and secrets of the *merkavah*, as well as the maintenance of a hierarchical order of divine ministry and rites of purification – all these were common to the angels and the descenders to the *merkavah* and stemmed from a visionary abstraction of the order of the earthly Temple service. The priests maintained the bond between heaven and earth via sacrificial rituals and other numinous and liturgical ceremonies, thus serving as the people’s ritual messengers until the destruction of the Temple. Likewise, the descenders to the *merkavah* viewed themselves as the people’s mystical messengers, maintaining the link between the terrestrial and celestial worlds after the Destruction.

The mystical priestly essence of *beikhalot* literature is clearly related to Qumran *merkavah* tradition. This connection was aptly stated by Gershom



Scholem in 1965, when he noted, in the second edition of his *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism*, the affinity between the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, fragments of which had just been published for the first time, and *Heikhalot* poetry: "These fragments [of *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*] leave no doubt that there is a connection between the oldest Hebrew Merkavah texts preserved in Qumran and subsequent development of Merkavah mysticism as preserved in the *Heikhalot* texts." The connection is clearly evident in many of the shared motifs of the two traditions: the centrality of the vision of the chariot; seven heavenly sanctuaries and seven-based patterns of angelic service; preoccupation with Temple traditions and an angelic priesthood, featuring the ministering angels in *heikhalot* literature and the priests of the inner sanctum in Qumran literature; the tradition of groups of seven angels associated with Ezekiel's *merkavah*; the joint participation of angels and human beings in the sacred service; and the angelic songs of praise and glorification in the heavens seen as a Temple with seven sanctuaries or *heikhalot*. They clearly share an affinity with the tradition of Enoch, the "seventh," the ceremonial recitation of the *kedushah* prayer and its exaltation of the Ineffable Name in an angelic ritual of song and benediction, the concept of the Sacred Name by which the world is adjured and bound, as well as the ceremonial oaths and the centrality of the priesthood. Both corpora are concerned with *merkavah* tradition and *cherubim*, with the fourfold and sevenfold relationships of cosmic order, with traditions alluding to the mystical *pardes* and the sacred plantation, and with the Holy of Holies and the Song of Songs.<sup>34</sup> The authors of *heikhalot* literature adopted these concepts, which originated in the tradition of Ezekiel's vision of sacred place and sacred service, in the Enoch traditions of the sevenfold configuration of sacred, cyclical time and the link between priests and angels; all these materials were reworked in *heikhalot* and *merkavah* literature.

Among the many traditions of poetry and song in the supernal worlds, as recounted in *heikhalot* literature, the opening poem of *Heikhalot Rabbati*, concerned with God's seat or chariot-throne and with his servants' song, is particularly interesting:

Said R. Ishmael: What are the songs that a person sings and descends to  
the *Merkavah*?

He begins and recites the beginnings of the songs:

Beginning of praise and genesis of song

Beginning of rejoicing and genesis of music

Sung by the singers who daily minister

To YHWH, God of Israel, and His Throne of Glory.

They raise up the wheel of the Throne of Glory,

<sup>34</sup> See R. Elior, *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford, 2004).

Sing, O sing, Supreme Seat,  
 Shout, O shout, delightful object,  
 made in the most wondrous way.  
 You surely delight the King Who is upon you  
 as a bridegroom delights in his nuptial chamber.  
 All the seed of Jacob delights and rejoices . . .  
 As Scripture says, Holy, Holy, Holy,  
 YHWH of Hosts, His Glory fills all the earth.  
 Of praise and song of each and every day,  
 Of rejoicing and music of each and every season,  
 And of *bigayon* [melody? recitation?] issuing from the mouths of holy ones  
 And of *nigayon* [singing?] gushing from the mouths of servants,  
 Mountains of fire and hills of flame, heaped up and concealed,  
 Paths each and every day, as Scripture says,  
 Holy, Holy, Holy, YHWH of Hosts.<sup>35</sup>

This glorification of the Throne of Glory uses a variety of biblical sources, among them “The Lord of Hosts enthroned on the cherubim” (1 Sam. 4.4; Isa. 37.16); “He mounted a cherub and flew” (Ps. 18.11); “God is seated on His holy Throne” (Ps. 47.9); Ezekiel’s *merkavah* vision, which ends with the scene featuring “the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and on top, upon this semblance of a throne, there was the semblance of a human form” (Ezek. 1.26); Isaiah’s vision of “YHWH seated on a high and lofty Throne” (Isa. 6.1); and his allusion to the cosmic nature of the divine seat: “The heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool” (Isa. 66.1). Similar images may be found in the corpus of Enoch literature as well (see also 1 *Enoch* 9.4; 14.21; 2 *Enoch* 20.3; 25.4).

It is clear from this passage that the throne, that is, God’s seat and the *merkavah*, are one and the same. The expression “delightful object” (Hebrew, *keli bemdab*) is associated with the Throne of Glory in other *Merkavah* traditions, and the terms *bigayon* and *nigayon* create a link with the book of Psalms and the Temple singers, praising the magnificence of the unseen God.

#### B SHARED PRAYER

Shared prayer is the form of prayer used by two corresponding communities – the company of the angels on high and the congregation of human worshipers on earth, who together recite the *kedusbah* and extol the Creator. The *kedusbah* of *heikhalot* literature, like that of the conventional Jewish prayer book, is based on the proclamation of the seraphim in the

<sup>35</sup> *Heikhalot Rabbati*, paras. 94–5; and see Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 20–6.

heavenly shrine as heard by Isaiah in his vision; it describes the song of the angels as they praise the Creator with verses from the books of Ezekiel and Psalms. However, unlike the unchangeable *kedusbot* familiar from the prayer book, the *kedusbot* of *heikhalot* literature feature varying formulas and unfamiliar elements. The *kedushab* prayer interlinks the lower and upper worlds, merging the heavenly panegyrics with the praises of Jews on earth. Solemnized daily at the morning and afternoon services, in the heavenly shrines and in terrestrial prayer assemblies, the *kedushab* expresses the sanctification of God by his servants singing his praises, the celebration of his kingship by angels and humans glorifying him in concert. The *kedushab* occurring in the *yozer* benediction – thought by some scholars to be of ancient origin and initially associated with the Temple<sup>36</sup> – is seen in

