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AND CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

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## RABBI ISHMAEL'S PRIESTLY GENEALOGY IN HEKHALOT LITERATURE

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"He [Rabbi Ishmael] is of the nation of Israel, whom the Holy One, blessed be He, chose from the seventy nations to be his people. He is of the tribe of Levi, (which presents) the priestly offering to His name. He is from the seed of Aaron, whom the Holy One, blessed be He, chose to be his servant and on whom the Holy One, blessed be He, placed the priestly crown at Sinai." At once they [i.e., the angelic host] began to say: "This one is certainly worthy to behold the chariot-throne, as it is written, *Happy the people who have it so; [happy the people whose God is the Lord] (Ps 144:15).*" (3 En. 2:3-4).

*Hekhalot* literature, the earliest systematic collection of Jewish "mystical" and "magical" writings, juxtaposes and combines a bewildering variety of motifs, themes, and genres.<sup>1</sup> How scholars of early Jewish mysticism ought to make use of this textual data has long divided the field of early Jewish mysticism—and continues to do so. It has now been more almost three decades since Peter Schäfer began to challenge the fundamental methodological assumption that *hekhalot* literature, as it has been transmitted to us in the medieval manuscript tradition and the surviving fragments from the Cairo Genizah, reflects a unified and internally consistent religious system.<sup>2</sup> Schäfer has instead argued that the various compositions that make up this corpus represent shifting assemblages of smaller or larger

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\* I delivered an earlier version of this paper in the Early Jewish and Mysticism Group at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in Denver, November 2001. I would like to thank the members of the group for their feedback in the early stages of this project. I have analyzed many of these same sources at considerably greater length and in a different context in Ra'anana S. Boustan, *From Martyr to Mystic: Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making of Merkavah Mysticism* (TSAJ 112; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 245-88.

1. All citations of *hekhalot* literature refer to Peter Schäfer, Margaret Schlüter, and Hans George von Mutius, eds., *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (TSAJ 2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981). All translations of *hekhalot* literature are mine unless otherwise noted.

2. See especially the studies collected in Peter Schäfer, ed., *Hekhalot-Studien* (TSAJ 19; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988).

literary units. Schäfer has, therefore, argued that a firm textual foundation must serve as the starting point for understanding *hekhhalot* texts as socially and culturally meaningful documents.

Schäfer's project has been understood by some as an out and out rejection of the possibility of exploring the "lived" dimension of early Jewish mysticism. Certainly his paradigm places high value on careful study of textual data. Yet in my view the conviction that research on *hekhhalot* literature must begin from the minutiae of textual archaeology need not imply a narrow research agenda restricted to empirical description of its transmission and reception histories. Indeed, only finely tuned attention to compositional history, rhetorical texture, and narrative structure can ultimately illuminate how religious authority and experience are represented in and thus constructed by *hekhhalot* literature. Problems of language and textuality are not obstacles to be overcome but opportunities to analyze early Jewish mysticism in ways that do not reduce its richness and specificity to teleological evolutionary schema or overly facile transcultural categories.

In this paper I survey the highly variable and even contradictory attitudes expressed in the different parts of the corpus toward one of its central characters, Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha the High Priest. While some sources present R. Ishmael's priestly status as an unimpeachable source of power and authority, others treat this potential claim to special privilege with considerable suspicion. I argue that a positive appraisal of R. Ishmael's priestly genealogy is particularly characteristic of—but not confined to—those *hekhhalot* compositions that most closely conform to the conventions of the apocalyptic genre, such as the frame narrative of 3 *Enoch* (*Synopse*, §§1–3). By contrast, those *hekhhalot* compositions that present ritual technique taught and performed within a community of initiates as the primary means for approaching the divine—either through heavenly ascent or angelic adjuration—tend to downplay or, in some cases, reject outright the genealogical principle. In particular, the extensive collection of ascent traditions found at the heart of *Hekhalot Rabbati* (*Synopse*, §§198–268) challenges the notion that R. Ishmael's singular genealogy confers upon him superior—and fundamentally inimitable—powers, subordinating priestly status to learning transmitted from master to disciple. This passage advocates what I call an "egalitarian" orientation toward heavenly ascent: the visionary's ability to undertake successfully a heavenly journey depends on proper mastery of esoteric knowledge and practice rather than being conferred upon him automatically by birth.

The diversity of representations of R. Ishmael in *hekhhalot* literature serves an index of the heterogeneous character of this fluid corpus of materials. In my view, therefore, any reconstruction of the socioreligious context that produced the constituent components of *hekhhalot* literature must take into account the full range of ideological perspectives encompassed within it. The radically divergent attitudes toward the Levitical priesthood that are articulated in *hekhhalot* texts should caution against drawing general conclusions about the ideological orientation of the

corpus without first considering the shifting literary contexts of the individual composition units.

