The Ways That Never Parted

Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

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Conclusion

Whichever solution these late ancient scholars and spiritual leaders adopted – marrying early or late, or abandoning family life altogether – Moses remains central to their notions of sexual practice and spiritual pursuit. Moses serves as a focal point for contemplating the perceived conflicts between sex, marriage, and divine calling for Philo, the Rabbis, and Aphrahat. While Philo prefers to see Moses as the embodiment of Hellenistic virtues such as self-discipline, the authors of the *Sifre* understand Moses' special prophethood (but no one else's) as necessitating his distancing himself from domestic life. Within the Jewish–Christian polemic, however, Moses' celibacy becomes the exegetical foundation for constructing religious identities based on sexual behavior. Through his exegetical construct of holiness-as-celibacy, Aphrahat both polemicizes against Jewish marriage practices and establishes a hierarchy of spirituality for his Christian readers. Celibacy is holiness and therefore remains the ultimate manifestation of true Christian living. Aphrahat wears his celibacy with pride for it marks him as holy, divinely blessed, and chosen. While the Rabbis never specifically counter Aphrahat's conclusions, Moses' sexual history, both procreative and celibate, allow them to construct their own sexual and religious identities. Never forgoing marriage, they struggle to create a balance between their domestic lives and their spiritual pursuits, basing their choices on Moses' example.

Rabbi Ishmael's Miraculous Conception

Jewish Redemption History in Anti-Christian Polemic

by

RA'ANAN BOUSTAN

אשרי עין שראתה כך ואשרי הגבר שזכה לכך תתברך האם שחבלה אדתו אשרי המעים
שגדל בהם אשרי דדים שינק מהם אשרי האב שהולידו ולמדו תורה אשרי עין
שהציצה בו אשרי זרועות שחבקוהו אשרין ר' ישמעאל שזכית לכך
– MS NY JTSA ENA 3201 folio 1a/39–40

Embedded in the early medieval Hebrew martyrological anthology *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* is a curious "annunciation" scene that recounts how Rabbi Ishmael's mother, the unnamed wife of Elisha the high priest, became pregnant after encountering an angel sent to her by God.[1] More remarkable still, Rabbi Ishmael is said to have inherited the angelic messenger's beautiful appearance. Within the martyrological cycle, the physical embodiment of the sage's unique kinship to the divine permits him unparalleled access to the heavenly realm from which his efficacious beauty derives. Each one of the episodes of Rabbi Ishmael's *vita* recounted in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* – his ascent to heaven to determine whether it is the will of God that the ten sages should be martyred, his own gruesome execution during which the skin of his

* This paper has been enormously enriched by both the written work and conscientious mentoring of Peter Brown, Shaye Cohen, Martha Himmelfarb, and Peter Schäfer. I would like to thank Annette Yoshiko Reed and Adam H. Becker for their keen editorial suggestions. I offer this paper with love to Leah Platt, whose tender strength and searching intellect have come to infuse every aspect of my life.

[1] This pericope appears in two distinct versions in Gottfried Reeg's synoptic edition of the text, *Die Geschichte von den Zehn Märtyrern* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985): I.15.10–19 and V, VII–VIII.11.10–23. All translations of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* are mine. In addition to Reeg's German translation of this unit (*Geschichte*, 63 and 93), English translations can be found in Micha Joseph bin Gorion, *Mimekor Yisrael* (3 vols.; ed. E. bin Gorion; trans. I. M. Lask; Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976), 547; David Roskies, "The Ten *Harugei Malkhut*," in *The Literature of Destruction* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1988), 61–62; David Stern, "Midrash Eleh Ezkerah, or The Legend of the Ten Martyrs," in *Rabbinic Fantasies* (ed. D. Stern and M. J. Mirsky; New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), 148–49. The narrative also appears in a number of medieval Jewish sources (see n. 12 below for citations).

beautiful countenance is peeled off, and the subsequent use of this "death mask" as a relic in a ritual that portends the ultimate fall of Rome and redemption of Israel – is intimately bound up with the special circumstances of his birth.[2] In fact, it is this hagiographic account of Rabbi Ishmael's life and death that lends a semblance of narrative unity to the otherwise disjointed literary traditions of which the anthology is composed.

The centrality of this narrative to the highly polemical collection of martyr stories certainly seems an intentional provocation. After all, in conferring upon this Jewish martyr semi-divine status through the agency of an angelic messenger at his birth, the anthology elicits automatic comparison between its protagonist and the prototypical Christian martyr Jesus, whose birth, death, and afterlife serve as the cornerstones of a very different history of redemption. It is certainly striking that, like the Christ of the NT Letter to the Hebrews, Rabbi Ishmael is imagined in the dual role of heavenly high priest and atoning sacrifice offered on the celestial altar. At the same time that the author/redactors of the anthology were painting a graphic portrait of the bleak experience of late antique Jews under Roman and, later, Christian domination, they thus chose to claim for themselves a set of highly charged literary motifs that were at odds with the more conventional scholastic orientation of their rabbinic source material. The recent work of Daniel Boyarin and Israel Yuval, among others, has taught us not to be surprised at such seemingly precarious fusions of polemical and apologetic aims: even where it is possible to speak of Jews and Christians as two distinct communities, they shared many common discursive categories, ritual practices, and literary forms, despite, or perhaps especially while, maintaining a rhetoric of difference and, at times, overt hostility.[3]

[2] It perhaps goes without saying that this hagiographical cycle is legend and not biography. Indeed, even the actions and statements attributed to Rabbi Ishmael the high priest in earlier rabbinic sources (e.g., *t. Hal.* 1:10; *b. Ber.* 7a; *b. Ber.* 51a; *b. Git.* 58a; *b. Hul.* 49a–b) are entirely unusable for biographical purposes, although they do constitute a relatively coherent corpus of material concerning this figure. On a note of caution, Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha the high priest should not be facilely identified with the early-second-century Tanna Rabbi Ishmael, whose priestly identity remains uncertain (Gary G. Porton, *The Traditions of Rabbi Ishmael* [4 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1982], 4.212–14, esp. n. 2). Compare, however, the discussion of Rabbi Ishmael's distinctively priestly orientation in Menahem Hirshman, *Torah for the Entire World* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999), esp. 114–49.

[3] For the use of Christian imagery in the Jewish martyrological literature produced in the wake of the Crusades, see Israel Yuval, "Christliche Symbolik und jüdische Martyrologie zur Zeit der Kreuzzüge," in *Juden und Christen zur Zeit der Kreuzzüge* (ed. A. Haverkamp; Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1999), 87–106. See also idem, *Shene goyim be-vitnekh: Yehudim ve-Notsrim – dimuyim hadadiyim* (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 2000); idem, "Easter and Passover as Early Jewish–Christian Dialogue," in *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times* (ed. P. F. Bradshaw and L. A. Hoffman; Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame, 1999), 98–124; idem, "Vengeance and Damnation, Blood and Defamation: From Jewish Martyrdom to Blood Libel Accusations," *Zion* 58 (1993): 33–90 [Hebrew]. On the mutually constituting histories of Judaism and Christianity, see Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999); idem, "Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism," *JECS* 6 (1998): 577–627; idem, "A Tale of Two Synods: Nicaea, Yavneh and Rabbinic Ecclesiology," *Exemplaria* 12 (2000): 21–62; also his "Semantic Differences; or, 'Judaism'/ 'Christianity'" in this volume.

Of course, the trope of "miraculous conception" was never the sole province of Christian authors.[4] The Hebrew Bible itself offers clear precedent for the link between a figure's exceptional origins and his or her extraordinary life.[5] Greco-Roman biographers and hagiographers similarly viewed the visions and portents that accompanied the conception or birth of an exceptional figure as signs of future greatness.[6] For instance, in his imaginative biography of Apollonius of Tyana, the early-third-century writer Philostratus recounts how the mother of that quintessential first century *theios aner* ("divine man") has a vision of the actual physical form of the god Proteus while she is pregnant. Like the angel in the Rabbi Ishmael tradition, Proteus is so strongly identified with the child he has heralded that he passes on to him his special abilities and

[4] The secondary literature on Christian annunciation, nativity, and childhood narratives is naturally quite vast. See the updated commentary in Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (rev. ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1993) and the compendious bibliography there. I speak here and throughout the paper of *conception* and not *birth*, since, unlike the accounts of Jesus' (and Mary's) conception, nativity, and childhood in the canonical gospels (Matthew 1–2; Luke 1–2) and in some apocryphal texts (e.g., *Odes of Solomon* 19:6–10, *Protevangelium of James* 11, and *Ascension of Isaiah* 11:8–9), the tradition of Rabbi Ishmael's supernatural origins does not address the circumstances of his birth or early life, instead restricting itself to the actual process of procreation. Notably, this emphasis conforms to the biblical prototype; see the excellent summary of this paradigm in Athalya Brenner, "Female Social Behavior: Two Descriptive Patterns within the 'Birth of the Hero' Paradigm," *VT* 36 (1986): 258–59.

[5] God is said to intervene in the process of procreation, either directly or through the agency of an intermediary, in the conceptions of Isaac (Gen 18:9; 21:1–3), Samson (Judg 13:2–7), and Samuel (1 Sam 2:21). On the "annunciation" motif in biblical literature generally, see especially Robert Alter, "How Convention Helps us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 115–30.

[6] For a useful discussion of many of these sources and their relationship to early Christian literature, consult Charles H. Talbert, "Prophecies of Future Greatness: The Contribution of Greco-Roman Biographies to an Understanding of Luke 1:5–4:15," in *The Divine Helmsman* (ed. J. L. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel; New York: Ktav, 1980), 129–41. On the specific theme of supernatural conception, see Plutarch, *Theseus* 2.6.36; *Romulus* 2.5; 4.2; *Alexander* 3.1–2; also Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander* 1; Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Alexander Romance*.

knowledge.[7] The Jewish historian Josephus, who often employed the stock motifs of the biographical genre,[8] likewise availed himself of the notion that the appearance of an angel to a barren woman could transmit unusual beauty to her child.[9]

Nevertheless, the story of Rabbi Ishmael's conception is not just one more example of this near-ubiquitous impulse. Rather, the narrative, while exhibiting discursive commonalities with the broader cultural milieu, represents a pointed rejoinder to Christian accounts of Jesus' divine nature and of his uniqueness within human history. This bold act of appropriation cannot be considered in a cultural vacuum; nor is it merely a symptom of intercommunal polemic. In his incisive work on the use of common liturgical forms in related, but distinct, religious communities, Lawrence Hoffman has developed a model for conceptualizing precisely this sort of contested cultural idiom:

> Instead of viewing society as a series of already sharply defined conflicting religious groups, vying with each other, I suggest a model in which all are presumed to share equally in a generally pervasive cultural backdrop. This cultural backdrop is what everyone takes as normative, and within which everyone takes some stand or another. In their liturgy, people declare themselves to stand within the commonly accepted boundaries of the religious enterprise, sharing certain generally accepted cultural characteristics along with everyone else – that is, censoring themselves in; at the same time they preserve the boundaries of their own integrity by censoring out those cultural characteristics which they have chosen not to accept.[10]

Hoffman cautions against an overly general and undifferentiated notion of shared cultural space. In his view, the act of participating in a common culture automatically entails marking out where one stands on that terrain. The trick is to locate the precise strategies by which the elements of a common idiom are fashioned into an exclusionary practice – or, in this case, narrative.