<sup>36</sup> The daily prayer book contains several *kedusbot* that differ from one another in their function and wording: the *kedushab* of *Amidah*; the *kedushab* of *Yozer*; The *kedushab de-Sidra*; and the *kedushab* of the Additional Service (*Musaf*). The *kedushab* of *Amidah* occurs in the third of the Eighteen Benedictions – the benediction proclaiming God's holiness – and is recited during the cantor's repetition of the prayer in the morning, afternoon, and additional services. The *kedushab* of *Yozer* is part of the benediction *Yozer Or* before the reading of *Shema*. Another *kedushab*, known as *Kedushab de-Sidra*, is recited in the prayer entitled "A redeemer shall come to Zion." The *kedushab* opens with the formula, "We will sanctify Your name in the world, just as they sanctify it in the highest heavens," or "We will reverence and sanctify You according to the beautiful prayer of the holy seraphim who sanctify Your name in the Sanctuary." The perception of the *kedushab* prayer as a liturgical partnership between the upper and lower worlds dates to the second century BCE and is found in Qumran writings and apocryphal literature. On the liturgical partnership between members of the terrestrial congregation and the celestial host, see Y. Licht (ed.), *Megillat ha-Hodayot* (Jerusalem, 1957), III 19–23. On the angels (known in Aramaic as *i'rin*, messengers) who recite the *Kedushab*, see *Ethiopian Enoch* 39.12–13. On various versions of the *kedushab* at Qumran, see M. Weinfeld, "Ikkevot shel Kedushat Yozer u-Pesukei de-Zimrah bi-Megillot Qumran uve-Sefer Ben Sira," *Tarbiz* 45 (1976), 15–26; M. D. Flusser, "Jewish Roots of the Liturgical Trishagion," in *Immanuel* 3 (1973–4), 37–43; D. Spinks, "The Jewish Sources for the Sanctus," in *Heythrop Journal* 21 (1980), 168–79; A. Libreich, "Ha-Shabat be-Siddur ha-Tefillah," in M. Ribolow (ed.), *Sefer ha-Yovel shel ha-Doar bi-Melot lo Shelosim Shanab* (New York, 1952), 255–62; and M. Weinfeld, "Nekaddesh et Shimkha ba-'Olam," *Sinai* 108/54 (1991), 69–76. Scholars differ regarding the time of composition of the *kedushab* and its origin, which they have defined as "most obscure," failing to discern its ancient origin and the mystical parallels in *Heikhalot* literature; this failure was the result of ascribing *Heikhalot* literature to a late period – the end of the geonic period. On the problems involved in researching the *kedushab*, see I. M. Elbogen, *Ha-Tefillah be-Yisra'el be-Hitpatebutab ha-Historit*, trans. Y. Amir, ed. Y. Heinemann (Tel-Aviv, 1972), 47–54; A. Altmann, "Shirei Kedushah be-Sifrut ha-Heikhalot ha-Kedumah," in *Panim shel Yabadut*, 44–67, 264–8; Y. Heinemann, *Ha-Tefillah bi-Tekufat ha-Tana'im ve-ha-Amora'im* (Jerusalem, 1964), 23, 145–7; and idem, "Kedushah u-Malkhut shel Keri'at Shema' u-Kedushah de-'Amidah," in Y. Heinemann, *Pyyumei Tefillah*, ed. A. Shinan (Jerusalem, 1981), 12–21.

*beikhalot* literature as a liturgical partnership between the lower and upper worlds, which exult in God and magnify his praises by proclaiming his sanctity and uniqueness and as a mystical abstraction of a rite once performed in the Temple and associated with the sanctification and praise of God's name. This mystical abstraction, a detailed representation of the *kedushah* recited in the supernal worlds by the beings of the *merkavah*, stands at the center of heavenly prayer.

Repeated accounts occur in this literature from the different perspectives of the celestial choirs. The descriptions are sometimes merely brief enumerations of different voices reciting familiar verses,<sup>37</sup> whereas, on other occasions, one reads complex formulas, rendering in minute detail the celestial polyphony and its distribution among the seven *beikhalot* with their fiery chariots and tongues of flame responding to one another with the various verses of the *kedushah* and other formulas unique to *beikhalot* literature. This antiphonal song is couched in certain formulas, some enunciated by the chariots in each *beikhal*, representing a visionary abstraction of ritual expression, while others are articulated by flames rising from one shrine to the next in ascending order, representing a mystical abstraction of the Divine Names. The sublime tone of the liturgy and its ceremonies expresses the remoteness of the heavens as well as a surrender to the supremacy and kingship of God. The numinous proceedings culminate in the Sanctification of the Name, that is, the ceremonial pronunciation of the Ineffable Name and the benediction, "Blessed be His Name, Whose glorious Kingdom is for ever and ever" – all rites once performed in the Temple.

Different versions of the Sanctification of the Name or the raising of the Divine Name from *beikhal* to *beikhal* exist in the various traditions. The ceremony generally consists of four ritual elements, all associated with the visionary abstraction of the earthly Temple and its sacred service. (1) There exists a permanent cosmic structure, hierarchically ordered – the seven *beikhalot* – containing a permanent ritual element, namely, the *merkavot* or celestial figures that minister to God. (2) A dynamic element, embodying the Divine Names, sometimes called flames (Hebrew, *shalhaviyot*) and sometimes crowns, is borne aloft through blessing and prayer. (3) Permanent benedictory formulas are recited by bearers and the borne. (4) At the climax of the celestial ceremony the Ineffable Name is pronounced

<sup>37</sup> "R. Ishmael said, "Three groups of ministering angels utter song each day; one says, Holy, and one says, Holy Holy, and one says, Holy Holy Holy is YHWH The Lord of Hosts, the Earth is full of His glory. And the *Ophanim* and holy *Hayyot* reciting after them: Blessed be the Glory of YHWH from His place." *Beikhalot Rabbati*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, para. 197.

with the usual response of “Blessed be His Name, Whose glorious Kingdom is for ever and ever.” Occasionally the ceremony describes the great commotion and agitation that seize the heavens upon the utterance of the *kedushah* – almost a symbolic realization of cosmic destruction and renewed creation.<sup>38</sup>

Occasionally the ceremony is reduced to a mystical vision of crowns and Ineffable Names and of flames or Divine Names of unfathomable meaning that hover in the heavenly shrines; at other times, the focus of events is the unspeakable splendor of the celestial choir reciting the verses of the *kedushah* or the visionary abstraction of ritual and liturgical elements. However, it is clear from the diverse descriptions that the crucial moment in the *kedushah* is the pronunciation of the Divine Name whose incomprehensible letters and secret vocalization encompass the eternal divine essence. The name is pronounced in an exalted, poetic context, culminating in the praise and sanctification of God’s Name by the celestial beings as expressed in the words of the vision of the seraphim in the Temple and the vision of the chariot, and in the liturgical formulas once used in the earthly Temple. In some of the formulations of the *kedushah* cited below, the ceremony of the Sanctification of the Name is seen as the mystical elevation of flames from *heikhal* to *heikhal* through the recitation of the verses of the *kedushah* by the fiery chariots standing in each of the seven *heikhalot*. The recitation of the verses of the *kedushah* generates the rising movement of the Climes, scattering and reassembling from *heikhal* to *heikhal*. The elevation of the flames is simply the mystical abstraction of the Divine Names as stated explicitly at the beginning of the hymn: “And Your Name is wrapped in the fire of flames of fire and hail,” and possibly an allusion to the daily burnt offerings in the Temple that ends with the pronunciation of the Ineffable Name and the standard response once heard in the Temple.

The heavenly ceremony in *heikhalot* literature involves sanctification of the Divine Name through its elevation, pronunciation, and benediction by the denizens of the heavens. The essence of God in this literature is identified with his Name as stated by Rabbi Nehunyah ben Hakanah, Rabbi Ishmael’s mentor: “And His name is sanctified for His servants, He is His Name and His Name is He, He is in Him and His Name is in His Name.”<sup>39</sup> Hence, the immense ritual significance ascribed to the recitation of the *kedushah* prayer by the supernal beings is similar to the significance attributed to the pronunciation of the Ineffable Name in the Temple.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See *Sefer Heikhalot*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, para. 56.

<sup>39</sup> *Maaseh Merkavah*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, para. 588. <sup>40</sup> See n. 60 below.