#### 1. INTERPRETING THE PRIESTLY TRADITIONS IN *HEKHALOT* LITERATURE

The recent interest in the priestly or cultic background of early Jewish mysticism makes a focused appraisal of the attitude(s) toward R. Ishmael's priestly status in *hekhhalot* literature particularly relevant. Indeed, a number of scholars have argued that "*merkavah* mysticism" was profoundly shaped by cultic traditions associated with the Jerusalem temple. The greatest proponent of this position, Rachel Elijor, has written that "it was in 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 *hekhhalot*' conceived the heavenly shrines as depicted in the *hekhhalot* literature."<sup>3</sup> Elijor views the imaginative depictions of the heavenly temple that fill *hekhhalot* literature as intentional attempts to compensate for the deprivation of postdestruction reality. In her most recent formulations she develops this argument even further, suggesting that these literary representations of the heavenly temple and its ritual-liturgical drama reflect the religious orientation and social identity of actual priestly groups that played an active and influential role within the Jewish community of Byzantine Palestine.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly enough, Ithamar Gruenwald, who was the first to study the attitude of *hekhhalot* literature toward cultic and priestly traditions in a systematic fashion, offers a diametrically opposed interpretation of the evidence.<sup>5</sup> Gruenwald asserts that the *hekhhalot* corpus is in fact aligned with the antipriestly attitudes that characterized the "Pharisaic-rabbinic" movement. This argument is most likely designed to substantiate Gershom Scholem's general thesis that *merkavah* mysticism arose in the heart of the rabbinic movement. Gruenwald does acknowledge that the Aaronide priesthood is often mentioned favorably in

3. Rachel Elijor, "From Earthly Temple to Heavenly Shrines," *JSQ* 4 (1997): 217–67, here 223. See also idem, "The Merkavah Tradition and the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism," in *Sino-Judaica: Jews and Christians in Historical Dialogue* (ed. A. Oppenheimer; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1998), 101–58; idem, "From Earthly Temple to Heavenly Shrines: Prayer and Sacred Liturgy in the Hekhalot Literature and Its Relations to Temple Traditions" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 64 (1995): 421–80.

4. Rachel Elijor, "*Hekhalot* and *Merkavah* Literature: Its Relation to the Temple, the Heavenly Temple, and the 'Diminished Temple'" [Hebrew], in *Continuity and Renewal: Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine* (ed. L. I. Levine; Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2004), 107–42; idem, *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism* (trans. D. Louvish; Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), esp. 201–65.

5. See especially Ithamar Gruenwald, "The Place of Priestly Traditions in the Writings of Merkavah Mysticism and the *Shi'ur Qomah*" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981–82): 65–120.

*hekhalot* texts. But he accounts for this phenomenon with the rather speculative claim that the “rabbinic” mystics of *hekhalot* literature were apparently willing to express their admiration for the institution of the priesthood because it no longer posed a challenge to their authority.

Although Elior and Gruenwald have come to opposite conclusions concerning the significance of the cultic motifs in *hekhalot* literature, I think they share several problematic assumptions. First, both scholars approach *hekhalot* literature as if it were a unified body of texts reflecting a single sociohistorical and ideological perspective. This tendency causes them to overlook the protracted and complex literary development of the corpus as well as the diversity of its contents. Second, both offer a stereotyped and overly general picture of the priesthood; they tend to speak of it as if it were a politically and ideologically cohesive social class. But as we know, in the literature of the Second Temple period indictments of the purity and legitimacy of the priesthood are most often to be found in works that were produced in priestly circles and are concerned largely with cultic practice.<sup>6</sup> It has come to be widely acknowledged that critique of specific cultic practices ought not to be confused with rejection of cultic practice as such. Consideration of the internal rivalries that often plagued the priesthood must necessarily complicate analysis of these “antipriestly” polemics. Finally, both appear to treat the sociological categories that were operative in the Second Temple as if they continued to be salient for understanding the social context from which *hekhalot* literature emerged.

Recently a number of Jewish historians and scholars of Hebrew liturgical poetry have suggested that priestly lineage did in fact continue to exert a certain degree of concrete social effect on social status and identity in Jewish communities throughout late antiquity.<sup>7</sup> Yet, in my view, the stylized portrait of the priesthood in *hekhalot* literature and its highly local rhetorical functions should give us pause before we jump to connect literary trope with social reality. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish carefully between real people who viewed themselves and were viewed by others as enjoying priestly privilege, on the one hand, and texts that found it productive to “think with” priests to advance their agenda, on the other. Especially because *hekhalot* literature encompasses such contradictory attitudes toward the Levitical priesthood, each case must be analyzed within its local literary context before we can decide how—and even whether—R. Ishmael’s

6. For analysis of innerpriestly polemic in the Second Temple period, see especially Martha Himmelfarb, “Levi, Phinehas, and the Problem of Intermarriage at the Time of the Maccabean Revolt,” *JSQ* 6 (1999): 1–24. For further discussion, see also idem, “Sexual Relations and Purity in the Temple Scroll and the Book of *Jubilees*,” *DSD* 6 (1999): 11–36.

7. See especially Oded Irshai, “The Priesthood in Jewish Society in Late Antiquity” (Hebrew), in Levine, *Continuity and Renewal*, 67–106; Joseph Yahalom, *Poetry and Society in Jewish Galilee of Late Antiquity* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999), 107–36.

priestly identity can contribute to our understanding of the social profile of the creators of *hekhalot* literature.