[7] Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* I.4.

[8] For signs accompanying the birth of heroes in the writings of Josephus, see, for example, *A.J.* 2.9.6–7; 2.10.1–2. Josephus even highlights the special circumstances of his own birth in *Life* 1. For a similar impulse in Philo, see *Mos.* 1.5.20–24; 1.6.25–29. See also Daniel J. Harrington, "Birth Narratives in Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities and the Gospels," in *To Touch the Text: Biblical and Related Studies in Honor of Joseph A. Fitzmeyer* (ed. M. P. Horgan and P. J. Kobelski; New York: Crossroad, 1989), 316–24.

[9] See the retelling of Samson's conception at *A.J.* 5.276–285; cf. Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* 42; *b. B. Bat. 91a*; *Num. Rab.* 10:5. On the relationship between Josephus' account and the biblical Samson cycle, see especially Adele Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother: An Unnamed Protagonist," *JSOT* 55 (1992): 25–37.

[10] Lawrence Hoffman, "Censoring in and Censoring Out: A Function of Liturgical Language," in *Ancient Synagogues: The State of the Research* (ed. J. Gutman; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 22–23.

What sets the Rabbi Ishmael material apart from comparable late antique hagiography, then, is its use of the notion of ritual purity to understand and articulate its hero's special status. The narrative constructs Rabbi Ishmael as a more-than-human figure who, by virtue of his angelic paternity, is exempt from the impurity that inheres in all human existence. It is worth noting that in the *Toledot Yeshu* literature, the Jewish anti-Gospels that flourished in numerous versions and languages throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Jesus' mother is said to have conceived during her *menses*.[11] Jesus is thus the quintessential offspring of impurity (בן נידה), whose illegitimate power and destructive nature reflects his improper origin. Rabbi Ishmael is his mirror opposite, a rabbinic figure who belongs to the heavenly realm because he is truly of it. Indeed, the conception narrative attributes his mother's decisive encounter with the angelic messenger to her rigorous and even extreme practice of ritual bathing following the period of her menstrual impurity. Of course, the story of his conception does to some extent operate according to a theory of sexual reproduction that was widely accepted by late antique Jews, Christians, and "pagans" alike. Nevertheless, the narrative follows the conventions of a specific strain of Jewish purity discourse that developed in Byzantine Palestine toward the end of Late Antiquity and assumed its clearest statement in the unusual halakhic rulings of the *Beraita de Niddah*. A close reading of the unit's relationship to the two separate discursive contexts in which it evolved – Jewish purity practice and Jewish martyrology – is thus essential to a proper understanding of Rabbi Ishmael's place within the history of salvation put forward in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*.

The argument of the paper will proceed as follows: I first situate the conception narrative within the broader discourse of late antique gynecological science, both Jewish and non-Jewish. I then analyze the intimate relationship between this vignette and the distinctive understanding of Jewish purity practice current among Byzantine Jews. The conspicuous formal and ideological affinities between the "annunciation" scene and this purity discourse demonstrate that the unit assumed its present form as a narrative dramatization of its stringent

[11] I cite here only a very partial list of the many versions of *Toledot Yeshu* that characterize Jesus in these terms: Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1977), 38–40 (MS Strassburg), 64–69 (MS Vindobona), 118 (MS Adler); Günter Schlichting, *Ein jüdisches Leben Jesu: Die verschollene Toledot-Jeschu-Fassung Tam ū-mū'ād* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1982), 65–67, 87–89, and 99. On the development of this literature as a whole, see especially Jean Paul Osier, *L'évangile du ghetto* (Paris: Berg International, 1984); R. Di Segni, *Il Vangelo del Ghetto* (Magia e religioni 8; Rome: Newton Compton, 1985); William Horbury, "A Critical Examination of the *Toledoth Yeshu*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1970).

system of purity practice. Yet, at the same time as the unit adopts the theoretical terms set out in the purity literature, it draws its narrative content from the martyrological tradition. I show that the central episodes of Rabbi Ishmael's life recounted in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* all directly hinge on the radical claims put forward in the "annunciation" scene concerning his angelic purity and beauty. Finally, I offer some concluding reflections on the significance of this narrative tradition for our understanding of the complex and, at times, paradoxical nature of Jewish cultural expression in the Byzantine period.

Visuality and Gynecological Science in Late Antiquity

Before considering the literary and ideological origins of the "annunciation" scene in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*, I will first present the relevant text in its entirety.[12]

> VII.11.10. [Every time Rabbi Ishmael wished to ascend to heaven (לעלות לרקיע), he would ascend. 11. Why was Rabbi Ishmael worthy of this (ולמה זכה ר' ישמעאל לכך). The reason is because (-מפני ש)][13] his father was Elishah the

[12] I translate and number the text following *Ten Martyrs*, VII.11.16–23 (Reeg, *Geschichte*, 19*). The unit also appears at I.15.11–30; V and VIII.11.16–23. I.15.11–30 seems to represent a relatively independent textual form, whereas the versions in recensions V, VII, and VIII stand in close relationship to each other as well as to the variations found in other medieval sources: *Liqute ha-Pardes* (attributed most likely to R. Solomon ben Isaac's disciple Rabbi Shemaya), Amsterdam 1715, 4a; Munkács, 1897, 6b–7a; *Sefer ha-Miqtso'ot*, 13–14; Eleazar of Worms, *Sefer ha-Roqeah*, "Hilkhot Niddah," 317; Isaac ben Moses of Vienna, *'Or Zaru'a*, Alpha Beta 29; Isaac of Dura, *Sha'are Dura*, "Hilkhot Niddah," 2:23; Menahem Tsioni, *Sefer Tsioni*, 78a; Azariah de Fano, *Sefer Gilgul Neshamot*, 8–29; MS New York-JTSA ENA 3021, fol. 1a (entitled *Zehirut ha-Tevillah*); MS Paris-BN 1408, fol. 67a; MS New York-JTSA Mic. 1842, fol. 192a–b (entitled *Hayye Nefesh* by Isaiah ben Joseph). See also the version in Moses Gaster, *Ma'aseh Book: Book of Jewish Tales and Legends Translated from the Judeo-German* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1934), 237–39; "Shivhe R. Ishmael Kohen Gadol," in *Hadashim gam yeshanim* (ed. A. M. Haberman; Jerusalem: R. Mas, 1975), 86. These attestations have been collected from Ch. M. Horowitz, *Tosefta 'Atiqta* (5 vols.; Frankfurt am Main, 1889), 4.7–15 and 5.VIII–IX (several of the versions are transcribed at 5.43–54, 57–61); Bin Gorion, *Memekor Yisrael*, 3.106 n. 5; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), 212–14, esp. n. 96; Michael Swartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 162–65, esp. n. 66; Evyatar Marienberg, "Etudes sur la Baraita de Niddah et sur la conceptualisation de la menstruation dans le monde juif et son echo dans le monde chrétien de l'époque medieval à nos jours" (Ph.D. diss., EHESS Paris, 2002), 485–514.

[13] The material in brackets is a redactional frame that appears only in recensions V, VII–VIII.11.11 and is not integral to the pericope.

> High Priest.[14] None of his children lived (ולא היו מתקיימין לו בנים), since, at the moment when his wife would give birth, the child would die (היה מת אותו ילד).[15] 12. His wife said to him: "Why do those wholly pious people have sons who are pious like them (מפני מה להללו צדיקים גמורי' יש להם בנים כמותם גמורים[16]), whereas we do not have even a single son who remains alive?" 14. He answered her: "They always purify themselves in the ritual bath before sexual intercourse (הם נוהגין בנפשותיהן טהרה וטבילה בשעה שהם עולים למטה בשעת תשמיש),[17] whether or not the law prescribes it (בין בדבר ובין שלא בדבר),[18] both they and their wives (הם ונשיהם)." 15. She said: "If that is so, then we too shall adopt this practice." They immediately did so.
>
> 16. One time, this pious woman went down to the bathhouse (לבית הטבילה) and immersed herself (וטבלה). But when she emerged (ועלתה), she saw (וראתה) a pig in front of her.[19] She returned (חזרה) to the bathhouse and (again) immersed herself. When she emerged, she saw a camel. She returned, immersed herself, emerged, and saw a leper (חזרה וטבלה ועלתה וראתה מצורע). She returned and immersed herself forty times.[20]
>
> 17. After the fortieth time, the Holy One blessed be He said to Metatron:[21] "Descend and stand before that pious woman (רד ועמוד לפני הצדקת הזאת) and tell her that tonight she will become pregnant with a son (תתעברי בן זכר) and his name will be Rabbi Ishmael." 18. Metatron straight away descended in the form of a human being (דמות בן אדם). He clothed himself and adorned himself (ונתעטף והקשיט את עצמו) and stood at the opening of the ritual bath

[14] In recension I alone Rabbi Ishmael's father is R. Yose and not Elisha the High Priest.

[15] In all the versions of the story, Rabbi Ishmael's mother is not barren, but instead has lost all of her children during childbirth. Only in recension I is it at all possible that she is barren: "We have not had success with children, since we have no heir, neither son nor daughter (ואנו לא הצלחנו בבנים כי אין לנו יורש בן או בת)."

[16] The other recensions read צדיקים rather than גמורים.

[17] בשעת תשמיש is, of course, an unnecessary gloss. Recension VIII offers the more straightforward formulation: מפני שנותני' מטותיהן בטהרה.

[18] This enigmatic phrase is difficult to interpret, but seems to indicate that these "righteous people" have exceeded the required practice.

[19] In some versions, a dog and a camel are added to this list of impure animals, and in some she also encounters an "ignoramus" (*'am ha-aretz*).

[20] The number of repetitions is highly variable. Recension VII agrees with recension VIII (and with *Liqute ha-Pardes*) that she repeated the procedure forty times. Recension I doubles the number to eighty times. *Sefer ha-Miqtso'ot* reports that she did so ten times. Recension V restricts the number to "several times" (כמה פעמים).