Other *kedusbot* in *beikhalot* literature elaborate the mythopoetical details of the celestial ceremony again in a manner recalling the climax of the earthly Temple service. As opposed to the High Priest's pronunciation of the Ineffable Name in the Temple during his confession, in the celestial rite it is the Ineffable Names that hover and ascend upon hearing the *kedushab*. Like its terrestrial counterpart, the following celestial rite concludes with the listeners – the heavenly hosts – prostrating themselves upon hearing the Ineffable Name, and pronouncing: “Blessed be His Name, whose glorious kingdom is for ever and ever.”<sup>41</sup> A clear association exists between the last lines of this *kedushab* and the mishnaic passage that reports: “And when the priests and the people who stood in the Temple Court heard the Ineffable Name come forth from the mouth of the High Priest, they used to kneel and bow themselves and fall on their faces and say, Blessed be His name, whose glorious kingdom is for ever and ever” (*Yoma* 6.2). Thus, the apex of the heavenly ceremony is a mystical metamorphosis of the earthly rite to the world of the *merkavah*, a mythopoetic abstraction of the liturgical ritual performed in the Temple. The ceremony is perpetuated on high by a solemn chant, by the ecstatic recitation of the *kedushab* and the pronunciation of the Ineffable Name in awe, as well as trembling by the visionary denizens of the *merkavah*. The figures of the latter are inspired both by Ezekiel's vision and the phraseology of the Psalms, and by the costume and ministry of the priests and Levites on earth. The denizens of the *merkavah* praise and extol, sing, bless, sanctify, and glorify God's Name, following the pattern of the terrestrial Temple rites and celebrating the eternity of the Divine Name in the celestial shrine while lauding the splendor of God's throne and the beauty of his chariot in the supernal *beikhalot*. In fact, the beings of the *merkavah*, chanting their paeans of praise in the ongoing ceremony and perpetuating the sanctity and majesty of God by their repeated enunciations of the Ineffable Name in the heavens, seem to be defying the terrestrial reality that arbitrarily wiped out the sacred hymns, obliterated the obeisances to the Divine Name, and destroyed the earthly Temple.

The Temple was the earthly abode of God's Name as the Bible proclaims it, “For building a House where My Name might abide . . . toward this House, toward the place of which You have said, My Name shall abide there” (1 Kgs. 8.16, 29; see also Jer. 7.12). It was also the only place where the priests were permitted to pronounce the Name as written and to bless the people with the Ineffable Name. After the Destruction, so the authors of the *beikhalot* hymns believed, God made His Name an abode in the

<sup>41</sup> *Sefer-Heikhalot*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, para. 57, 71. See also Odeberg, *Enoch*, 53; Gruenwald, “Shirat ha-Mal'akhim,” 463.

supernal *heikhalot*, in the heavenly shrines, and appointed the creatures of the *merkavah* that continually praise His Name and enunciate the Ineffable Name as written to serve it and guard it. The tradition of Divine Names associated with the Temple and the sacred service, originally entrusted to the priests who employed it in the ritual accompanying the climax of the earthly ceremonies, became an angelic tradition, preserved in the heavenly shrines, where it was again used ritually at the peak of the celestial rites. Similarly, the poetic and musical traditions of the Levites and priests as practiced in the liturgical proceedings in the earthly Temple were transformed into the tradition of songs of praise and glorification chanted by the creatures of the *merkavah* in the *heikhalot*.

#### C HEAVENLY PRAYER

Finally, heavenly prayer is associated with the vision of the *merkavah* and the tradition of the Temple service. Its complex liturgical polyphony represents the sanctification of the Deity and the divine enthronement in the upper worlds by the living creatures of the *Merkavah*. Similar in structure to the *kedushah*, recited by the seraphim, *ofannim*, and holy *bayyot*, it comprises song, music, praise, the *kedushah*, enunciation of Names and pronunciation of the Ineffable Name, as well as the elevation and crowning of the Name. Heavenly prayer is based on the priestly tradition of Names and the Levitical Temple song that also involved praising, singing, playing musical instruments, and uttering holy Names. Revolving around the pronunciation, sanctification, and elevation of God's Name, it is recited daily in the upper worlds with imposing ceremony and solemnity; it provides a backdrop for the entire worldview that pervades *Heikhalot* literature.<sup>42</sup>

The liturgical polyphony reverberating through the heavenly worlds receives considerably more attention than the other modes of prayer in the different *heikhalot* traditions.<sup>43</sup> *Heikhalot* literature devotes detailed accounts to the beauty and splendor of the heavenly choirs and the unceasing worship of the celestial beings, and in no less detail it describes the inhabitants of the upper worlds praying and intoning the *kedushah*, singing

<sup>42</sup> See Scholem, *Merkabah*, 20–30, 101–2; Altmann, “Shirei Kedushah”; and see below.

<sup>43</sup> For examples of the liturgical polyphony of the prayer of the celestial beings, see *Sefer Heikhalot*, *Synopse*, paras. 30, 31, 34, 42, 71; *Heikhalot Rabbati*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, paras. 94, 95, 99, 101, 103, 126, 152–62, 168–71, 175, 181–89, 197, 268–70, 273–4, 306, 405–6, 418, 469–70, 475, 486–8, 498, 526, 530–40; and *Maaseh Merkavah*, in *Synopse*, paras. 546, 552–3, 555–6, 564–5, 582, 588–92, 714, 745, 773, 795–8, 816–17, 819–20, 850, 966, 972, 974. On the hymns in *heikhalot* literature, see Altmann, “Shirei Kedushah,” 1–24; and Scholem, *Trends*, 57–63.

and exulting, playing music and “tying crowns” to one another’s heads, as well as expressing enthusiasm and praise. Their names, their positions, their hierarchies, the texts of their benedictions, and their functions in the heavenly choirs are all recounted with a poetic power and eloquence, and in a degree of detail, that surpass those of all earlier liturgical and angelological traditions. The attentive reader of these accounts of the heavenly liturgical polyphony will realize that they were created by juxtaposing and interweaving elements taken from the three main sources: Ezekiel’s vision of the *merkavah*; Isaiah’s vision of the seraphim singing their threefold *Sanctus* in the celestial Temple; and the levitical and priestly musical traditions of the earthly Temple as embodied in various passages of the biblical books of Psalms, Nehemiah, and Chronicles, as well as described in the mishnaic tractates of *Arakbin*, *Sukkah*, and *Tamid*.<sup>44</sup>

In the various traditions of *heikhalot* literature, all the components of the heavenly chariot proclaim God’s holiness in the threefold formula of the seraphim of Isaiah 6.3, in the rushing and tumult of the wings of the *hayyot* and the *ofannim* found in Ezekiel’s vision (Ezek. 1.24; 3.12–13; 10.8), and in the chanting and music-making of the priests and Levites in the Temple (2 Chron. 5.12–13; Pss. 98.4–6; 149.3; Neh. 12.27–47). They participate in the heavenly ceremony in the supernal shrines, intoning the two languages reserved for the sacred service: the levitical songs and music that once accompanied the Temple worship and sacrificial rites; and the enigmatic Divine Names enunciated by the priests delivering their benediction at the close of the ritual and by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement.<sup>45</sup>

The writers of *heikhalot* literature interpreted Ezekiel’s inaugural vision as a visionary abstraction of terms originally denoting the cultic objects of Solomon’s Temple described in detail in 1 Kings (7.23–37; 8.6–9) and 2 Chronicles (3.7–14; 4.3–5, 14–15).<sup>46</sup> Ezekiel, the priest and prophet exiled to Babylon with King Jehoiachin in 597 BCE, may have witnessed the Babylonian king transporting from Jerusalem “all the treasures of the House of the Lord,” stripping off “all the golden decorations in the

<sup>44</sup> Ezek. 1.10; Isa. 6.114; Neh. 12.27–47; 1 Chron. 15.16, 19–24, 28; 16.5–11; Pss. 149.3; 150.3–5; 81.3; and 2 Chron. 5.12–13. See also M. *Ar.* 2.6; M. *Suk.* 5.4. On the relationship between levitical song in the Temple and the Psalms, see M. *Tam.* 7.4; and note also Safrai, *Ha-ʿAliyah la-Regel*, 17–18.