## 2. THE CROWN OF THE PRIESTHOOD AS A SOURCE OF RITUAL POWER

Perhaps most noteworthy among the passages in the *hekhalot* corpus that specifically thematize priestly lineage as a positive criterion for enabling a person to better negotiate the dangerous business of heavenly ascent is the literary frame of 3 *Enoch* (*Synopse*, §§1–3).<sup>8</sup> This text describes R. Ishmael’s ascent to heaven and his reception by the angel Metatron, who in turn recounts to the visionary his human origins as the patriarch Enoch before his elevation to heaven.<sup>9</sup> This introductory passage thus supplies the narrative setting for Metatron’s revelations concerning both his own past and a wide variety of heavenly secrets.<sup>10</sup> Upon ascending to the seventh palace, R. Ishmael’s first action is to utter a prayer to God:

“Master of the Universe, I beg of you that the merit of Aaron ben Amram (זכות אהרן בן עמרם), lover of peace and pursuer of peace, who received the crown of priesthood (כתר כהונה) on Mount Sinai in the presence of your glory, may avail for me now, so that Prince Qatspi’el and the angels with him may not prevail over me and cast me from heaven.”<sup>11</sup>

In response to R. Ishmael’s plea, God summons Metatron to protect him from the rest of the angelic host. Even more provocatively, when the angels do subsequently threaten R. Ishmael, God himself chastises them: “My servants, my *serapim*, my *kerubim*, my *’opannim*, cover your eyes from Ishmael My beloved son, My favored, and My glory, so that he not shrink and tremble” (§2 = 1:8).

8. In the *Synopse*, this passage is found both at §§1–3 (MS V228) and at §§882–884 (MS M40). A different version of the first two units of the passage (§§1–2) is also found in G8/2a:2–16 (Peter Schäfer, ed., *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* [TSAJ 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984], 135–39). I use MS V228 as the primary basis for my discussion.

9. Among the numerous studies of Enoch’s angelification as Metatron, see especially Nathaniel Deutsch, *Guardians of the Gate: Angelic Vice Regency in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 27–77; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 82–85; Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones, “Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition,” *JJS* 43 (1992): 1–31.

10. On the redactional function of this passage, see Annelies Kuyt, *The “Descent” to the Chariot: Towards a Description of the Terminology, Place, Function, and Nature of the Yeridah in Hekhalot Literature* (TSAJ 45; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 342–68, esp. 367; Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (AGJU 14; Leiden: Brill, 1980), 192.

11. *Synopse*, §1 = Alexander 1:3. I have largely followed the translation in Philip S. Alexander, “3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of Enoch),” *OTP* 1: 255–57 (1:1–2:4 in his edition).

God's assertion of his special relationship with R. Ishmael is reminiscent of the depiction of the sage in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*, although, unlike the martyrology, this passage does not explicitly attribute the sage's elevated status to his miraculous conception and his resulting resemblance to Metatron.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, both sources link R. Ishmael's ability to ascend to heaven successfully to his priestly lineage.

The emphasis on R. Ishmael's priestly lineage is heightened further in the subsequent unit of the text, where the angels challenge the visionary's right to be in heaven:

Then the eagles of the chariot, the flaming *ḡpannim*, and the *kerubim* of devouring fire asked Metatron, "Youth, why have you allowed one born of women to come in and behold the chariot? From what nation is he? From what tribe is he? What is his character (מה טיבו של זה)?"<sup>13</sup>

The interrogatory formula *mah tib-* (מה טיב-) at the end of the angels' challenge serves to highlight the fundamental incompatibility of the human and divine spheres.<sup>14</sup> In response, Metatron defends R. Ishmael's right to be in heaven:

"He (R. Ishmael) is of the nation of Israel, whom the Holy One, blessed be He, chose from the seventy nations to be his people. He is of the tribe of Levi (משבט לוי הווא), (which presents) the priestly offering to His name.<sup>15</sup> He is from the seed of Aaron (מזרע אהרן הווא), whom the Holy One, blessed be He, chose to be his servant and on whom the Holy One, blessed be He, placed the priestly crown at Sinai." At once they [i.e., the angelic host] began to say: "This one is certainly

12. On the conception narrative as the basis of R. Ishmael's special powers in the post-talmudic martyrology *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*, see Ra'anana Abusch, "Rabbi Ishmael's Miraculous Conception: Jewish Salvation History in Anti-Christian Polemic," in *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (ed. A. H. Becker and A. Y. Reed; TSAJ 95; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 307–43.

13. *Synopsis*, §3 = Alexander 2:2. It should be noted that §3 does not appear in all versions of the text, making it difficult to judge whether it is integral to this introductory frame or a later redactional addition. See Peter Schäfer, "Ein neues Fragment zur Metoposkopie und Chiromantik," in idem, *Hekhalot-Studien*, 84–95; also idem, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism* (trans. A. Pomerance; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 137–38.

14. On this phrase, see also Abusch, "Rabbi Ishmael's Miraculous Conception," 329–32; Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones, *A Transparent Illusion: The Dangerous Vision of Water in Hekhalot Mysticism* (JSJSup 59; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 118–23.