[21] In most versions of the narrative (including recensions VII and VIII), the angelic messenger is named Metatron. By contrast, in recension I and *Liqute ha-Pardes* the angel is named Gabriel. In recension V, which initially casts Metatron in the role of the angel (V.11.17), Gabriel joins Metatron outside the bathhouse (V.11.18) and entirely displaces Metatron in the latter half of the narrative (V.11.20–23). Even here in recension VII, Gabriel makes an appearance at the end of the unit (VII.11.23), where he seems to have been carried over into this recension from one of the other versions. In the *'Or Zaru'a*, the angel is identified as the *Sar Torah*, which may indicate that this version was once incorporated into magical material.

(על פתח המקוה). [19. From this you learn that a man must adorn himself in fine clothing and go stand before his wife when she emerges from immersion.][22] 21. She emerged, saw him, went home, and became pregnant that very night with Rabbi Ishmael. His form was beautiful like the form of Metatron (והיה דמותו כיופיות דמות מטטרון), the god-father (סינדיקנוס) of Rabbi Ishmael, 22. so that every time that Rabbi Ishmael wished to ascend to the heavens he would pronounce the divine name (היה מזכיר השם) and, when he ascended, 23. Gabriel (sic)[23] would tell him anything he wanted.

Because of the aggressive process of redactional adaptation to which the unit was subjected in the course of its transmission, it is nearly impossible, if not methodologically irresponsible, to try to deduce which of its many extant versions, if any, might represent its original formulation.[24] Gottfried Reeg, however, has convincingly argued the unit developed and circulated independently from the martyrological anthology and was incorporated into it only at a relatively late point in its transmission.[25] He bases this insight on the unit's relative infrequency within the manuscripts of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* – it appears in only four of the ten recensions of the text (i.e., I, V, VII, VIII) – as well as on its shifting redactional context. The unit appears in two different locations within the anthology's narrative progression. In each case, it serves a different function: recension I links the unit to a discussion of Rabbi Ishmael's beautiful appearance, while recensions V, VII, and VIII situate the narrative immediately before Rabbi Ishmael's heavenly ascent, thereby transforming the narrative into an aetiology of his unique powers. Moreover, the peculiar ethical form of the story – its overt encouragement of proper behavior and its promise of reward – is awkward in the martyrological context and, as we will see, more naturally conforms to the ethical (*Musar*) literature from which it likely emerged.

Despite this considerable textual instability, all the versions of the narrative share a common understanding of Rabbi Ishmael's miraculous conception, merging rigorist purity practice and pietism with a visual theory of procreation. In this amalgamation, impurity and divine favor are both mediated through the medium of sight. The narrative puts the very act of seeing an unclean animal or an impure skin blemish on par with the standard regulations concerning actual physical contact with the sources of impurity, thus going far beyond the normal strictures surrounding

[22] This hortatory statement, which treats the surrounding narrative as an elaborate *exemplum*, is found in the martyrology only in recensions V and VII. It is common in the purity literature (e.g., MS New York-JTSA ENA 3021, fol. 1a/9).

[23] See n. 21 above.

[24] Horowitz, *Tosefta 'Atiqta*, 4.14 tentatively suggests that *Liqute ha-Pardes*, *Sefer ha-Miqtso'ot*, and *Sefer ha-Roqeaḥ* preserve the earliest form of the narrative and that the versions in the martyrological anthology represent secondary revisions.

[25] Reeg, *Geschichte*, 40.

contact impurity in conventional Jewish law. Strikingly, the same mechanism that exposes Rabbi Ishmael's mother to the dangers of impurity and the associated threat to her newborn children bestows upon him his distinctive character and appearance. Although the angel does not adopt the appearance of a specific human being, the narrative's emphasis on the angel's capacity to assume "human form" (דמות בן אדם) highlights the physical concreteness of the theory of visual procreation it assumes.[26]

The theory of visual "impressions" operative in the narrative would not have struck the late antique reader as remarkable.[27] Indeed, its basic premise, that visual stimuli can influence the process of gestation, was a commonplace in certain branches of Greek and Latin gynecology.[28] It is already prefigured in the patriarch Jacob's exercise in eugenics through which he produced mottled sheep by placing striped twigs in front of the flock during breeding: "The rods that he had peeled he set up in front of the flocks in the troughs .... Their mating occurred when they came to drink, and since the goats mated by the rods, the goats brought forth streaked, speckled, and spotted young."[29] In his commentary on this biblical passage, Jerome goes to great lengths to explain the narrative in terms of contemporary genetic theory.[30] Augustine, too, cites this biblical precedent in his only partly-successful attempt to provide scientific grounding both for his theory of original sin and his conception of the relationship between body and soul.[31] *The Testaments of the Twelve*

[26] Recension I departs from the majority tradition when it says that the angel (Gabriel) took on the appearance of the husband, in this case Rabbi Yose (I.15.16–17): לה כדמות ר' יוסי בעלה והיה נדמה (cf. MS New York-JTSA ENA 3021, 1a/8). The idea that angels could assume the form of a particular human being is discussed in Wolfson, *Speculum*, 212–13, although he nowhere indicates that recension I diverges from the majority tradition precisely on this matter.

[27] An impressive number of ancient, medieval, and even modern sources that attest to the endurance of this theory in the medical tradition are collected and discussed in M. D. Reeve, "Conceptions," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 215 (1989): 113–43. See also the interesting observations concerning the place of this theory in Western notions of human imagination in Silvio Curletto, "L'immaginazione e il concepimento: Fortuna di una teoria embriogenetica e di un mito letterario," *Maia* 52 (2000): 533–64.

[28] Galen, *De theriaca*, 11; Soranus, *Gyn.* 1.39; Caelius Aurelianus, *Gyn.* 1.50. On the place of this branch of gynecological theory in Greek medicine, see G. E. R. Lloyd, *Science, Folklore, and Ideology: Studies in the Life Sciences of Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 174–80.

[29] Gen 30:25–39. All citations from the Hebrew Bible are from the JPS translation.

[30] The relevant passage is translated in C. T. R. Hayward, *Saint Jerome's Hebraicae quaestiones on Genesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 66–68.

[31] I cite here only one example of Augustine's argumentation: "In other animals, whose bodily bulk does not lend itself so easily to such changes, the fetus usually shows some traces of the passionate desires of their mothers, whatever it was that they gazed upon with great delight. For the more tender and, so to speak, the more formable

Patriarchs employs a similar notion to explain how the "sons of God" (בני האלהים) of Gen 6:1–4 were able to procreate with human women after descending to earth:

> It was thus that they (human women) allured the Watchers before the flood; for, as a result of seeing them continually, the Watchers lusted after one another, and they conceived the act in their minds and changed themselves into the shape of men and appeared to the women when they were having intercourse with their husbands. And the women, lusting in their minds after their phantom forms, gave birth to giants (for the Watchers seemed to be them tall enough to touch the sky).[32]

Although the descending angels here intrude in the course of the sexual act itself rather than during the elaborate preparations for it, there are obvious affinities between Rabbi Ishmael and the monstrous progeny of this episode of primeval transgression. Yet, whereas their angelic paternity dooms them to drag humanity down into sin, Rabbi Ishmael's represents its opposite, the legitimate and even redemptive unification of the heavenly and the earthly realms.

This same theory of visual conception, however, can be found much closer to the cultural context in which the Rabbi Ishmael legend developed. Midrashic sources explicitly employ this theory in order to elucidate these early Jewish traditions about the "sons of God:"

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the original seeds were, the more effectually and the more capably do they follow the inclination of their mother's soul, and the fantasy which arose in it through the body upon which it looked with passion. There are numerous examples of this which could be mentioned, but one from the most trustworthy books will suffice: in order that the sheep and the she-goats might give birth the speckled offspring, Jacob had rods of various colors placed before them in the watering-troughs, to look at as they drank, during that period when they had conceived" (*De Trinitate*, II, 5; trans. in Stephen McKenna, *The Trinity* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1963], 321–22). Cf. *De Trinitate*, III, 15; *Against Julian*, V, 51–52; *Against Julian*, VI, 43; *Retractatio* II, 62, 2. On the importance of this issue in Augustine's thought, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "Vitiated Seeds and Holy Vessels: Augustine's Manichean Past," in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Antique Christianity* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellon Press, 1986), 291–349.

[32] *T. Reu.* 5:6–7 (Translation by Marinus de Jonge in *The Apocryphal Old Testament* [ed. H. F. D. Sparks; Oxford: Clarendon, 1984], 519–20). There are numerous allusions to the story of the Watchers in early Jewish literature (e.g., *1 En.* 6–16 and *passim*; *T. Naph.* 3:5; *Jub.* 4:15–22, 7:21, 8:3, 10:5; *CD* 2.18). Compare the counter-tradition concerning the miraculous birth of Noah in which Lamech's apparently erroneous concern that his son's angelic visage is a sign of his fallen-angelic parentage is assuaged (*1 En.* 106–7; 1QapGn ii–v). On the place of the fallen-angel myth in late antique Judaism and Christianity, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, "What the Fallen Angels Taught: The Reception-History of the *Book of the Watchers* in Judaism and Christianity" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2002).

> *It was then, and later too, that the divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men* (Gen 6:4). Rabbi Berekhiah said: A woman would go to the marketplace, see a young man, and desire him (מתאוה לו). She would then go have sexual intercourse and give birth to a child just like him (היתה מעמדת בחור כיוצא בו)."[33]

In a similarly vein, a narrative unit contained in a number of midrashic works recounts that the "cushite" King of the Arabs came to Rabbi Akiva for advice after accusing his wife of adultery because she had given birth to a white child.[34] Without further prompting, the rabbi immediately asks whether the figures painted on the wall of the couple's house are black or white (צורות ביתך שחורות או לבנות). When he learns that they are white, he reassures the anxious father that his wife must have been looking at them when she conceived. Interestingly, this brief rabbinic tradition offers an almost perfect précis of Heliodorus' vast novel, *The Aethiopica*, which similarly turns on the problem of skin color. Through myriad narrative twists and turns, the novel's protagonist, Charikleia, learns that, despite her white skin, she is in fact the daughter of the King and Queen of Ethiopia.[35] Apparently, the royal couple has given birth to this remarkable child because the Queen gazed at the beautiful image of Andromeda painted on the wall of their bedroom during sexual intercourse, an event that has stamped their child with the exact appearance of the Greek heroine. Fearing that she will be accused of adultery, Charikleia's mother arranges for her to be cared for by others and tells her husband that the newborn has died during childbirth. While the midrash and Heliodorus may simply reflect a common folk motif, Rabbi Akiva's question regarding the existence of the painted figures – a detail that is not otherwise accounted for in the midrashic sources – suggests that *The Aethiopica* itself or, more likely, its underlying narrative kernel somehow exerted an influence on the rabbinic authors. Whatever the channels of influence, it proves significant that Charikleia's inheritance of the specific appearance of a heroic figure from the mythic

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[33] *Gen. Rab.* 26:7 (translation mine); cf. *Tanh. B*, *Bereshit* 40. I would like to thank Annette Yoshiko Reed for calling my attention to this tradition.