<sup>45</sup> For the cultic aspects of the Temple service in the Second Temple period, see Safrai, *Ha-ʿAliyah la-Regel*; A. Buchler, *Ha-Kobanim va-Avodatam be-Mikdash Yerushalaim ba-Asor ha-Sbanim ha-Aharon she-Lifnei Hurban Bayit Sbeni* (Jerusalem, 1966); see also Y. Kaufmann, *Toledot ha-Emunah ha-Yisʿelit*, 11 (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, 1960), 474, 476; Maier, *Von Kultus zur Gnosis*, 27–33, 61–93; and M. Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, 1978).

<sup>46</sup> Elior, “Mysticism,” 23–6.



Temple of the Lord" (2 Kgs. 24.13), and experienced his vision in the fifth year of the exile of Jehoiachin. In that vision, he saw a mystical transfiguration of the golden "pattern of the chariot – the cherubim" (1 Chron. 28.18) that had stood in the Holy of Holies; and a visionary abstraction of the decorated bronze structures that were used for preparation of the sacrificial rites in the Court of the Temple. He describes the lions, oxen, cherubim, and *ofannim* – all inanimate cultic vessels forged from burnished bronze in the shape of animals and winged creatures, set on wheels (Hebrew, *ofannim*), spokes, and hubs, which once stood in the Sanctuary, their faces turned toward the four points of the compass. These vessels, all associated in the Temple cult with various phases of the sacred service, were metamorphosed in Ezekiel's vision into four winged creatures, sparkling with the luster of burnished bronze, with the face of a lion, an ox, an eagle, and a human being. In addition, these creatures stood on four *ofannim*/wheels, with the appearance of "two *ofannim*/wheels within one another," facing all four cardinal directions (Ezek. 1.4–11, 15–21). A similar metamorphosis transformed the golden "pattern of the chariot – the cherubim" in the Holy of Holies (1 Chron. 28.18) and the winged *cherubim* overlaid with gold that stood in the *devir*, their wings touching one another (1 Kgs. 6.23–8; 2 Chron. 3.1–13), "standing up on their legs" (2 Chron. 3.13), which became sacred creatures, winged and radiant, "each one's wings [touching] those of the other" (Ezek. 1.4–11), each having "a single rigid leg" (Ezek. 1.6). In the second version of the vision, they became four-faced, winged cherubim standing on four *ofannim*/wheels, all recalling appurtenances of the Temple that the prophet saw in his "visions of God" (Ezek. 10; 8.3).<sup>47</sup> Ezekiel's vision also endows this complex cultic structure with multidirectional motion, an appearance of splendor, additional rushing winds and beating wings, clouds and flashing fire, radiance and torches – and the whole structure is maintained in the visionary portrayal of the heavenly *Merkavah*. The authors of *heikhalot* literature, however, take these same holy creatures, cherubim and *ofannim* – which now, by virtue of Ezekiel's prophetic vision, possess motion and emit sounds and flames – and subject them to a mystical transformation and ritual personification, picturing them as heavenly priests and Levites officiating in the ceremonial rites of the heavenly shrines at which they perform the heavenly service, blow trumpet blasts and fanfares, sing and chant, and play musical instruments before the Throne of Glory.

<sup>47</sup> The following components of Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. 1; 10) also figure in the description of the Temple: *ofan*/wheel, *ofannim*/wheels, cherubim, *bayvot*/oxen, wings, lion(s), bronze; and see also 1 Kgs. 7.25–37 and the sources cited in the text here.

The mishnaic tractate *Tamid* – one of the oldest sections of the Mishnah, probably first compiled not long after the destruction of the Second Temple and based on the testimony of eyewitnesses to the Temple rites<sup>48</sup> – describes the priests sounding their trumpets in the Temple at the climax of the High Priest's service, as noted in the following passage:

When the High Priest was minded to burn the offering, he used to ascend the Ramp . . . Then he walked around the Altar . . . And two priests stood at the table of the fat pieces, with two silver trumpets in their hands. They blew a blast, a fanfare and a blast.<sup>49</sup> (7.3)

*Heikhalot* literature describes the service in the heavenly shrines in similar language; there, however, the *ofannim* replace the priests and it is they who blow their trumpets at the climax of the rite:

And in the seventh shrine *ofannim* of light sprinkle pure *foliatum* and balsam / and a twofold *ofan* blows a blast, a fanfare and a blast.<sup>50</sup>

At the end of the rite, after the trumpet blasts, the priests blessed the congregants in the Temple (M. *Tamid* 7.2). In the supernal shrines, too, the same order is followed:

And horns emerge from beneath His Throne of Glory  
Retinue after retinue, and blow a blast and a fanfare and bless.<sup>51</sup>

While, in the Temple, it was the task of the Levites and the singers (Neh. 7.1, 44; 1 Chron. 9.33; 2 Chron. 5.12) “to praise and extol the Lord”

<sup>48</sup> Tractate *Tamid* of the Mishnah is phrased in archaic Hebrew, involving expressions rarely encountered elsewhere in the Mishnah; it concludes with the words: “This was the rite of the daily burnt offering, in the service of the House of our God.” For more on this issue consult Y. N. Epstein, *Mevot le-Sifrut ba-Tana'im* (Jerusalem, 1957), 27–31; and see also H. Albeck, *Shisha Sidrei Mishnah Meforabim, Seder Kodashim*, an introduction to Tos. *Tam*, 291–2; and *Seder Moed*, an introduction to Tos. *Yoma*, 216.

<sup>49</sup> The English versions of passages from the Mishnah, both here and following, mainly follow H. Danby's translation (London, 1933). In the present passage, however, I depart from his version (588–9), translating the phrase *take'u ve-beri'u ve-take'u* as “They blew a blast, a fanfare and a blast,” which I believe conveys the solemn, ceremonial spirit of the original Hebrew more accurately.

<sup>50</sup> *Heikhalot Zutarti*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, para. 411. For the priests blowing trumpets, see Num. 10.8, 10; Josh. 6.4, 8, 9, 13, 16; on trumpets in the Temple, see 2 Chron. 5.13: “And as the sound of the trumpets, cymbals, and other musical instruments, and the praise of YHWH, ‘For He is good, for His steadfast love is eternal,’ grew louder, the House, the House of YHWH, was filled with a cloud.” See also Neh. 12.35 and 2 Chron. 29.26–8, “When the Levites were in place with the instruments of David, and the priests with their trumpets . . . All the congregation prostrated themselves, the song was sung, and the trumpets were blown – all this until the end of the burnt offering.”

<sup>51</sup> *Heikhalot Rabbati*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, para. 192.

(1 Chron. 23.30), to sing, play their instruments, and raise their voices in exultant hymns of praise during the sacrificial rites, in the supernal shrines it was all the denizens of the *Merkavah* who gave thanks and praise and participated in a ceremony of song that presumably replaced the sacrifices. The *middot* of the bearers of the throne, the *ofannim* of the chariot, the cherubim and the holy *hayyot* were the ones who sang, chanted, and trilled.