15. The syntax of this phrase in ms V228 is problematic, since it lacks a verb and the juxtaposition between "tribe" and "offering" is unclear. Alexander translates according to Munich 40, which contains the verb "to offer up, present" (מריס), as does ms Florence 44.13. On the difficulty of this phrase and the contradictory manuscript evidence, see Alexander, "3 Enoch," 1:257 n. e.

worthy to behold the chariot-throne, as it is written, *Happy (אשרי) the people who have it so; [happy the people whose God is the Lord] (Ps 144:15).*<sup>16</sup>

This unit returns to the motif of "the crown of priesthood" (כתר כהונה), which is found in R. Ishmael's prayer at the beginning of the narrative in §1, thereby forming a kind of *inclusio*. Here, however, Metatron explicitly links R. Ishmael's wish that he be protected by the "merit of Aaron" to his genealogical ties to the Levitical line. His successful ascent is thus directly attributed to his priestly lineage.

Martha Himmelfarb has convincingly argued that *3 Enoch* represents a hybrid form that integrates an eclectic arrangement of motifs originating in *hekhalot* literature into the type of ascent account that is characteristic of apocalyptic literature.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, similar appeals to the efficacy of R. Ishmael's priestly lineage are most often found in the Hebrew apocalyptic compositions that circulated alongside (but rarely within) the *hekhalot* corpus, such as the "Messiah-Aggadah."<sup>18</sup> Here the angel Metatron informs R. Ishmael that he is worthy of having the events and chronology of the coming of the Messiah revealed to him because "his glory is equal to that of Aaron the priest" (*Synopsis*, §140). These apocalyptic sources do not describe or advocate ritual techniques as a source of special power or hidden knowledge but instead emphasize the visionary's priestly genealogy as the determining factor in his capacity to gain entrance to the heavenly realm. The introductory framework of *3 Enoch* cannot be taken as a direct reflection of the priestly interests or identities of the *hekhalot* authors in general. Rather, this reflex belongs to a limited current within *hekhalot* literature that is largely governed by the specific conventions of the subgenre of *hekhalot* apocalypses.

### 3. PRIESTLY LINEAGE AND RITUAL PRAXIS

In contrast to the frame narrative of *3 Enoch*, with its strong emphasis on R. Ishmael's priestly lineage, other passages from *hekhalot* literature present priestly lineage and ritual practice as complementary explanations for R. Ishmael's ability

16. *Synopsis*, §3 = Alexander 2:3–4.

17. On the "mixed" form of *3 Enoch*, see Martha Himmelfarb, "Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the Hekhalot Literature," *HUCA* 59 (1988): 73–100, esp. 98. On the relationship of *3 Enoch* to the other *hekhalot* apocalypses, see also Peter Schäfer, ed., *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literature* (4 vols.; TSAJ 17, 22, 29, 46; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 1:1–iv; Kuyt, *The "Descent" to the Chariot*, 161–63; Alexander, "3 Enoch," 1:223–53.

18. This passage, which is printed in the *Synopsis* at §§140–145, has been inserted into *Hekhalot Rabbati* in only one manuscript, the idiosyncratic New York 8128, where it is found in a cluster of apocalyptic sources (§§122–145). These sources are more often found independent of the *hekhalot* corpus (e.g., MSS New York JTS ENA 3021, 1a–b and Jerusalem 80 5226, 16b–17b, both of which contain this passage).

to ascend to heaven or to summon angels to him on earth. An adjuration text found in the macroform *Merkabah Rabbah* (§§680–681) provides what is perhaps the clearest example of a practitioner's priestly identity setting him apart from—and above—his nonpriestly colleagues.<sup>19</sup> Adjurations directed to the *Sar Torah* (the Prince of the Torah), like the one found here, claim to confer upon the practitioner unfailing ability to acquire and retain knowledge of the Torah.<sup>20</sup> According to the narrative, after R. Ishmael has gotten a first taste of the enormous power of the *Sar Torah* ritual, his colleague Rabbi Akiva advises him that he still must learn to control and harness this technique. Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Qanah then proceeds to teach his star pupil the method for making use of a praxis that the text explicitly notes is intended for “every disciple of a sage”:

“Go return to R. Nehunya ben ha-Qanah your teacher and ask your teacher that he tell and say and specify for you this praxis (מידה) in detail—how one makes use of it, how one adjures by it—lest you err and make use of it incorrectly, and act inappropriately, and they harm you as was the case with so-and-so, whom they harmed, and their bile dissolved within them, so that it became like water, because they heard it incorrectly and acted improperly.” And when I asked this question before R. Nehunya ben ha-Qanah, he said to me: “My student! What R. Akiva said to you I will also say: if it were not for the covenant (ברית) that was made for Aaron and the branch from which you came, they would already have harmed you and obliterated you from the world.”<sup>21</sup>

The technique, described in the subsequent unit (§§682–684), is exacting and elaborate, though highly conventional within *hekhalot* literature.<sup>22</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that the passage above juxtaposes adjuration technique with the authority of the priestly covenant and line. Thus, although R. Ishmael's identity as a priest apparently protects him from the violence of the *Sar Torah*, it is more a stop-gap measure than a primary strategy. R. Ishmael, like all other practitioners, is advised to undergo the processes of purification and abstention that are required of all practitioners (§683). It seems, then, that proper preparation is a prerequisite for interacting with the divine, even if one is from the branch of Aaron.