[34] *Gen. Rab.* 73:10; *Num. Rab.* 9:34; *Tanh., Naso'* 7. These sources are collected in Horowitz, *Tosefta 'Atiqta*, 5.55–56. I follow the narrative sequence and language of the *Tanhuma* version. In some versions, this figure is identified as the king of the Arabs, while in others simply as "an Ethiopian" (כושי אחד). Just as in Jerome's *Quaestiones hebraicae* on Gen 30:35–43, the predicament of the Ethiopian king is used in each of these versions to provide validation for Jacob's strange breeding technique. Jerome and the Rabbis may here be transmitting a common exegetical tradition, although it is also possible that this interpretative strategy developed independently in the two contexts.

[35] Heliodorus, *Aethiopica* 4.8; 10.14. On the function of this theme within the novel's complex narrative, see especially Michael J. Anderson, "The Sophrosyne of Persinna and the Romantic Strategy of Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*," *Classical Philology* 92 (1997): 303–22.

past comes very close to Rabbi Ishmael's physical kinship with Metatron. Heliodorus shared with the Jewish texts that we have been looking at a common set of literary motifs and scientific knowledge from which to build his narrative.

Rabbinic literature, however, often viewed this theory of "maternal impression" through the lens of purity regulation. In fact, the story about Rabbi Ishmael draws explicitly on Rabbi Yohanan's unusual practice of standing outside the ritual bath so that the women who saw him after purifying themselves would have children as handsome as he.

> R. Yohanan used to go sit outside the ritual bath (הוה אזיל ויתיב אשערי טבילה). He said: "When the daughters of Israel come out from the bath, let them meet me (מצוה לפגעו בי)[36] so that they will have children as beautiful as I am (דשפירי כוותי)." The Rabbis said to him: "Are you not afraid of the Evil Eye (מעינא בישא)?" He answered: "I am of the seed of Joseph, our father, of whom it is said, *Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring* (Gen 49:22)."[37]

Rabbi Ishmael's story echoes the specific terminology of this description of Rabbi Yohanan's curious form of public service: both passages use the root פגע to describe the encounter outside the bathhouse.[38] It is this distinctive mixture of gynecological science and purity practice that connects the story of Rabbi Ishmael's conception to these earlier rabbinic traditions. At the same time, the interest in purity sets them both apart from the general cultural discourse in which they participated.

Purity, Piety, and Procreation: *Beraita de Niddah*

When the narrative of Rabbi Ishmael's conception is not found in the context of the martyrological literature, it appears in a number of instructional manuals and legal texts as a freestanding narrative

[36] The parallel version at *b. Ber.* 20a reads "they look at me" (מסתכלן בי).

[37] *b. B. Metsia* 84a (I have slightly modified the translation in Daniel Boyarin, "Talmudic Texts and Jewish Social Life," in *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice* [ed. R. Valantasis; Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000], 136). Compare the parallel text at *b. Ber.* 20a. Rabbi Yohanan also discusses the importance of ritual bathing for procreation at *b. 'Erub.* 55b. On Rabbi Yohanan's eroticized relationship with Resh Lakish (*b. B. Metsia* 84a–b) and the importance of this narrative for the formation of rabbinic scholastic culture, see Daniel Boyarin, "Rabbis and their Pals: Rabbinic Homosociality and the Lives of Women," in *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1997), 127–50.

[38] The term פגע is also found in a similar context at *b. Pes.* 111a, where the dangers of encountering a woman immediately after she has completed her ablutions are described.

exhortation to proper purity practice.[39] The stringent form of Jewish purity law reflected in these texts was particular to the Franco-German cultural sphere in the later Middle Ages, but seems to have spread along with so much else in medieval Ashkenazi culture to these nascent centers of Jewish life from the Land of Israel; hence, this branch of Jewish purity law is best viewed not as a deviation from a firmly established norm but rather as a later refraction of what was originally a legitimate local practice.[40] This mode of purity practice is most fully described in the enigmatic text *Beraita de Niddah* (*BdN*).[41] The text, consisting of a collection of legal statements and narrative *exempla*, seems to have its origins in the Jewish community of Byzantine Palestine in the sixth and seventh centuries and, according to Shaye Cohen, reflects that community's new tendency to equate the synagogue with the Jerusalem Temple.[42] Whether or not *BdN* actually existed as a literary whole as

[39] See the sources listed in n. 12 above, especially *Liqute ha-Pardes*, *Sefer ha-Roqeah*, *Sha'are Dura*, *Zehirut ha-Tevillah*.

[40] On the purity practices of Ashkenazi Jews, see especially Israel Ta-Shma, "On Some Franco-German Niddah Practices," *Sidra* 9 (1993): 163–70 [Hebrew]; also idem, *Early Franco-German Ritual and Custom* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992), esp. 57 [Hebrew]. On polemical responses to the diversity of purity ritual practiced throughout the medieval Jewish world, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Purity, Piety, and Polemic: Medieval Rabbinic Denunciations of 'Incorrect' Purification Practices," in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* (ed. R. Wasserfall; Hanover: Brandeis UP, 1999), 82–100.

[41] A version of the text is available in Horowitz, *Tosefta 'Atiqta*, 5.1–34 (all citations of the text follow Horowitz's chapter divisions and page numbers). The sources collected and discussed by Horowitz have been thoroughly reevaluated in Marienberg, *Beraita de Niddah*. Marienberg is currently preparing a critical edition of the text with French translation.

[42] Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Menstruants and the Sacred in Judaism and Christianity," in *Women's History and Ancient History* (ed. S. B. Pomeroy; Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina, 1991), 285: "By the time of *Beraita de Nidda*, however, the synagogue was becoming a surrogate temple, a development confirmed by archaeology. In the sixth and seventh centuries synagogues were regularly outfitted with an ark, an eternal flame, and representations of temple vessels ...." Cohen calls special attention to the description of Palestinian purity practice in *Differences between the Jews of the East and the Jews of the Land of Israel*, 79 sect. 11. This date and provenance are supported in Saul Lieberman, *Sheqi'in* (Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrmann, 1939), 22. See also Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Purity and Piety: The Separation of Menstruants from the *Sancta*," in *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue* (ed. S. Grossman and R. Haut; Philadelphia: JPS, 1992), 103–15; Sharon Koren, "'The Woman from whom God Wanders': The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1999), esp. 102–26; idem, "Mystical Rationales for the Laws of *Niddah*," in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* (ed. R. Wasserfall; Hanover: Brandeis UP, 1999), 101–21; Yedidyah Dinari, "The Customs of Menstrual Impurity: Their Origin and Development," *Tarbiz* 49 (1979–80): 302–24 [Hebrew].

early as the Geonic period,[43] the traditions attested therein do conform to earlier Palestinian practice.

Although the "annunciation" scene does not occur in *BdN*, it is this collection that offers the most sustained source for understanding this story. It presents a wide range of para-halakhic strictures that severely limit the activities of the menstruant: one could not enjoy the fruits of her labor (*BdN* 1:2); she could not enter the synagogue or house of study (*BdN* 3:4); one could not greet her or say a blessing in her presence lest she respond with "amen" or with the name of God, thereby desecrating it (*BdN* 2:5). Her social exclusion was absolute. Even the speech of the menstruant was considered impure (*BdN* 2:3). She could not comb her hair or shake her head lest a hair fall out and convey impurity to her husband (*BdN* 1:4). Finally, contrary to standard Talmudic sources (*b. Bek.* 27a and *m. Niddah* 10.7), *BdN* ranks the maintenance of its purity laws above a woman's other obligations, barring the menstruant from the commandments of *hallah* (separating the priestly offering from dough) and of lighting the Sabbath candles. For *BdN*, menstrual impurity had become a dangerous state from which public life had to be assiduously guarded.

Amongst its idiosyncratic (though influential) rulings *BdN* includes explicit discussion of the role of visual stimuli in the process of procreation. One such passage reports in the name of Rabbi Hanina[44] that "at the time when she immerses, if she encounters (פגעה) a dog, if she is wise and has fear of heaven, she will not allow her husband to have intercourse with her that night. Why? Lest her sons be ugly and their faces resemble a dog's, she returns and immerses again."[45] The passage continues by listing similar cases concerning a donkey and an ignoramus (עם הארץ). The tendency to enumerate such encounters in a series of parallel cases is a distinctive feature of this literature, one employed in the "annunciation" scene to great effect. Like the sources of impurity encountered by Rabbi Ishmael's mother, these dangerous types of people and animals pose a threat to a woman's capacity to conceive a healthy child.

Oddly enough, however, the notion of visually transmitted danger described in these texts does not coincide fully with the categories of ritual impurity that have their roots in biblical, or perhaps better, levitical,

[43] Prof. Shaye Cohen has suggested to me the possibility that, as with so much late antique Jewish literature, the existence of this work as a redactionally unified composition may be no more than a scribal fiction of the later Middle Ages (oral communication).

[44] Perhaps to be identified with Rabbi Hanina ben ha-Qanah (=Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Qanah). On this identification see below.

[45] *BdN* 1:1 (Horowitz, *Tosefta 'Atiqta*, 5.2).

purity concerns. In fact, in the same passage, *BdN* instructs that, if a woman sees a horse, she and her husband should have sex that night: "Happy is one whose mother came upon a horse; her sons are beautiful in carriage and speech, hearing, understanding and learning Torah and Mishnah ...."[46] This detail represents an important inconsistency in the text's discursive logic since, after all, a horse is no more or less pure than a dog. At least in this case, *BdN* is concerned wholly with the animal's impact on the "ethical" attributes of the child and does not view the horse through the lens of ritual purity. This reasoning should apply equally to the dog and the ignoramus. Just as in non-Jewish sources, these are ethical types and not potential carriers of ritual impurity. What we find here, then, is that *BdN* has wed the conventional theory of visual "impressions" to its basic framework of levitical regulations. Just as ritual immersion removes impurity in conventional Jewish law, in the context of this hybrid discourse it is said to erase, as it were, the damaging images that have become imprinted in the woman. Yet, despite the tensions between these systems, it is virtually impossible to separate them out once they have been integrated, however incompletely, within the purity literature. Indeed, as we will see, the boundary between levitical purity and other forms of purification, such as those that precede ascent and adjuration in late antique Jewish and non-Jewish magical literature, is impossible to fix in this material. *BdN*'s kitchen sink approach to ritual purity lumps together what we might prefer to imagine as wholly separate systems of purity or simply procreative science. The creators and consumers of this "post-levitical" purity discourse seem not to have been interested in strict categorization. For *BdN*, just as for the account of Rabbi Ishmael's conception, purity, piety, and procreation are inextricable.