The heavenly choirs, like those of the Levite singers, not only sing and chant but also play instruments. The lyres, timbrels, cymbals, and trumpets and horns on which the psalmists played music for the glory of God, and which accompanied the priestly and levitical service in the Temple, are transformed in *Heikhalot* tradition, becoming the instruments of the celestial protagonists of Ezekiel's vision. Playing on these instruments, the *hayyot*, *ofannim*, and cherubim sing and chant, praise and extol, blow trumpet blasts and fanfares, and utter their blessings in the supernal shrines. Biblical traditions describe the music of the Temple and the labor of the Levites who played their lyres, harps, and percussion instruments. Then too, one reads of the priests blowing their trumpets in honor of the ark of the Lord or in the Temple: "All the Levite singers . . . dressed in fine linen, holding cymbals, harps, and lyres, were standing to the east of the altar, and with them were one hundred and twenty priests who blew trumpets" (2 Chron. 5.12–13); and again of "The Levites . . . the singers, with musical instruments, harps, lyres, and cymbals, joyfully making their voices heard . . . Also the singers . . . to sound the bronze cymbals . . . with harps on *alamot* . . . with lyres on the *sheminit* . . . the priests sounded the trumpets" (1 Chron. 15.16, 19–24; see also Neh. 12.27, 35).<sup>52</sup> The Mishnah, too, speaks of the music in the sacred service: "and the Levites with lyres, harps, cymbals, trumpets and musical instruments . . . and they utter song" (*Sot.* 5.4). These scenes are transferred to the heavenly shrines, now referring to the holy *hayyot* playing lyres, the cherubim accompanying their song with cymbals, and around them the *ofannim* beating timbrels and blowing their trumpets:

From the sound of His Holy Creatures playing their lyres,  
From the sound of His Ofannim joyfully beating their tumbrels,  
And from the sound of His Cherubim songfully clashing their cymbals.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See Pss. 81.3; 149.3; 150.3–5; Neh. 12.27. For the hymns and songs accompanying the sacrifices, see 2 Chron. 29.27; Ben Sirah 50.14–16; and note also Newsome, *Songs*, 18. For the song sung by the Levites in the Temple, see M. *Tam.* 3.8; 7.3–4. For vocal and instrumental music in the Temple, see Werner, *Bridge*, 11 1–25; on the prayers accompanying the sacrifices, see Aptowitz "Bet ha-Mikdash," 261–2; M. Greenberg, "Al ha-Mikra ve-'al ha-Yahadut, Kovez Ketavim" (Tel-Aviv, 1985), 180; and idem, "Tefillah," in T. K. Cheyne and J. S. Black (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, VIII (1982), cols. 910–17.

<sup>53</sup> *Heikhalot Rabbati*, *Synopsis*, para. 161.

And a double wheel ch[eers] like a fowl, the horn held in two branches,  
And blows a blast, a fanfare and a blast.<sup>54</sup>

The heavenly choruses also accompany their song with harps and *shofarot* (rams' horns), in addition to other instruments mentioned in these passages. These instruments, once used in the sacred service in the earthly Temple, are taken over by the celestial beings officiating in the heavenly shrines as they discharge their priestly duties.<sup>55</sup>

The vision of the chariot, the *merkavah*, revealed to the exiled priest Ezekiel shortly after the destruction of the First Temple, is seen by the authors of *heikhalot* literature as a framework of their mystical worldview after the destruction of the Second Temple. Ezekiel, torn from the proper venue of his priestly duties and as one who "saw visions of God" (Ezek. 1), transformed the cultic Temple vessels into visionary entities in the celestial shrine and the golden "pattern of the chariot – the cherubim" from the Holy of Holies (1 Chron. 28.18) into the sublime heavenly chariot/*merkavah* of the cherubim and the holy *hayyot*. The writers of *heikhalot* literature, for their part, grappling with the chaotic reality of loss and desolation after the destruction of the Second Temple, also endeavored to re-create the ruined Temple in their minds' eye and to perpetuate in their vision the transcendental and mysterious aspects of the levitical and priestly service. Like Ezekiel, who preserved essence of divine majesty through the metamorphosis of cultic elements, the "descenders to the *merkavah*" tried to preserve the memory of their bygone world in their vision, to order the chaos through a magnificent liturgical-mystical metamorphosis, and to perpetuate the now discontinued ritual tradition in heavenly shrines through mystical poetic abstraction. With Ezekiel's vision as a conceptual prototype to inspire them, they replaced the ruined earthly Temple with eternal, supernal shrines. In their minds, moreover, the visionary entities originally associated with the cult of the terrestrial Temple became the functionaries of the cult in the heavenly shrine. Thus, the inanimate *ofannim*/wheels of some cultic appurtenances of Solomon's Temple (1 Kgs. 7.32) metamorphosed in Ezekiel's vision into the *ofannim*/wheels of the chariot/*merkavah* (Ezek. 1.15–16; 10.9–13), and are mystically personified in the *heikhalot* tradition by the animate *ofannim* who blow their blasts and fanfares, in the sacred service on high, emulating the ministry of the priests on earth. Likewise, the winged cherubim, described in detail in some of the

<sup>54</sup> Schäfer, *Geniza Fragmente*, 105, lines 10–11, with my amendment.

<sup>55</sup> *Heikhalot Rabbati*, *Synopse*, paras. 184–5. See also *Sefer Heikhalot*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, para. 54.

cultic objects of the First Temple (1 Kgs. 8.6–8; 2 Chron. 3.10–14) and figuring in the vision of the chariot as visionary entities (Ezek. 10.8–22) become the cherubim who sing, play cymbals, and officiate in the heavenly shrines, imitating the Levites' labors.

The *merkavah* beings are described in terms deriving from Temple worship in general, but, in particular, from the various rituals prescribed to protect one against the dangers attendant upon approaching the Sanctuary. Self-sanctification and self-purification, wearing sacred vestments, donning a crown engraved with God's name, standing in purity, and singing in unison, all of these are explicitly mentioned in various contexts of the priestly and levitical service in the Temple.<sup>56</sup> The ceremonial chant in unison and the approach to the Sanctuary are conditional upon meticulous and intricate preparations, as described in the Bible: "When the priests came out of the Sanctuary – all the priests present had sanctified themselves . . . all the Levite singers . . . dressed in fine linen, holding cymbals, harps, and lyres, were standing to the east of the altar, and with them were one hundred and twenty priests who blew trumpets. The trumpeters and the singers joined in unison to praise and extol the Lord; and as the sound of the trumpets, cymbals, and other musical instruments, and the praise of the Lord . . . grew stronger . . ." (2 Chron. 5.11–13). Not surprisingly, one finds (as noted above) a similar account of the heavenly liturgical ceremony in *heikhalot* literature:

And they all stand in terror and fear, in purity and holiness,  
And utter song, praise, hymn, rejoicing and extolling in unison,  
In one utterance, in one mind and one melody.<sup>57</sup>

After their self-sanctification and self-purification, after properly clothing themselves, the heavenly creatures stand in order of ascending sanctity and present themselves for their sacred labors. They participate as one in the heavens where they sing together, and utter songs of praise and hymns of thanksgiving, in language reminiscent of Ezekiel's visions and the Temple ritual. The utterance of songs in unison is significant, leading as it does to the climax of the heavenly ceremony.<sup>58</sup>

The liturgical song, sung in sublime unison by the *ofannim* and holy *hayyot*, seraphim, and *galgalim*/wheels "in one mystery, of one mind," is but

<sup>56</sup> *Heikhalot Rabbati*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, para. 185. For other traditions in *heikhalot* literature concerning unison chants in the upper worlds, see *Sefer Heikhalot*, in *Synopse*, paras. 57, 58, 67; *Heikhalot Rabbati*, in *Synopse*, para. 187; *Maaseh Merkavah*, in *Synopse*, para. 553. And see also the sources cited in n. 57.

<sup>57</sup> See Ezek. 1.5–15, 16, 22–3; 3.12–13; 10.2–17; and M. *Yoma* 6.2.

<sup>58</sup> *Maaseh Merkavah*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, para. 553. For the instrumental and vocal unison of the priests and Levites, see 2 Chron. 5.1.

a prelude to the central part of the celestial ceremony, that is, the explicit pronunciation of the Ineffable Name, its enunciation, benediction, elevation, and enthronement. This heavenly ceremonial parallels the High Priest's pronunciation of the Ineffable Name at the climax of the service in the earthly Temple on the Day of Atonement, while the benedictory response of the heavenly worshipers, which mimics that of their human counterparts, is to fall to their knees and prostrate themselves upon hearing the Name. The benediction recited by the beings of the *merkavah* at the close of the ceremonial refers to the Tetragrammaton, in wording similar to the liturgical formula that was recited in the earthly Temple upon hearing the Ineffable Name pronounced by the High Priest.