The motif of priestly lineage also appears in a short unit (§§583–585) that is embedded in an extended ascent account in the macroform *Ma'aseh Merkabah*

19. This unit is found in an almost identical form at §§278–280 (*Hekhalot Rabbati*); a parallel passage is found at §§307–314. For detailed analysis of these two versions of this material, see Michael D. Swartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 63–74.

20. Of course, “Torah” in this context includes mastery of all aspects of biblical and rabbinic learning.

21. *Synopsis*, §681. I have slightly adapted the translation in Swartz, *Scholastic Magic*, 83, which follows MS O1531, supplemented by N8128. The unit is also found in MS M40.

22. The ritual instructions begin with a unit that is also found at §310 in MS V228.

(§§579–591).<sup>23</sup> According to the passage, immediately following R. Ishmael's vivid description of the heavenly liturgy being carried out before the throne of God, Zevudiel, the Angel of the Presence, reprimands the visionary for his careless performance of the ritual techniques that he has learned (although exactly what his error is we are not told): “Son of the exalted (בן גאים), what merit do your father and mother have (מה זכות לאביך ולאמך) that you have deserved to endure this mystery (שזוכית לעמוד על רז זה)?”<sup>24</sup> The sage has apparently survived precisely because of his lineage, although here again this special attribute serves only as a measure of last resort.<sup>25</sup> The angel warns him not to exalt himself above his colleagues (אל תתגאה מכל חבריך), nor to say “only I was privileged among the others (אני זכיתי מכולם)” (§584). Indeed, according to the angel, “all human beings who possess (this mystery) and recite it every morning in prayer” can visit the heavenly throne-world just like R. Ishmael (§584).

The portrait of R. Ishmael in this passage is thus highly ambivalent: it casts him in a critical light for presuming to be superior to his colleagues, while at the same time suggesting that his priestly status does in fact confer certain advantages on him. The title “son of the exalted” takes on an almost contemptuous tone here: in §583 and §584 the root גאה, meaning “proud,” appears both in his title and in the charge against him.<sup>26</sup> He must defend himself against the allegation that he considers his elevated rank to set him apart from his colleagues. It is instructive that the *hitpa'el* form of this word is also found in a comparable phrase elsewhere in *hekhalot* literature in a hymn praising God as “the exalted one who exalts himself over the exalted [i.e., the angels] (גאה ומתגאה על גאים).”<sup>27</sup> It seems that R. Ishmael has wrongfully adopted a superior attitude toward his colleagues, perhaps in a manner suitable only for God. Even when *hekhalot* authors might accord R. Ishmael a comparative advantage over his peers because of his Levitical identity,

23. I follow the division of the text proposed in Swartz, *Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism: An Analysis of Ma'aseh Merkabah* (TSAJ 28; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), 91–100. This macroform encompasses *Synopsis*, §§544–596. Aside from Swartz's detailed treatment of the macroform's literary history, see also Kuyt, *The “Descent” to the Chariot*, 269–303; Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, 77–95; N. Janowitz, *Poetics of Ascent: Theories of Language in Rabbinic Ascent* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkabah Mysticism*, 181–87.

24. *Synopsis*, §583. I follow the translation of this passage in Swartz, *Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism*, 242, which follows MS O1531, supplemented by MSS N8128, M40, and D436.

25. But compare *Synopsis*, §304, in which the “merit” (זכות) and “righteousness” (צדקת) of a person's parents help him make effective use of a magical seal and crown (זכות אבותיו) לו (מסייעתו וצדקת יולדיו עומדת לו בגיאיות).

26. This same title is used repeatedly throughout the *havurah* material (e.g., *Synopsis*, §§200–201, §225, and §239; cf. §§402–403).

27. The term גאים is regularly applied in *hekhalot* literature to the angels (e.g., *Synopsis*, §1, §98).

they were often troubled by the possibility that he would thus be set apart from the rest of Israel.

#### 4. THE "EGALITARIAN" IMPULSE IN *HEKHALOT RABBATI*

I have argued thus far that the shifting representations of R. Ishmael in *hekhalot* literature reflect competing conceptions of his power and authority. In some sources this central protagonist of *hekhalot* literature embodies—simply by virtue of his priestly lineage—the attributes necessary for a favorable reception in heaven. At the same time, another strand within the corpus presents R. Ishmael's priestly identity in a critical light. I believe that his latter concern is most fully articulated in the often analyzed ascent material in *Hekh. Rab.* §§198–268.<sup>28</sup> This passage roundly censures him for lording this advantage over other aspiring initiates. Indeed, the polemic against priestly privilege in this passage is intended to bolster its conviction that any *properly trained Jewish man* can ascend to heaven by means of esoteric instruction and ritual practice. The egalitarian rhetoric in this passage should not be mistaken for the democratization of religious practice in early Jewish mysticism. It should be emphasized that I do not use the notion of egalitarianism in the modern, democratic sense; Jewish women and all non-Jews are implicitly and, in some cases, explicitly barred from membership in the "mystical" fellowship and prohibited from undertaking a heavenly journey or otherwise interacting with the divine realm. Instead, in what follows I focus on the discursive function of the various models of ascent practice and ritual power put forward in *hekhalot* literature—and contrast these with the representations of heavenly ascent in related texts.