In fact, even in sections of *BdN* that do not explicitly relate to conception and procreation, vision serves as the principal medium through which impurity is conveyed. The text recounts that a certain Rabbi Hanina ben ha-Qanah, likely the same Rabbi responsible for the list of dangers discussed above, "was once walking on the road and came across a woman. He covered his eyes and distanced himself from her three paces."[47] The Rabbi seems to have an almost preternatural sensitivity to impurity; he senses her impurity even before she has approached him. More importantly, he carefully covers his face so that her impurity will not enter him through his eyes. Scholars have long noticed the strong similarities between this figure in *BdN* and the almost identically named Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Qanah of the Hekhalot

[46] *BdN* 1:1 (Horowitz, *Tosefta 'Atiqta*, 5.3).

[47] *BdN* 1:7 (Horowitz, *Tosefta 'Atiqta*, 5.9).

corpus,[48] whose disciples famously bring him back from before God's chariot-throne using a piece of cotton tainted with a minuscule trace of menstrual impurity.[49] Indeed, this rigorist brand of purity practice in which "magical" practice and halakhah are interwoven seems to be at the heart of the many ideological affinities between *BdN* and the Hekhalot literature. Within the context of the Jewish mystical and magical literature of Late Antiquity, practices to achieve a heightened state of ritual purity are most commonly intended as preparation for revelatory adjuration (and not primarily for heavenly ascent).[50] This notional background may very well have informed the conception narrative's description of Metatron's appearance to the mother of Rabbi Ishmael. As in so many adjurational texts, the power to draw down an angel for specific practical aims is here predicated on the attainment of proper levels of ritual purity.

Interestingly enough, angels do not play only constructive roles in *BdN*'s understanding of conception. In its description of the causes of birth defects, the text attributes a malevolent aspect to angelic intervention as well:

> When the father has intercourse with the mother, if he thinks of her as a prostitute (חושבה כזונה), and neither of them act with the fear of heaven, and he has sex with her light-heartedly (בליצנות), and both of them laugh during the time of their pleasure (בשעת הנאתן), what does the Holy One blessed be He do to the fetus? Before the fetus has left the mother's womb, He summons (lit. hints to: -רומז ל) an angel, who takes blood of menstrual impurity (דם נידה), places it in the mouth of the fetus so that it enters its body, and it is immediate struck (לוקה) [with a defect].[51]

[48] This identification was first pointed out in Saul Lieberman, "The Knowledge of Halakha by the Author (or Authors) of the *Heikhaloth*," Appendix 2 of Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (AGJU 14; Leiden: Brill, 1980), 241–44.

[49] *Hekhalot Rabbati*, §§224–228. Hekhalot paragraph designations are given according to Peter Schäfer's *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981). This well-known passage has received a great deal of scholarly attention, most notably, Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Recall of Rabbi Nehuniah Ben Ha-Qanah from Ecstasy in Hekhalot Rabbati," *AJS Review* 1 (1976): 269–81; Margarete Schlüter, "Die Erzälung von der Rückholung des R. Nehunya ben Haqana aus der *Merkava*-Schau in ihrem redaktionellen Rahmen," *FJB* 10 (1982): 65–109.

[50] On purity practice in the Hekhalot corpus and especially its primary connection to angelic adjuration, see Peter Schäfer, "Engel und Menschen in der Hekhalot-Literature," *Kairos* 22 (1980): 201–25 (rev. and repr. in *Hekhalot-Studien* [TSAJ 19; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988], 250–76); Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 106–14; Swartz, *Scholastic Magic*, 153–72; idem, "'Like the Ministering Angels': Ritual and Purity in Early Jewish Mysticism and Magic," *AJS Review* 19 (1994): 135–67; Rebecca Macy Lesses, *Ritual Practices to Gain Power: Angels, Incantations, and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1989); idem, "Speaking with the Angels: Jewish and Greco-Egyptian Revelatory Adjurations," *HTR* 89 (1996): 41–60.

Here we find the text's familiar tendency to conflate ethical and cultic categories at its most extravagant. The deleterious effects of immoral thoughts are put on par with failure to attend to one's condition of ritual impurity. Whereas Rabbi Ishmael's parents demonstrate their piety by embracing the strictures of purity law and are duly rewarded, the parents in this passage bring harm to their child through decadent attitudes towards sexual intercourse. Not surprisingly, the medium of punishment is menstrual blood.

Other portions of the text betray a similar interest in the notion of divine intervention in the process of procreation. Basing itself on biblical precedent, the text asserts that the miraculous fruitfulness of each of the matriarchs, Sarah, Rachel, and Leah, should be attributed to her careful maintenance of purity regulations.[52] More interesting still, its account of Samson's conception in Judges 13 emphasizes the added element of angelic intervention. The text reports that, despite her female neighbors' (שכינותיה) advice to employ a magical remedy involving the hide of a fox (עורו של שועל) as a cure for her barrenness, Manoah's wife chooses instead simply to continue being vigilant about her state of ritual purity: "Although they led her astray (אע"פ שהיו מכזבות בה), the Holy One blessed be He heard her voice. Immediately, an angel appeared to her and said to her: 'Take care not to eat any impure thing (הזהרי ואל תאכלי כל טמא).' And, because she maintained her purity (ועל ידי ששמרה את נדתה), she immediately conceived (מיד נפקדה)."[53] In this "annunciation" scene, it is not her piety in general that is rewarded, but her steadfast dedication to the purity laws in particular, coupled with her refusal to engage in magical practice. Whatever the tangible similarities between this form of rigorist purity practice and late antique Jewish magic, *BdN* vigilantly insists on a firm boundary between them.

Although the purity discourse, of which *BdN* is the most developed example, accounts for the formal logic and vocabulary of Rabbi Ishmael's conception, the larger context of this narrative unit still demands elucidation. In other words, where does the literary fabric of this brief *exemplum* – its characters and its dramatic setting – come from? As we have seen, the presence of the "annunciation" scene in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* presents us with a paradox. On the one hand, in strictly formal terms this narrative unit achieved its present literary form outside of the martyrological tradition – the story reflects the practical, ethical, and ritual concerns of the purity literature in which it developed. On the

[51] *BdN* 2:7 (Horowitz, *Tosefta 'Atiqta*, 5.20).

[52] *BdN* 2:6 (Horowitz, *Tosefta 'Atiqta*, 5.19).

[53] *BdN* 2:6 (Horowitz, *Tosefta 'Atiqta*, 5.19).

other, its narrative content is so integrally connected to the later events of Rabbi Ishmael's life that it is difficult to imagine how these motifs could have been generated and orchestrated in so coherent a manner without presupposing a tradition concerning his miraculous origins. Nevertheless, the complex process of redaction through which the martyrological anthology was assembled belies any overly elegant solution to this tension. In what follows, I argue that, while this narrative tradition was incorporated into the anthology only after it had already become crystallized in another literary context, its thematic content is essential to understanding the figure of Rabbi Ishmael within *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*.

Rabbi Ishmael's Angelic Purity and Beauty in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*

Despite being set during the "Hadrianic persecutions" of the second century CE, the martyrological anthology as a fully formed literary composition dates to the Geonic period (seventh to tenth centuries). Jewish historians have long endeavored to isolate the historical kernel concealed in the multiple and shifting versions of this legend.[54] More recent scholarship, however, has come to reject the positivist assumptions of these earlier attempts, preferring instead to emphasize the literary nature of the cycle.[55] According to these scholars, the text is only of

[54] See especially Heinrich Grätz, "Die Hadrianische Verfolgung und die zehn Märtyrer," *MGWJ* 1 (1852): 307–22; M. Auerbach, "Asarah Haruge Malkhut," *Jeschurun* 10 (1923): 60–66; idem, "Zur politischen Geschichte der Juden unter Kaiser Hadrian," *Jeschurun* 10 (1923): 398–418; idem, "Zur politischen Geschichte der Juden unter Kaiser Hadrian," *Jeschurun* 11 (1924): 59–70, 161–68; Samuel Krauss, "Asarah Haruge Malkhut," *Hashlah* 44 (1925): 10–22, 106–17, 222–33 (repr. in *Bar-Kokhba* [ed. A. Oppenhiemer; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1980], 239–77); N. Wahrmann, "Zur Frage der 'Zehn Märtyrern,'" *MGWJ* 78 (1934): 575–80; Louis Finkelstein, "The Ten Martyrs," in *Essays and Studies in Memory of Linda R. Miller* (ed. I. Davidson; New York: JTSA, 1938), 29–55.

[55] This literary approach was inaugurated in Solomon Zeitlin, "The Legend of the Ten Martyrs and its Apocalyptic Origins," *JQR* 36 (1945/6): 1–16. See also Joseph Dan, "The Story of the Ten Martyrs: Its Origins and Development," in *Studies in Literature Presented to Simon Halkin* (ed. E. Fleischer; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1973), 15–22; idem, "The Story of the Ten Martyrs: Its Origins and Development," in *The Hebrew Story in the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 62–66 [Hebrew]; idem, "Pirke Hekhalot Rabbati ve-Ma'ase Asarat Haruge Malkhut," *Eshel Be'er Sheba'* 2 (1980): 63–80 [Hebrew]; Reeg, *Geschichte*, 1–2. For detailed analysis of the full range of rabbinic sources related to this period of conflict and alleged persecution, see especially Peter Schäfer, *Der Bar Kokhba-Aufstand. Studien zum zweiten jüdischen Krieg gegen Rom* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981), 194–236. Schäfer's emphasis on the ongoing literary

historical value for understanding the experience of the Jews under East-Roman (Byzantine) rule in the period of its actual literary formation, not the earlier community from which its characters are drawn.[56]

The story weaves together a unified tale from pre-existing martyrological material found scattered throughout the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds as well as the vast midrashic corpus, together with a number of units that seem to have been generated specifically for the anthology itself.[57] The result is a new form of martyrology. Classical rabbinic literature, for instance, nowhere recounts the contemporaneous deaths of ten rabbinic martyrs, but instead restricts itself to brief narrative complexes that typically narrate the death of one martyr, and at most two or three.[58] By contrast, the anthology situates the executions of all ten sages within a single literary framework that offers a common explanation for their deaths, namely, the sin committed by Joseph's brothers when they sold him into slavery (Genesis 38).[59] Basing itself on the

transformation of these traditions in later rabbinic sources is an important corrective to the more positivist interpretation of the evidence in Saul Lieberman, "The Martyrs of Caesarea," *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves* 7 (1939–1944): 395–446; idem, "Religious Persecution of the Jews," in *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday* (Jerusalem: The American Academy of Jewish Research, 1974), 213–45 (repr. in *The Bar-Kokhba Revolt* [ed. A. Oppenheimer; Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 1980], 205–37) [Hebrew]; Moshe David Herr, "Persecutions and Martyrdom in Hadrian's Days," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 23 (1972): 85–125.