The Mishnah describes the Day of Atonement service in detail, counting ten occasions on which the Ineffable Name was pronounced at the climax of the ceremony:

[The High Priest] then came to the Scapegoat [lit.: the he-goat to be sent away] . . . And thus he used to say: O the Name [Hebrew, *Aria ba-Shem*], Thy people, the House of Israel, have committed iniquity, transgressed and sinned before Thee. O by the Name, atone, I pray you, for the iniquities and transgressions and sins . . . And when the priests and the people who stood in the Temple Court heard the Ineffable Name come forth from the mouth of the High Priest, they used to kneel and bow themselves and fall on their faces and say, Blessed be His name, whose glorious kingdom is for ever and ever. (*Yoma* 6.2)

The Babylonian Talmud provides additional details:

Our Rabbis taught: Ten times did the High Priest pronounce the Name on that day [the Day of Atonement]: three times at the first confession, thrice at the second confession, thrice in connection with the Scapegoat, and once in connection with the lots. And it already happened that when he pronounced the Name, his voice was heard as far as Jericho. (*Yoma* 39b; cf. Tos. *Yoma* 2.2)

The Ineffable Name was enunciated during the confession in the formula "O the Name," and when the High Priest prayed for atonement, the Name was said in the formula of an oath or invocation: "O by the Name [Hebrew, *ba-Shem*], atone, I pray You . . ." The Talmud associates the first occasion with seemingly historical developments in the esoteric tradition of Names and the care that was exercised in pronouncing Sacred Names:

Our Rabbis taught: At first, the twelve-lettered Name used to be entrusted to all people. When unruly persons increased, it was confided to the pious of the priesthood, and the pious of the priesthood would pronounce it indistinctly [lit. "swallowed it"] during the chanting of their brother priests . . . Rav Judah said in the name of Rav: The forty-two lettered Name is entrusted only to him who is pious and meek . . . And he who knows it, is heedful thereof, and observes it in

purity, is beloved above and popular below, feared by men, and inherits two worlds, this world and the World to Come. (Tos. *Kidd.* 71a)

The historical picture described above is probably wrong because the Divine Names were a priestly prerogative in antiquity; the Sages, however, had their own version of the Temple tradition in which a greater role was ascribed to the people. According to a geonic tradition, the Name enunciated by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement was that of forty-two letters: "And Rav Hai said: The High Priest did not say the words 'O the Name,' but he said the forty-two lettered Name."<sup>59</sup>

The passages just quoted from the Mishnah and the Talmud do not specify which Names were enunciated; neither do they provide any indication of their nature or their pronunciation. Nevertheless, although the Names are only alluded to – in contradistinction to the *heikhalot* tradition, which treats the subject in great detail – the text clearly testifies that the pronunciation of the Ineffable Name was one of the climaxes of the Sacred Service: it was entrusted exclusively to the High Priest once a year on the Day of Atonement in the Holy of Holies. Moreover, it hints at the existence of an esoteric tradition of enunciating the Sacred Names and is related to the ritual tradition of the Temple to which the priests were privy. It was forbidden to all but the priests in the Temple to pronounce the Ineffable Name. This prohibition and the well-known admonition to refrain from the use of Sacred Names – "He that makes worldly use of the Crown shall perish" (M. *Avot* 1.13) – interpreted in *Avot de-R. Natan* as referring to the profane use of the Ineffable Name – allude to the esoteric nature of the Name of God and the traditions of its pronunciation and indicate the special importance ascribed to it in the priestly service. In addition, evidence is available that the letters (consonants) of the Name, and their vocalization, which determined its pronunciation, were thought to possess supreme metaphysical significance.<sup>60</sup>

The writers and editors of such works as *Heikhalot Rabbati*, *Heikhalot Zutarti*, *Maaseh Merkavah*, *Shiur Qomah*, and *Shivhei Metatron* disregarded the prohibition of pronouncing and using the Sacred Names. Indeed, they

<sup>59</sup> For the forty-two-lettered name, see *ibid.*, 132–3; and see also J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York, 1987), 94–5; and L. H. Schiffman, "A Forty-Two Letter Divine Name in the Aramaic Magic Bowls," *Bulletin of the Institute of Jewish Studies* 1 (1973), 97–102. On the tenfold pronunciation of the Ineffable Name on the Day of Atonement, see also Tos. *Yoma* 2.

<sup>60</sup> For the Ineffable Name and the significance of its revelation in biblical priestly tradition, see Knohl, *Mikdash ha-Demamah*, 139. On the numinous element in the Ineffable Name, see R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford, 1958), 74–5. For the mystery and awe surrounding the Ineffable Name and its pronunciation as well as the Names in general in talmudic tradition, see BT *Ned.* 8b; 7b; BT *Sanh.* 56–56a.

wrote lengthy discourses about the tradition of the Names and their divine nature, specifying the ceremonials that accompanied the pronunciation of the Ineffable Name. The tradition of the Names in *beikhalot* literature is based on two premises: first, that the essence of God is embodied in His Ineffable Name; second, that the divine creative force is embodied in unintelligible letter combinations that come to be identified with a mysterious divine utterance. Heavenly and terrestrial existence come into being through the unfolding and revelation of this mysterious divine utterance; the divine words with which the world was created are perceived as Names with creative power, that is, as letters linking heaven and earth. The Name encompasses the arcane divine essence, the creative force hidden in the letters, and the vocal element that binds the terrestrial and celestial worlds.<sup>61</sup> This tradition, ritually associated with the High Priest's service in the Temple, listed the various Sacred Names; it described a visionary abstraction of the rites attendant upon the pronunciation of the Names; and it put various "Explicit Names" in the mouth of Metatron, the celestial High Priest, at the climax of the heavenly ceremony:

And that youth whose name is Metatron brings deafening fire and places it in the ears of the *Hayyot*, so that they should not hear the voice of the Holy One, blessed be He, speaking, and the Ineffable Name that the youth whose name is Metatron pronounces at that time in seven voices in the name of the Living and Pure and Venerated and Awesome . . . YHWH, I am that I am, the Living, YHWH, YWAY, HKH HH WH HWH WHW HH HY HH HH YHY HYH YHY YHWH . . . This shall be my Name for ever, this is my appellation for all eternity<sup>62</sup>

A dialogue occurs in the upper *beikhal* between "the voice of the Holy One, blessed be He, speaking," which is inaudible to all but Metatron, "who serves before fire devouring fire," and the seven voices of Metatron that pronounce the Ineffable Name, inaudible to all but God. The Names uttered by Metatron are combinations of letters or sound units, devoid of any intelligible semantic significance, undifferentiated in meaning; they are in the nature of inscrutable vocal patterns and incomprehensible formal entities. The divine voice heard by Metatron is probably similar.

The Ineffable Name (Heb. *ba-shem ha-meforash*), which itself is merely a euphemistic substitute for the most secret Name, can be heard only by the High Priest and by God Himself as "deafening fire," and deafens the denizens of the Merkavah. In the ceremony in the earthly Temple, too, the Ineffable Name was known only to the High Priest and concealed from his auditors, as one learns from a *baraita* in the Palestinian Talmud, which

<sup>61</sup> See Elior, "Mysticism," 111–112, and the references cited there.