Sections 238–240 directly addresses the central preoccupation of the larger complex of ascent material in *Hekh. Rab.* §§198–268, namely, what criteria, if any, should determine whether a person is worthy to undertake a heavenly journey. The narrative opens as follows:<sup>29</sup>

28. Numerous studies have been dedicated to analyzing the sources and structure of all or part of this passage, most notably: Kuyt, *The "Descent" to the Chariot*, 60–124; Peter Schäfer, "Ein neues *Hekhalot Rabbati*-Fragment," in idem, *Hekhalot Studien*, 96–103; Joseph Dan, "The Gate to the Sixth Palace" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987): 197–220; Margarete Schlüter, "Die Erzählung von der Rückholung des R. Nehunya ben Haqana aus der *Merkava*-Schau in ihrem redaktionellen Rahmen," *FJB* 10 (1982): 65–109; Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Recall of Rabbi Nehuniah Ben Ha-Qanah from Ecstasy in *Hekhalot Rabbati*," *AJS Review* 1 (1976): 269–81; Arnold Goldberg, "Einige Bemerkungen zu den Quellen und der Redaktionellen Einheiten der grossen *Hekhalot*," *FJB* 1 (1973): 1–49; repr. in *Mystik und Theologie des rabbinischen Judentums: Gesammelte Studien* (ed. M. Schlüter and P. Schäfer; TSAJ 61; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 49–77.

29. For *Synopsis*, §§238–240, I follow the version in MS V228, unless otherwise indicated. I note only significant textual variation. This passage is also found in the Genizah fragment T.-S.

R. Ishmael said; Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel was angry with me and said to me: "ZHPNWRVY almost chastised us and crushed us like bran. Why? You committed a conscious error against us, in that you consider Yonatan ben Uziel to be an insignificant man in Israel (אדם קטן בישראל). What if he were to ascend [lit. descend] somewhat haphazardly (מה אם ירד סתם), and come and stand at the entrance to the seventh palace<sup>30</sup> [without a seal? What would have happened to him then? He would just barely have enough time to lower his eyes before the guardians at the entrance to the seventh palace brought total destruction upon him.]"<sup>31</sup>

The Patriarch Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel has accused R. Ishmael the High Priest of having failed to provide the knowledge required for entering the seventh palace safely. The tension captured in this text between one idealized figure who is associated with the Davidic monarchy and one linked to the Levitical priesthood is an obvious reflex of a deeply entrenched ideological conflict with deep roots in both ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism.<sup>32</sup> *Hekhalot Rabbati* builds on this long-standing motif. Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel claims that, if Yonatan ben Uziel had mistakenly or carelessly attempted to ascend without having mastered the full technique, he would only just barely have escaped with his life.<sup>33</sup> The Patriarch attributes R. Ishmael's negligent disregard to his lowly opinion of Yonatan, whom he is accused of considering "an insignificant man in Israel."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the Patriarch seems to imply that R. Ishmael has omitted this final bit of information *intentionally*.<sup>35</sup>

AS 142.94 (G5 in Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente*, 76–81). For comparison of the versions, see the *partiturtext* at Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente*, 78–79.

30. The unit ends here in MSS V228, N8128, O1531, M40, D436, and Florence 44.13. Some manuscripts (e.g., M22, B238, Leiden 4730, and G5/1a:15–1b:2) contain a long recension of the unit, which extends through the bracketed material. For the bracketed section, I follow M22.

31. *Synopsis*, §238. In my view, the material in brackets, which appears only in the long recension of this unit, is a secondary addition to the text. Cf. Kuyt, *The "Descent" to the Chariot*, 105 n. 170.

32. David Goodblatt, *The Monarchic Principle: Studies in Jewish Self-Government in Antiquity* (TSAJ 38; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 57–76. On the conflict between patriarchal and priestly authority in rabbinic literature, see Reuven Kimelman, "The Conflict between the Priestly Oligarchy and the Sages in the Talmudic Period (PT *Shabbat* 2:3, 13c = *Horayot* 3:5, 48c)" (Hebrew), *Zion* 48 (1983): 135–48.

33. The specific connotation of the word סתם (*stam*), which I have rendered "somewhat haphazardly," is not certain. Nevertheless, the phrase as a whole plainly refers to the fact that Yonatan is not prepared for the dangers posed by the guardians of the "seventh palace."

34. Cf. *Synopsis*, §305; G8/ 2a:12–23 and 2b: 21–24 (Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente*, 103–5). I discuss these passages and their relationship to the *havurah* material below, pp. 138–40.