[56] This insight was first suggested in Philip Block, "Rom und die Mystiker der Merkabah," in *Festschrift zum siebzigsten Geburtstage J. Guttmanns* (Leibzig, 1915), 113–24.

[57] On the use of earlier rabbinic sources in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*, see Reeg, *Geschichte*, 49–51. Otherwise unattested material is used in the martyrological accounts of Rabbi Judah ben Bava (I.43), Yeshevav the Scribe (I.50; III–VII.44), Rabbi Judah ben Dama (I.46); Rabbi Hanina ben Hakhinai (I, III–V.49); and Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua (I–II, IV–VII.51).

[58] E.g., for the death of Rabbi Akiva: *y. Ber.* 9,7 (14b); *Mek. Y., Shirata* on Exod 15:2; *b. Ber.* 61b; *b. Erub.* 21b; *b. Ber.* 66a; *b. Pesah.* 50a; *b. B. Bat.* 10b; of Rabbi Hananya ben Teradyon: *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 17b–18a; of Rabbi Yehudah ben Bava: *b. Sanh.* 14a and *b. 'Abod. Zar* 8b; of Judah the Baker: *y. Hag.* 2,1 (77b); of Rabbi Hutzpit the Interpreter: *b. Hul.* 142a; *b. Qidd.* 39b; of Lulianus and Pappus, "the Two Martyrs of Lod": *b. Ta'an.* 18b; *b. Ketub.* 77a; *b. Pesah.* 50a; *b. B. Bat.* 10b.

[59] This motif appears in earlier Jewish literature (e.g., *Jub.* 34:10–20; *Gen. Rab.* 84:17; *Song Rab.* on Song 1:3; *PRE* 38; *Midrash Mishle* 9, 2; cf. *Test. Gad* 2:3; *Test. Zeb.* 1:5). Lists of the ten martyrs are found in *Lam. Rab.* 2,4; *Ekha Rabbati* 2,2; *Mid. Ps* on Ps 9:13. Versions of this list are also found in the body of the *Story of the Ten Martyrs* (I.21.12; II–III.4.3; IV–V, IX.10.32; VIII.22.27) and in some manuscripts of *Hekhalot Rabbati* at §109 (MS N8128 and in a gloss in V228). These lists vary greatly from text to text and even within the different recensions of the anthology. It is important to note that several recensions of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* suggest one of two alternative explanations of the sages' deaths: either Israel's sin of teaching Torah to

scriptural authority of Ex 21:16 ("He who kidnaps a man – whether he has sold him or is still holding him – shall be put to death"), the text argues that their actions constituted a capital crime. The deaths of the ten sages are intended as atonement of the "original sin" committed by the progenitors of the tribes of Israel.

While there are many versions of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*, they all share a common literary structure provided by a highly elaborate account of the twin executions of Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel and Rabbi Ishmael, into which the motif of ten rabbinic martyrs has been incorporated.[60] This frame narrative (*Rahmenerzählung*) served as a relatively flexible literary structure within which future redactors of the anthology could organize and reorganize shifting configurations of thematically related martyrological material. Moreover, the individual versions of this collection differ wildly in their application of the frame narrative. The number and content of the martyrological units included in each recension is highly unstable; in fact, recensions II and VIII do not even bother to attach any additional martyrological material to the frame narrative.[61] Therefore, the subsequent martyrological material, whether drawn from earlier rabbinic sources or attested first within this collection, often seems no more than the obligatory realization of the literary structure established in the frame narrative. Rabbi Ishmael's *vita*, then, not only dominates late Jewish martyrology in a thematic sense, but also functions as its literary anchor.

Rabbi Ishmael's Heavenly Ascent

As we have seen above, several recensions of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* offer the story of Rabbi Ishmael's miraculous origins as an explanation for his ability to ascend to heaven. He makes this celestial visit to learn if the executions of the ten sages are in accordance with the

the Roman Emperor or the Gentiles (IV–V, VIII–IX.8.6) or the hubristic belief that the wisdom of the sages can fully compensate for the destruction of the Temple (I.8.5). These aetiologies, however, are merely ancillary to the sin of Joseph's brothers, which is found in every recension of the text and is clearly central to the literary development of the anthology.

[60] On the form of the open frame narrative, see Reeg, *Geschichte*, 33–34. This frame narrative more or less occupies I–X.10–22, V–VII.25–28, and IX–X.28, although the different recensions differ considerably. An early version of this passage is contained in *Midrash Shir Hashirim* on Song 1:3 (L. Grünhut, *Midrash Shir Hashirim* [Jerusalem: Wilhelm Gross, 1897], 3a–4b). The account of their twin deaths is found in its more rudimentary forms without being connected to the motif of ten martyrs at *Mek. Y.* on Exod 22:22; *Semahot* 8:8; *AdRN* A 37 and 38; *AdRN* B 41; and *SER* (30) 28, p. 153.

[61] See Reeg, *Geschichte*, 54.

will of God and, more importantly, whether the decree can be repealed.[62] Immediately following the account of his conception, these versions of the text continue:

> At that time Rabbi Ishmael recited the name of God and a storm wind lifted him up and brought him to heaven (וקבלתו רוח סערה והעלהו לשמים). Metatron, the Prince of the Countenance, met him (פגע בו) and asked him: "Who are you?" He answered him: "I am Rabbi Ishmael ben Elishah the High Priest." He said to him: "You are the one in whom your Creator takes pride each day (אתה הוא שקונך משתבח בך כל יום) saying, 'I have a servant on earth, a priest like you [Metatron]; his radiance is like your radiance and his appearance is like your appearance (יש לי עבד בארץ כהן כמותך זיוו כזיוותך ומראהו כמראך).'" Rabbi Ishmael answered: "I am he." He asked him: "What is your business in this place of pure ones (מה טיבך במקום טהורים)?" "A decree has been passed that ten noble ones of Israel will be executed (גזירה נגזרה עלינו שיהרגו עשרה מאבירי ישראל) and I have ascended to learn whether this is the will of heaven or not (ועליתי לידע אם גזירה זו מן השמים ואם לאו)."[63]

Metatron answers Rabbi Ishmael with a detailed description of the proceedings in the heavenly court during which the angelic prosecutor successfully demands from God that he exact the punishment due Israel for the crime of their forefathers. This account satisfies Rabbi Ishmael, who returns to earth to instruct his colleagues to accept their collective fate. The coupled descriptions of Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel and Rabbi Ishmael's gruesome deaths immediately ensue, followed by the sequential reports concerning the deaths of the other martyrs.

Of course, Rabbi Ishmael's encounter with an angel in heaven seems familiar enough. In the Hekhalot literature, Rabbi Ishmael is portrayed numerous times as the favored disciple of the great master of secret lore, Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Qanah. He serves as the prototype of the aspiring mystical initiate who, through careful preparation and technique, gains access to the heavenly sphere above. Like his colleagues in the mystical fellowship, his powers derive from the secret teachings transmitted within the human community of scholars.[64] The act of heavenly ascent is typically described in the Hekhalot literature using the technical phrase "to descend to the chariot-throne" (לירד למרכבה).[65] By contrast, *The*

[62] *Ten Martyrs*, V, VII–VIII 11.11. Recension I.15.10, however, links the conception narrative to Rabbi Ishmael's exceptional beauty.

[63] *Ten Martyrs*, I–X 15.1–4; cf. Grünhut, *Midrash Shir Hashirim*, 4a. The translation follows recension VII. This unit is relatively stable within the manuscript tradition.

[64] The *locus classicus* for this instructional style of literature is the *havura*-account in *Hekhalot Rabbati* (Schäfer, *Synopse*, §§198–259).

[65] See most recently the comprehensive study of its technical vocabulary of "descent to the chariot" (*yeridah la-merkavah*) in Annelies Kuyt, *The 'Descent' to the Chariot* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995); idem, "Once Again: Yarad in Hekhalot Literature," *FJB* 18 (1990): 45–69. See also the important analysis of this phenomenon in Elliot R. Wolfson, "Yeridah la-Merkavah: Typology of Ecstasy and Enthronement in Ancient

Story of the Ten Martyrs employs the more conventional verb "to ascend" (עלה) in order to characterize Rabbi Ishmael's journey.[66] This terminological discrepancy is not incidental, but signifies the differing ideological and literary contexts of the two accounts. Whereas the Hekhalot corpus portrays Rabbi Ishmael gaining his powers through a process of study, piety, and ritual performance that can be replicated by others, the martyrological tradition presents Rabbi Ishmael's power as radically unique, deriving from his special kinship with the angel Metatron.

In fact, rather than drawing on the Hekhalot literature, the description of Rabbi Ishmael's journey to heaven has a striking number of verbal and conceptual affinities with the well-known midrashic tradition concerning Moses' ascent to receive the Torah.[67] Like Moses, who in almost all the

Jewish Mysticism," in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, and Typologies* (ed. R. A. Herrera; New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 13–44.

[66] There are several notable exceptions where versions of the martyrology do employ the technical terminology of *yeridah*. These, however, are unquestionably later adaptations of the original formulation in the martyrology. The version of the story of the ten martyrs contained in *Hekhalot Rabbati* (Schäfer, *Synopse*, §§107–121) reports: "When Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Qanah saw this decree (גזירה זו), he rose and led me down to the Merkavah (עמד והורידני למרכבה)" (Schäfer, *Synopse*, §107). However, the causative (*hif'il*) form of the verb *yarad* used here is found only in this one instance throughout the entire Hekhalot corpus (Kuyt, *Descent*, 150–52). This anomalous formulation suggests strongly that this version of Rabbi Ishmael's ascent was adapted to conform to the literary/ideological context of the Hekhalot literature. Similarly, recension III of the martyrological anthology, which is represented by a single Italian manuscript family, employs the same technical terminology (e.g., at 12.9 and 31.1). Reeg, *Geschichte*, 43–44, however, rightly argues that this recension represents a relatively late and highly modified version of the anthology into which a great many passages from the Hekhalot corpus have been interpolated. *Pace* Dan ("The Story of the Ten Martyrs," 15–22; idem, "Pirke Hekhalot Rabbati," 63–80), recension III is not the earliest extant version of the anthology from which the Hekhalot literature derived its version of the martyrology.