<sup>62</sup> *Shivhei Metatron*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, paras. 384, 390.



notes that the word *le-olam*, “for ever,” in the verse “This shall be my Name for ever,” is derived from the same root as the Hebrew verb “to conceal” or “to disappear”; hence, the Ineffable Name, having been pronounced in the Temple by the High Priest, immediately “disappeared” from the hearers’ memories:

Ten times did the High Priest pronounce the Name on the Day of Atonement . . . Those close by used to fall on their faces, while those farther away used to say, “Blessed be His Name, Whose glorious Kingdom is for ever and ever.” None of them departed the place until it [the Ineffable Name] had disappeared from their memories. “This shall be my Name *le-olam*” [read instead:] “This shall be my name *le’alem*” [to disappear].  
(PT *Yoma* 3.7)

At the end of the ceremony, as described in the Mishnah, the entire congregation prostrated themselves upon hearing the Ineffable Name. This liturgical formula, which replaced the standard “Amen” in the Temple, reappears in *heikhalot* literature as the supernal creatures’ response to the pronunciation of the Ineffable Name. They too would prostrate themselves, “and say after him, ‘Blessed be His name, whose glorious kingdom is for ever and ever.’”<sup>63</sup>

*Heikhalot* literature conceives of the Divinity as a system of Holy Names woven about the Ineffable Name, the Ineffable Name itself being seen as inexplicable units of sound, embodying a supreme concentration of the divine power that created the Universe. In other words, the Ineffable Name transcends any linguistically defined meaning; it is the source of the essence, vitality, and unity of creation, the pivot of the mystical-theurgical knowledge associated with the being and oneness of creation.<sup>64</sup> The enunciation of the Ineffable Name in unison, at the climax of the song of praise to God, possesses paramount theurgical significance. This significance is not only implied but also explicitly stated in *heikhalot* literature in unmistakably priestly contexts, recalling the association with liturgical traditions of praise that prescribed the psalms sung in accompaniment with the daily Temple service (M. *Tam.* 7.4; M. *Suk.* 5.4). An intimate bond also existed with the priestly benediction that was recited upon termination of the daily sacrificial offering (M. *Tam.* chs. 5–6). The glorification of God’s name in song and music, accompanying the sacrificial rites and the benediction with

<sup>63</sup> Schäfer, *Synopse*, para. 384.

<sup>64</sup> On the role of the Ineffable Name in *heikhalot* literature and the significance of the tradition of the Divine Names, see K. Grozinger, “The Names of God and the Celestial Powers: Their Function and Meaning in the Heikhalot Literature,” in *Mehkeret Yerushalayim be-Mahasbevet Yisra’el*, VI (1987), English section, 53–86; and Elior, *Demut Ha-El*, 17–24.

the Ineffable Name recited as a closing ceremony, were an integral part of the priestly and levitical service in the Temple.

While the Talmud speaks of the connection between the priestly benediction and the angelic blessings in general terms,<sup>65</sup> the *beikhalot* tradition traces a detailed relationship between the pronunciation of the Ineffable Name at the peak of the priestly benediction in the Temple and its enigmatic pronunciation at the climax of the rites performed in the heavenly shrines by the angels and the denizens of the *merkavah*:

Mighty is Your Name throughout the Earth  
 In the heavens You established Your throne  
 You set Your seat in the upper heights  
 You placed Your chariot in the supreme regions  
 Your sanctuary in the mists of purity  
 Legions of fire glorify Your renown  
 Seraphim of fire utter Your praise  
*Ofannim* and Holy *Hayyot* stand before You  
 With *Ofannim* of glory and *Seraphim* of flame and the wheels of the *Merkavah*  
 With a great tumult and thunder  
 They pronounce the Name TTRWSY YY one hundred and eleven times  
 And say, TTRSY TTRSYF TTRSY' TTRGY' . . .  
 TTRSYH YHWH, holy is your Name in the highest heavens  
 Lofty and supreme above all *Cherubim*  
 May Your Name be sanctified in Your holiness  
 May it be magnified in magnitude, wax strong in strength  
 May Your domination extend to the end of generations  
 For your strength is for all eternity  
 Blessed are You, YHWH, mighty in power, great in strength.<sup>66</sup>

Through an esoteric process, therefore, the pronunciation of God's name and the singing of His praises, both central to the priestly rites in the Temple as well as to the recitation of the priestly benediction, which involved enunciation of the Ineffable Name, became the focus of the angelic service in the heavenly shrines.

Concluding this tripartite analysis of mystical prayer, it can fairly be said that heavenly prayer – the pivot of *beikhalot* literature – is generally known

<sup>65</sup> See PT *Sot.* 7, 39b; *Tanb.*, *Kedoshim* 6; *Ber. R.*, 65.21 (Theodor and Albeck, ed., 739); and see Weinfeld, *Nekaddesh* 75. See also Heinemann, *Iyunei Tefillah*, 13.

<sup>66</sup> *Maaseh Merkavah, Synopse*, para. 590. For "TTRWSYY YHWH, God of Israel," also called "TTRWSY H" or "TWTRWSAY" in variant readings, and his central position in *beikhalot* literature, see *Heikhalot Rabbati*, in Schäfer, *Synopse*, paras. 195, 206, 219; *Heikhalot Zutarti*, in *Synopse*, paras. 414, 416; and *Maaseh Merkavah*, in *Synopse*, paras. 539, 540, 590, 977.

to human beings only through its descriptions in the mystical prayer of the descenders to the *merkavah*. Likewise, references to shared prayer are relatively infrequent, since the bulk of *heikhalot* literature does not treat this dual ceremonial as a whole but concerns itself primarily with the prayer of the descenders to the *merkavah*, that is, of a small number of initiates, representatives of the community at large, whose prayer is modeled on angelic prayer. At the same time, *kedushah* itself, the central element of heavenly prayer, is also a characteristic element of shared prayer. Nevertheless, although these different modes of prayer are indeed intertwined and all three modes of prayer have strong ties to the traditions of the Temple service, good grounds prevail for distinguishing between them and considering each separately as they represent different facets of the world of the *merkavah* and its ties to the cultic heritage.

#### IV *SHIUR QOMAH*

*Shiur Qomah* (the dimensions of the divine entity) is one of the most original contributions of *Heikhalot* literature to the new mystical perception of the Deity. This text, entitled a *mishnah* or *raz* (recitation or mystery), is a mystical testimony of Rabbi Akiva or Rabbi Ishmael that discusses the theophany revealed to the descender of the chariot upon his ascent to heaven. Furthermore, *Shiur Qomah* is not only a mystical testimony but also a ritual text that should be recited as a daily religious duty in the mystical circles, as well as a magical formula that affects the destiny of those who recite it. The theophany of *Shiur Qomah*, or the vision of the Deity in the heavenly Sanctuary, as revealed to the angels and the mystics, is one that transcends in content and detail any parallel prophetic biblical description. The description of the Deity provided in this text is based on angelic testimony rendered to the mystic by Metatron, the angel of the countenance. It is comprised of three components: namely, an anthropomorphic dimension, a cosmic-numerical dimension, and an onomatologic-linguistic dimension. In effect, the asserted structure of the divine body, its limbs, and their measures – as well as the respective names of each bodily element – are set out at length in this tradition. This detailed description was meant to serve as a method of instruction towards the unexpected mystical experience, preconditioned by the previous preparation and knowledge that the mystical adept brought to this experience. *Shiur Qomah* is part of the mystical effort to represent the entire cosmic heavenly sanctuary in relation to *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkavah*, that is, the divine mystery of the chariot.