35. It is worth noting that the relevant phrase "a conscious error" (*shegagat zaton*) is virtually an oxymoron: whereas the first term typically denotes an *unintentional* sin, the second term refers to an *intentional* transgression.

Whether or not R. Ishmael had intended to harm his colleague, he does not contest the legitimacy of the Patriarch's charges. Instead, he seeks out his teacher R. Nehunya ben ha-Qanah in great distress (§§239–240). Rabbi Nehunya acknowledges to his pupil that the key to completing the heavenly journey successfully remains to be taught. He seems to imply that he has waited to reveal the names of the guardians of the seventh palace because their similarity to the divine name renders them especially potent. But now that R. Ishmael has explicitly demanded access to this as-yet-undisclosed information, the master agrees to reconvene his disciples so that it can be transmitted to the whole fellowship (*havurah*)—and even recorded for posterity.

The background of the passage is obscure. In earlier rabbinic literature Yonatan ben Uziel is said himself to have been chastised by God for having revealed to human beings the secrets of the Torah through his Aramaic translation (Targum) of the prophetic books. The charge against him implies that he has undertaken to do so specifically for the purpose of self-glorification. In the version of this tradition found in the Babylonian Talmud, Yonatan defends himself to God, saying: "It is surely known to You that I did this neither for my own honor nor for the honor of my father's house (לא לכבודי עשיתי ולא לכבוד בית אבא), but for I did it for Your honor (אלא לכבודך עשיתי), so that disputes will not proliferate in Israel" (*b. Meg.* 3a). More interesting still, the formulation of his denial is echoed closely elsewhere in *hekhalot* literature in a passage that critiques R. Ishmael's motives for revealing the secret names of the angels who guard the heavenly palace: "Not for my own glorification did I do it (לא לקילוס עצמי עשיתי), but for the praise of the King of the World (אלא לשבח מלכו של עולם)" (*Synopse*, §586). Apparently, for the author of this unit the figure of Yonatan ben Uziel represented a suitable foil for R. Ishmael. The irony could hardly have been lost on an educated reader. The text is clearly suggesting that in withholding divine secrets from his colleagues, R. Ishmael has acted in an even more self-aggrandizing fashion than did Yonatan ben Uziel when he made his translation of the prophets available to the public. Within the context of *Hekhalot Rabbati* §§238–240, the figure of Yonatan ben Uziel thus functions as an emblematic example of the universal efficacy of ritual practice.<sup>36</sup>

The controversy concerning Yonatan ben Uziel establishes the thematic framework for the remainder of the ascent account in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, which consists of esoteric instructions that must be mastered by the visionary before he embarks on his journey. This theme is most poignantly encapsulated in the "water vision" episode that is placed at the culmination of the instructional material (§§258–259), in which the visionary must demonstrate his worthiness to enter the sixth palace by passing two separate tests. First he must wait at the gate

36. Comparable passages, which emphasize the universal efficacy of *hekhalot* ascent practices, can also be found at *Synopse*, §305; G8/2b: 21–24 (Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente*, 105).

to the palace until the angels have invited him to enter *twice*; if he enters at their first summons, they "throw iron bars at him," and he perishes. Second, he must refrain from asking the angels concerning the nature of the waves of water that he sees rushing at him. I cite the description of this "water test" in full:

Because the guardians of the entrance to the sixth palace throw and cast thousands upon thousands of waves of water upon him—although there is not even a single drop there—if he says: "What is the nature of this water?" they immediately run after him in order to stone him, saying: "Good-for-nothing, perhaps you are from the seed of those who kissed the calf, so that you are not worthy to see the king and his throne?" If that is the case, a heavenly voice goes forth from the 'aravot raqia' and says: "You have spoken well! He is from the seed of those who kissed the calf and is not worthy to see the king and his throne!" He does not move from there until they throw thousands upon thousands of iron bars upon him.<sup>37</sup> (*Synopse*, §259)

This puzzling test appears in a number of different forms in the *hekhalot* corpus.<sup>38</sup> It is not my intention here to enter into the enormously complicated question of the interrelationship of these sources or to analyze the rich symbolic background of the image of heavenly water in *hekhalot* literature—questions to which many studies have been dedicated.<sup>39</sup> Rather, I wish to set the "water test" in the context of the notion of worthiness in *Hekhalot Rabbati*.

Joseph Dan has subjected this unit to meticulous analysis in his treatment of the traditions in *hekhalot* literature concerning the dangers encountered by the visionary during his ascent to heaven.<sup>40</sup> Dan has argued that, at the earliest stage of its development, the danger motif is used to characterize the behavior of the guardians of the sixth palace as arbitrary and absurd but that over time this irrational impulse was suppressed by later editors. In his view, this sense of randomness explains why in *Hekh. Rab.* §224 the angels inexplicably destroy

37. I translate according to Vatican 228. The unit is also translated at Kuyt, *The "Descent" to the Chariot*, 112.

38. In addition to §§258–259, also §§407–408 (*Hekhalot Zutarti*), §345 (*Hekhalot Zutarti*, only in ms N8128); §672 (*Merkavah Rabbah*, only in ms N8128); cf. §§224–228 (*Hekhalot Rabbati*). The motif also appears in the version of the "Four who entered the *pardes*" at *b. Hag.* 14b.