[67] For detailed discussion of this material, see especially David Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Response to Ezekiel's Vision* (TSAJ 16; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 289–322; Karl-Erich Grözinger, *Ich bin der Herr, dein Gott! Eine rabbinische Homilie zum Ersten Gebot (PesR 20)* (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1976). Differing versions of this narrative tradition are contained in the following sources: *b. Shabb.* 88a–89a; *Pesiq. Rab.* 20, §§11–20 (ed. Rivka Ulmer, *Pesiqta Rabbati: A Synoptic Edition of Pesiqta Rabbati Based upon All Extant Manuscripts and the Editio Princeps* [vol. 1; SFSHR 155; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997], 422–35); MS Oxford Or. 135, 357a–358a (printed in Grözinger, *Ich bin der Herr*, 12*–16*); *Ma'ayan Hokhmah* (Adolf Jellenik, *Beit ha-Midrash* [3rd ed.; 6 vols.; Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1967], 1.58–61; *Haggadat Shema' Yisra'el* (Jellenik, *Beit ha-Midrash*, 5.165–66); T-S K 21.95.A, 1a–2a (fragment 21 in Peter Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* [TSAJ 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984], 171–81); *PRE* 46; *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Ex 19:20. The narrative also appears in *piyyut* form as *'El 'ir gibborim* by

versions of this tradition is conveyed to heaven within a cloud (ונשאתו ענן),[68] Rabbi Ishmael is said to ascend within a storm-wind (רוח סערה). Indeed, precisely the same phrase – "he encountered him" (פגע בו) – is used in both literary traditions to describe their audience with the angel who meets them immediately upon their ascent.[69] Moreover, the image of heaven in both of these traditions is horizontal, not vertical as in the Hekhalot literature.[70] This horizontal orientation is given expression through the description of Rabbi Ishmael walking about in heaven (והיה מהלך ברקיע),[71] which uses almost identical language to the characterization of Moses' own movement – "he was walking in heaven like a human being walking on earth" (והיה מהלך ברקיע כאדם שמהלך בארץ).[72]

Yet the affinities between these two accounts go beyond these verbal echoes. Upon ascending, both figures are interrogated by the angelic host concerning their presence in heaven. Just as Metatron asks Rabbi Ishmael, "What is your business in this place of pure ones (מה טיבך במקום טהורים)?" the angels who confront Moses demand to know, "what business does one born of woman have in this place of purity, in this place of holiness (מה טיבו של ילוד אישה כאן במקום טהרה במקום קדושה)?"[73] An even more dramatic formulation of this protest is found in the brief textual unit known as "The Seventy Names of Metatron."[74] Here the angels oppose God's decision to reveal the secrets of the universe to Moses, who, as the representative of mankind, is

Amittai ben Shephatiah (Yonah David, *The Poems of Amittai* [Jerusalem: Akhshav, 1975], 100–2).

[68] E.g., *Pesiq. Rab.* 20, §11 (Ulmer, *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 422–23).

[69] E.g., *Pesiq. Rab.* 20, §11 (Ulmer, *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 422–23).

[70] On the layered vertical cosmology of the Hekhalot literature, see most recently Peter Schäfer, "In Heaven as it is in Hell: The Cosmology of *Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit*," in *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions* (ed. R. Abusch and A. Y. Reed; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, forthcoming).

[71] I.20.1.

[72] *Ma'ayan Hokhmah* (Jellenik, *Beit ha-Midrash*, 1.57). Cf. *Pesiq. Rab.* 20:11–12; MS Oxford Or. 135, 357a (§11,2).

[73] T-S K 21.95.A, 1b/13–14 (Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente*, 174). Most versions of the narrative use the shorter phrase מה לך (e.g., *b. Shab.* 88b; *Pesiq. Rab.* 20, §11), instead of the more explicit מה טיבך. However, since all of these versions include the phrase "one born of woman" (ילוד אישה), it is reasonable to assume that both formulations are similarly intended to address the impropriety of human entry into heaven. In most versions, this question is asked by Kemuel, the first angel encountered by Moses, rather than by a group of angels.

[74] Schäfer, *Synopse*, §§71–80. On this unit, see Claudia Rohrbacher-Sticker, "Die Namen Gottes und die Namen Metatrons: Zwei Geniza Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur," *FJB* 19 (1991–92): 95–168; Joseph Dan, "The Seventy Names of Metatron," *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division C* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1981), 19–23.

described as "born of woman, blemished, unclean, defiled by blood and impure flux," and who like all men "excretes putrid drops (of semen)."[75] Unlike Rabbi Ishmael, who is immediately granted a detailed answer to his request, Moses is met with the unbridled hostility of the angelic host, which is evidently displeased that God plans to entrust to flesh and blood what he has withheld from His beloved angels.[76] The angels view Moses' arrival in heaven as an unacceptable invasion of their domain and wage a near-fatal battle against his perceived aggression. Their challenge does not primarily address the content of his mission, but rather his right to be present in heaven at all.

The phrase מה טיב- constitutes far more than the pragmatic (and relatively neutral) question: "What is your business here in this place?" Instead, this interrogative formula signals a pointed challenge to the interlocutor: "What business do you have being here at all?" – or, perhaps even better, "Should not the very nature of this human being bar his entry into our realm?"[77] The question insists on the radical disparity between human existence and the wholly pure status of the heavenly realm. The angels' complaint against Moses is based on their unshakable conviction that for a human being to enter the angelic realm constitutes a grave transgression of the cosmic order.

What, then, accounts for the contrasting receptions that these two figures are given upon arriving in heaven? In order to answer this question, we should first turn to the Hekhalot literature, which similarly employs the phrase מה טיב- as its standard formula for expressing alarm at the potential mixing of these two apparently antithetical domains, the angelic and the human.[78] The formula is used most frequently in *3 Enoch*, which directly addresses the problems associated with the transformation

[75] Schäfer, *Synopse*, §79 (translated in Philip S. Alexander, "3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [2 vols.; ed. J. Charlesworth; New York: Doubleday, 1983], 1.315). Cf. *b. Shabb.* 88b; *Pesiq. Rab.* 20:11–12; *Lev. Rab.* 14:2. At *m. Avot* 3, Akabya ben Mehalalel reflects on the lowliness of humanity using the same terminology: "Consider where you have come from – a putrid drop (מטפה סרוחה)."

[76] On the motif of conflict between angels and human beings and its bearing on the Moses ascent traditions, see especially Peter Schäfer, *Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen: Untersuchungen zur rabbinischen Engelvorstellung* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975), 207–16.

[77] This last rendering of the phrase reflects the literal meaning of the word טיב as "form, nature, character, or peculiarity" (s.v. Jastrow, 523).

[78] In his recently published study *A Transparent Illusion: The Dangerous Vision of Water in Hekhalot Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), esp. 118–23, C. R. A. Morray-Jones applies a similar analysis to the enigmatic question "What is the nature of this water?" (המים האלה מה טיבן) that appears in the well-known "Water Vision Episode" in the Hekhalot corpus (Schäfer, *Synopse*, §§258–259 and §§407–408; cf. *b. Hag* 14b). I arrived at my conclusions prior to reading Morray-Jones' discussion.

of the human Enoch into the angelic figure Metatron.[79] In a passage that is highly reminiscent of the Moses material, the text puts the phrase in the mouths of the distraught angelic trio, Uzzah, Azzah, and Azael, who vocally oppose Enoch's arrival in heaven and subsequent elevation to angelic status:

> Then three of the ministering angels, Uzzah, Azzah, and Azael, came and laid charges against me in the heavenly height. They said before the Holy One blessed be He, "Lord of the Universe, did not the primeval ones give you good advice when they said, Do not create man!" The Holy one, blessed be He, replied, "I have made and will sustain him; I will carry and deliver him." When they saw me they said before him, "Lord of the Universe, what right has this one to ascend to the height of heights (מה טיבו של זה שעולה למרום מרומים)? Is he not descended from those who perished in the waters of the Flood? What right has he to be in heaven (מה טיבו ברקיע)?" (§6 = 4:6–7)[80]

In response to their charges, God turns the tables on them, rebuking the angelic rebels with a curt reminder of the strict boundaries that severely circumscribe their influence on his judgment: "What right have you to interrupt me (מה טיבכם שאתם נכנסים לדברי)?" (§6 = 4:8) As a thematically related passage later reports, it is Enoch's odor that has apparently been the cause of the angels' distress. Like Moses' opponents, these angels complain, "What is this smell of one born of woman (מה טעם של ילוד אישה)? Why does a white drop (of semen) ascend on high (ומה טיפת לבן שהיא עולה לשמי מרום) and serve among those who cleave to the flames?" (§6 = 4:2) Finally, in a passage that belongs to the literary frame of *3 Enoch*, this same complaint is lodged against Enoch/Metatron for permitting his interlocutor in the text, Rabbi Ishmael, to visit him in heaven: "Then the eagles of the chariot, the flaming ophanim, and the cherubim of devouring fire asked Metatron, 'Youth, why have you allowed one born of women to come in and behold the chariot (מה הנחת ילוד אישה שיבא ויסתכל במרכבה)? From what nation is he? From what tribe is he? What is his character (מה טיבו של זה)?'" (§3 = 2:2). In *3 Enoch*, unlike the martyrology, the angelic host does not recognize Rabbi Ishmael's special status.

In each case, the phrase מה טיב- is used to assert that everything must have its proper place – God, the angels, and human beings – reaffirming

[79] On Enoch's angelification as Metatron, see esp. Nathaniel Deutsch, *Guardians of the Gate: Angelic Vice Regency in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 27–77; Wolfson, *Speculum*, 82–85; C. R. A. Morray-Jones, "Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition," *JJS* 43 (1992): 1–31. On the somewhat anomalous place of *3 Enoch* with the Hekhalot literature, see Peter Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God* (New York: SUNY, 1994), 123–38.