The anthropomorphic perception of the Deity corresponds to the image of the lover appearing in the Song of Songs. The quantitative dimensions

depicted in incomprehensible cosmic measures referring to the process of creation, and the aesthetic dimension reflected in the overwhelming beauty viewed by the mystics, correspond to the priestly-prophetic tradition of the divine revelation. While these three aspects reflect a new perception of the divine world depicted in concepts that have but small foundation in the biblical language, the mysterious, meaningless, powerful divine names engraved on the limbs of the divine body, which are learned by the mystics as mystical vehicles for ascension and magical formula for powerful knowledge and corporeal benefits, have no precedence in any other text. The elusive mystical tradition of *Shiur Qomah* is apparently concerned with the seemingly intelligible anthropomorphic image that is perceived by the mystic. In fact, this image is described in incomprehensible cosmic dimensions and mysterious Divine Names (*razim*) that create an immeasurable, wholly transcendent image of the Deity.

The immeasurable cosmic dimensions and the incomprehensible divine names are not reserved for the divine stature alone, but are ascribed to the divine throne and to the difficult descriptions of the celestial chariot and the angels as well. Therefore, one will find *Shiur Qomah shel haMerkavah* or *shiur qomah* in the different components of the heavenly sanctuaries and the cosmic dimensions of creation. The transformation of anthropomorphic divine limbs into incomprehensible divine names, and the combination of human limbs like fingers that suggest perceivable final measures with metaphysical endless measures like cosmic parasangs, create a mystical reality in which distinctions are blurred and borders are non-existent. The origins, significance, and purpose of the mystical, speculative tradition of *Shiur Qomah* and its paradoxical perception, which combines impossible metaphysical visual descriptions with alleged mystical perception, are not known, and are debated among scholars. For example, confronted by descriptions such as: "Metatron's measure is the length and the width of the cosmos and each one of his wings is the size of the world," or "each one of the fingers of the holy creatures of the divine chariot is 8,766,000 parasangs,"<sup>67</sup> it is difficult to comprehend what these passages are meant to indicate or convey. Scholem, for example, thought the purpose of the text, contrary to its appearance, centered on emphasizing the absolute transcendence and the incomprehensibility of the divine. That is, the anthropomorphic descriptions given, because of their vast magnitude, ultimately become unimaginable. Other scholars, in contrast, have argued for a more literal interpretation of the text and its meaning, though with

<sup>67</sup> Schafer, *Synopse*, sections 12 and 50.

only marginal success. The issue remains undecided, and the full decipherment of this difficult text remains to be provided.<sup>68</sup>

## VII SEFER YETZIRA

*Sefer Yetzira* or *The Book of Creation* has been associated with *Heikhalot* literature by scholars since the nineteenth century. Since about 1970, however, this connection has been rejected by most scholars because the work lacks all the characteristics of *heikhalot* literature, that is, it is not concerned with mystical ascent or with the heavenly chariot and divine sanctuaries; it does not express any interest in angels serving in the heavenly realm or as transmitting heavenly knowledge to the adept or descender of the chariot; and it lacks any mystical liturgical reference to angelic prayer that characterizes the style and content of the *heikhalot* hymns. True, the *heikhalot* traditions are multifaceted in content and style, and they reflect broad perspectives on the hidden world known as the world of the chariot, but, in spite of their diversity, all the *heikhalot* traditions share clear common denominators. They are all interested in the hidden, heavenly world of the angels and in the mystical interaction that enables the adept to ascend and gaze upon the heavenly chariot and to perceive the angelic worship.

In contrast, *Sefer Yetzira* is concerned with the process of creation and with cosmogony and cosmology. The book introduced the interesting idea that creation is an ongoing, creative, linguistic process, whereby language and divine creativity are shared by humans and God. The anonymous author argued that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, numbers, and the divine cosmology are described as three books or spheres, and are, in essence, grammatical constructs that express the divine spirit in an unprecedented way. In particular, he points to the creative quality of letters and numbers, which, in spite of their limited quantity (twenty-two letters and ten numbers), are capable of generating an almost infinite number of words and sums. *Sefer Yetzira* introduced a new perception of lingual creativity

<sup>68</sup> For studies concerning *Shiur Qomah*, see G. Scholem, "Shiur Qomah, The Mystical Shape of the Godhead," in idem, *Pirkei Yesod beHavanat Hakabalab uSemaleab* (Jerusalem, 1976); J. Dan, "The Concept of Knowledge in the Shiur Qomah," in S. Stein and R. Loewe (eds.), *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to A. Altmann* (Alabama, 1979), 67–73; M. S. Cohen, *The Shiur Qomah-Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1983); idem, *The Shiur Qomah: Texts and Recensions* (Tübingen, 1985); R. Elior, "The Concept of God"; and A. F. Ginat, "Studies in Shiur Qomah," in M. Oron and A. Goldreich (eds.), *Massuot in Memory of Ephraim Gottlieb* (Jerusalem, 1994), 361–94.

that connects matter and spirit, and a dialectical classification of the component of creation that served as a backbone to kabbalistic literature in the second millennium.

*Sefer Yetzira* does not demonstrate any interest in the vision of God, in the mystical ascent, or in the heavenly throne, nor does it concern itself in any way with the mystical dialogue taking place in the world of the chariot and with angelic liturgy and mystical prayer, and thus it can not be considered as a segment of the *beikhalot* literature. Rather, it is a unique, anonymous tradition concerned with the dialectics of divine and human spiritual creativity, which has come down from antiquity, presumably originating in the first to second centuries of the Common Era, and which served as a major source of inspiration to Jewish mysticism.<sup>69</sup>

### 30 EARLY FORMS OF JEWISH MYSTICISM

#### Hebrew editions and English translations of *beikhalot* texts

##### *Heikhalot Rabbati* (*The Greater Sanctuaries*)

Hebrew text in Schäfer, *Synopse*, sections 81–276.

Three partial translations are available in English:

Chapters 15–29, in D. R. Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1978) (referred to as *Pirkei Heikhalot*).

Chapters 1, 2, and 16–26, in A. Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* (York Beach, 1982).

Chapters 15.1–22.2, in P. S. Alexander, *Textual Sources for the Study of Judaism* (Totowa, 1984; repr. Chicago, 1990).

##### *Heikhalot Zutrati* (*The Lesser Sanctuaries*)

Two editions are available in the original Hebrew and Aramaic: Schäfer, *Synopse*, sec. 335–74, 407–26; and R. Elior, *Heikhalot Zutrati: A Critical Edition* (Jerusalem, 1982).

<sup>69</sup> H. Graetz, *Gnosticismus und Judentum* (Krotoschin, 1846) (who ascribes it to R. Akiva); G. Scholem, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala* (Berlin 1962), 20–9, who points to the influence of Greek sources integrated with talmudic perceptions of *Maaseh Merkavah* and *Maaseh Bereshit*; I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden, 1980), 46 (who points to *Maaseh Merkavah* as the background of *Sefer Yetzira*); A. P. Hayman, “Sefer Yesira and the Hekhalot literature,” *Early Jewish Mysticism: Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, vi/1–2 (1987), 71–85 (who argues that *Sefer Yetzira* shares none of the essential traits of religious thought and experience revealed in the *beikhalot* texts); and Y. Liebes, *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetsira* (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, 2000) (who discusses the poetical nature and spiritual creativity reflected in the book and suggests that it belongs to the first half of the first century CE). Many scholars have seen *Sefer Yetzira* as a text reflecting a scientific perception of the cosmos that introduced mathematical insight and grammatical rules associated with the Pythagorean school. A review and refutation of this view is presented by Liebes, *Ars Poetica*, 9–11.

No complete version of *Heikhalot Zutrat* is available in English. Some important passages are translated in G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 15–19; Halperin, *Faces*; and Morray-Jones's *Transparent Illusion*, passim.

*Sefer Heikhalot*

This is the Hebrew book of *Enoch*, which is also called 3 *Enoch* (*Book of Sanctuaries*); the Hebrew edition can be found in Odeberg (see below) and in Schäfer, *Synopse*, sections 1–80.

Translations:

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