39. See now the lengthy *Forschungsgeschichte* at Morray-Jones, *Transparent Illusion*, 34–53. On the interrelationship of these sources and their specific redactional functions, see especially Morray-Jones, *Transparent Illusion*, 54–82; Kuyt, *The "Descent" to the Chariot*, 110–13. In this sweeping tradition-historical treatment Morray-Jones largely revives Scholem's contention that this image has authentic visionary experience as its generative source. However, he also builds on David J. Halperin's valuable insight that the waters symbolize the cosmic forces of chaos that have been tamed by God at creation (*Faces of the Chariot* [TSA] 16; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 199–249). For critique of Halperin's eclectic approach, however, see Ronen Reichman, "Die 'Wasser-Episode' in der *Hekhalot-Literatur*," *FJB* 17 (1989): 67–100, esp. 78–79.

40. Dan, "Gate to the Sixth Palace," 197–220.



those visionaries who are worthy of ascending to heaven while sparing those who are unworthy. Moreover, Dan argues that the “water test,” which distinguishes between those who are “from the seed of those who kissed the calf” and those who are not, is aimed squarely at the descendents of Aaron the high priest, who was responsible for the sin of the golden calf (Exod 32).<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, he considers the test itself to be wholly superfluous. The ability of an aspiring visionary to enter the sixth palace depends entirely on his lineage; no one of priestly stock will be allowed to pass.

While I accept most of Dan’s argument, I part ways with him on this final point. In my view, the “water test”—at least within the specific context of *Hekhalot Rabbati*—is designed to make a rather different point, namely, that prior knowledge of the nature of the dangers associated with the entrance to the sixth palace enables the visionary to enter heaven. There is no indication in the text that a priestly figure such as R. Ishmael cannot learn to answer properly.

Ronen Reichman has similarly concluded that the fate of the visionary depends entirely on his own actions.<sup>42</sup> Reichman, however, understands the text in strictly typological terms: those who fail the tests are *like* those who worshiped the golden calf but not actually related to them genealogically. But this purely symbolic reading threatens to isolate the passage from its larger discursive context. I would submit instead that claims to priestly lineage posed serious problems for the ideology of ritual practice advocated by the creators of *Hekhalot Rabbati*. It is difficult, if not impossible, to know whether such claims reflected the interests of actual priestly groups. What is certain, however, is that the notion of priestly identity was deployed as part of a sophisticated rhetorical strategy that characterizes some *hekhalot* texts to legitimate their particular brand of ritual practice.

The antipriestly polemic of the “water test” represents the direct counterpart to the positive conception of Levitical lineage that we have seen animates various other strands of the *hekhalot* corpus. At the same time, numerous *hekhalot* texts—*Hekhalot Rabbati* most prominent among them—adopt the opposite stance. Subjecting R. Ishmael’s comportment and behavior to careful scrutiny, these passages explicitly link both his ethical shortcomings and his ritual failures to the superior attitude he has adopted concerning his priestly status. Ironically, however, in critiquing R. Ishmael’s special status, *Hekhalot Rabbati* succeeds in transforming him into the quintessential mystical initiate. The dominant claim of *Hekhalot Rabbati* turns on the notion that anyone at all can attain the exalted

41. *Ibid.*, 199–200. As we have seen earlier, the term “seed” is used elsewhere in *hekhalot* literature to refer to the perquisites of Aaronide lineage (esp. §3 of 3 *Enoch*). But compare Morray-Jones, *Transparent Illusion*, 192–99, which argues that the phrase “those who kissed the golden calf” in fact refers to all of Israel *except* the Levites, the one tribe that refrained from worshipping the calf.

42. Reichman, “Wasser-Episode,” 80–82.

status of R. Ishmael merely by imitating the ritual practices that he helped transmit to his colleagues in the “mystical” fellowship.

##### 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This essay has explored the methodological implications that the essentially heterogeneous nature of *hekhalot* literature has for the study of its literary history and religious significance. From this one test case—the highly particular representation of R. Ishmael in the ascent material in *Hekhalot Rabbati*—I would suggest that attention to the variety of ways in which various themes, motifs, and figures are deployed in different components of the corpus is essential to a proper reading of this literature. Our increasing awareness of the continuing diversity of Jewish culture well into the posttalmudic period (600–1000 C.E.) complicates the task of mapping the heterogeneous strands of *hekhalot* literature, each with its own distinct conception of religious authority, onto the equally heterogeneous landscape of Jewish society. *Hekhalot* literature encodes a range of conflicting and evolving points of view about the purpose of the various ritual techniques that it advocates and, in particular, about who may legitimately engage in these practices. Such variation should not be viewed merely as “noise” that conceals an underlying unity of religious sensibility or experience. In fact, it is precisely the fluidity and diversity of *hekhalot* literature that enables us to trace its literary development, thereby shedding light on the history and nature of early Jewish mysticism. We miss a great deal if, for the sake of an appealing coherence, we generalize about the literary function, ideological valance, or sociohistorical background of R. Ishmael in *hekhalot* literature.