[80] On the relationship of this passage to the fallen angel traditions in *1 Enoch*, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, "From Asael and Semihazah to Uzzah, Azzah, and Azael: 3 Enoch 5 (§§7–8) and Jewish Reception-History of 1 Enoch," *JSQ* 8 (2001): 105–36.

the cosmic order in the face of these repeated breaches. Indeed, it is used not only to challenge the over-reaching ambitions of lesser beings, whether human or angelic, but also to safeguard the divine from being tainted by the human sphere. In a passage again found in *3 Enoch*, the angels complain that because of idolatrous sins committed by the generation of Enosh it is no longer fitting for God to remain among human beings.[81] More germane to our purposes, however, is a striking adjurational text that is appended in some manuscripts to *Hekhalot Rabbati*, in which the Prince of the Torah (שר תורה) rebukes the young Rabbi Ishmael, here age thirteen, for having improperly called him down to earth:

> I stood and afflicted myself for forty days, and I recited the Great Name, until I caused him [the Prince of the Torah] to descend. He came down in a flame of fire, and his face had the appearance of lightning. When I saw him, I trembled and was frightened and fell back. He said to me: "Human being! What is your business that you have disturbed the great household (בן אדם מה טיבך שהרעשת את פמלייא גדולה)." I said to him: "It is revealed and known before Him Who spoke and the world came into being that I did not bring you down for [my] glory, but to do the will of your master." Then he said to me: "Human being, son of a stinking drop, worm and vermin (בן אדם טפה סרוחה רמה ותולעה)!"[82]

The text then proceeds to instruct the reader on the proper preparation for angelic adjuration: "Whoever wants it to be revealed to him must sit fasting for forty days, perform twenty-four immersions every day, and not eat anything defiling; he must not look at a woman, and must sit in a totally dark house."[83] As we have noted above, the rigorous practices prescribed here are typical of the Hekhalot literature: the state of ritual purity that is a prerequisite for interacting with the divine is an achieved state. Like Moses and Enoch, the Rabbi Ishmael of the Hekhalot literature is neither exempt from the contamination inherent in normal human existence nor from the dangers this impurity poses for the person attempting to gain access to divine knowledge.

Thus, despite the many literary and conceptual connections between *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* and the Hekhalot corpus, they offer radically different solutions to the predicament created by their common notion of a selectively permeable cosmos. The Hekhalot corpus' Rabbi

[81] Schäfer, *Synopse*, §8 = 5:10–12: "'Lord of the Universe, what business have you with men (מה לך אצל בני אדם)? ... Why did you leave the heaven of heavens above ... and lodge with men who worship idols? Now you are on earth, and the idols are on the earth; what is your business among the idolatrous inhabitants of earth (מה טיבך בין דרי הארץ)?'"

[82] Schäfer, *Synopse*, §313. (I have slightly modified the translation in Swartz, *Scholastic Magic*, 69.) Cf. §292.

[83] Schäfer, *Synopse*, §314 (translated in Swartz, *Scholastic Magic*, 70).

Ishmael must labor to achieve the proper state of purity and to learn the necessary practices for encountering the divine, but the martyrology posits a very different type of liminal figure. Rabbi Ishmael's angelic status and purity seem to derive directly from Metatron himself. In Metatron's words, Rabbi Ishmael is the one in whom God "takes pride each day saying, 'I have a servant on earth, a priest like you (Metatron); his radiance is like your radiance and his appearance is like your appearance (יש לי עבד בארץ כהן כמותך זיוו כזיוותך ומראהו כמראך).'"[84] Quite simply, he is a hybrid of the divine and the human, his nature structurally analogous to the porous cosmos he traverses. His encounter with Metatron is more a recognition scene of kin than a confrontation between two dissimilar beings.

It is hardly surprising that Rabbi Ishmael's kinship with his angelic progenitor is embodied in his luminous face, since Metatron's own bond with the divine is regularly expressed in similar terms. One particularly evocative passage from the Hekhalot corpus, which takes the form of a midrashic exegesis of two verses that mention God's face, Ex 33:15 (... אם אין פניך הולכים) and 23:21 (השמר מפניו), relates how God warned Moses to beware of the dangerous force exerted by His countenance (ואדון כל העולמים הזהיר למשה שישמור מפניו).[85] The unit then explicitly identifies God's face with the angelic name Yofi'el (lit. "beauty of God") and finally with Metatron himself. Nathaniel Deutsch has rightly pointed to this passage to support his conclusion that "some sources understood Metatron to be the hypostatic embodiment of a particular part of the divine form, most notably the face of God .... It is likely that this tradition underlies the title *sar ha-panim*, which is associated with Metatron. Rather than 'prince of the face [of God],' this title is better understood as 'prince who is the face [of God].'"[86] Rabbi Ishmael's angelic appearance is thus synonymous with God's own hypostatic countenance. It is, therefore, understandable that in one of the recensions of the martyrological anthology, the relatively late *Midrash Eleh Ezkerah*, Metatron explicitly comments on the resemblance between Rabbi Ishmael and God: "You are Ishmael in whom your Creator takes pride each day, since he has a servant on earth who resembles the countenance/beauty of his own face (שדומה לקלסתר פניו)."[87] Although this formulation is a

[84] *Ten Martyrs*, I–X 15.1–4; cf. Grünhut, *Midrash Shir Hashirim*, 4a.

[85] Schäfer, *Synopse*, §§396–397.

[86] Deutsch, *Guardians*, 43. See Deutsch's fuller discussion of this material in *The Gnostic Imagination: Gnosticism, Mandaeism, and Merkabah Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 99–105.

[87] *Ten Martyrs*, I.15.3. קלסתר = Greek κρυσταλλος, "countenance or beauty" (s.v. Jastrow, 1379). For the dating of this recension and its relationship to the *piyyut Eleh Ezkerah*, see Reeg, *Geschichte*, 48–52.

minority tradition, it puts a suitably fine point on the matter: Rabbi Ishmael is God's special servant, whose more-than-human purity and beauty are tokens of the divine nature that ensures his safe reception in heaven and affords him an unparalleled place in Israel's history.

Rabbi Ishmael's Execution

Just as Rabbi Ishmael's heavenly ascent hinges on the motifs of angelic purity and beauty, so too does the elaborate account of his execution that is at the heart of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*. In addition to the allusions to his angelic beauty in both the conception and ascent narratives, the martyrology explicitly reports that Rabbi Ishmael belongs to a long succession of beautiful Jewish men: "They said concerning Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha the high priest that he was among the seven beauties the world had seen (אחד משבעה יפים שהיו בעולם). And these are Adam, Jacob, Joseph, Saul, Absalom, Rabbi Yohanan, Rabbi Abbahu, and Rabbi Ishmael."[88] A variation on this motif, which is also contained in the anthology, reports even more succinctly: "There was no beauty in the world from the days of Joseph the son of Jacob except Rabbi Ishmael (שלא היה נוי בעולם מימות יוסף בן יעקב אלא ר"י)."[89] These competing formulations, which both seek to link rabbinic figures with biblical prototypes of masculine beauty, effectively situate Rabbi Ishmael within a specific tradition found in rabbinic literature concerning this eugenic genealogy that wends its way through Israel's history.

Indeed, the list of the "seven beauties" to which Rabbi Ishmael is added seems to draw much of its material from the very same passage cited above in connection with Rabbi Yohanan's public service of transmitting his beauty to the next generation:

> Said Rabbi Yohanan: "I have survived from the beautiful of Jerusalem (משפיתי ירושלים)." One who wishes to see the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan should bring a brand new silver cup and fill it with the red seeds of a pomegranate and place around its rim a garland of red roses, and let him place it at the place where the sun meets the shade, and that vision is the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan. Is that true? But haven't we been taught by our master that, "The beauty of Rabbi Abbahu is like the beauty of our father Jacob and the beauty of our father Jacob is like the beauty of Adam," and that of Rabbi Yohanan is not mentioned. But (the editor objects) Rabbi Yohanan is not included here because he did not have a beard (lit. "splendor of face," i.e. had a different sort of beauty). Rabbi Yohanan used to go sit outside the ritual bath. He said: "When the daughters of Israel come out from the bath, let them meet me so that they will have children as beautiful as I am." The Rabbis said to him: "Are you not afraid of the Evil Eye?" He answered: "I am of the seed of Joseph, our father, of whom it is said, *Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring* (Gen 49:22)."[90]

[88] This statement appears in variety of formulations and locations in the different recensions of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* (in some cases several times within a single recension): I.15.10; IV–V.22.6–7; IV.22.32; VI–VII.37.1–2; VII and IX–X.28.1–2.

[89] *Ten Martyrs*, II–III.22.33. A slightly different form of this tradition occurs at V–VII.22.33: "They said (of Rabbi Ishmael) that from the days of Joseph there was no beauty like him (אמרו מימות יוסף לא היה יפה כמוהו)."

Although Rabbi Ishmael's beauty is explicitly mentioned on a number of occasions elsewhere in earlier rabbinic literature (e.g., *t. Hor.* 2:5–7; *y. Hor.* 3,7 [48b]; *b. Git.* 58a.), the inclusion of Rabbi Abbahu and Rabbi Yohanan in the list further emphasizes Rabbi Ishmael's genealogical bond to the one biblical figure most renowned for his beauty, Joseph.[91] Indeed, it may be possible to hear an echo of this kinship in the martyrology's account of Rabbi Ishmael's arrival in Rome for execution: "When they brought Rabbi Ishmael to Rome all the women who gazed upon him began to bleed because of his great beauty."[92] Rabbi Ishmael's damaging effect on the women of Rome is strikingly similar to medieval versions of the Joseph narrative in Genesis 39, which describes how Potiphar's wife and her friends were so astounded at Joseph's beauty when he entered the banquet room to serve them that they mistakenly cut the palms of their hands with the knives they were holding.[93]

[90] *b. B. Metsia* 84a (Boyarin, "Talmudic Texts," 136). For the beauty of Rabbi Abbahu, see also *b. B. Batra* 58a; *b. Sanh.* 14a. On Rabbi Abbahu's important leadership role in the Jewish community of Palestine and his deep acculturation in Greco-Roman society, see Lee I. Levine, "R. Abbahu of Caesarea," in *Christianity, Judaism, and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty* (ed. J. Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 56–76.

[91] Gen 39:6; cf. *T. Jos.* 3:4, 18:4; *T. Sim.* 5:1; *Jos. Asen.* 5:1–7; Philo, *Joseph* 40; Josephus, *A.J.* 2:9; *Gen. Rab.* 87:3. On Joseph's beauty, see especially James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretative Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994), 28–93; Joshua Levinson, "An-other Woman: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife. Staging the Body Politic," *JQR* 87 (1997): 269–301; Ra'anan Abusch, "Eunuchs and Gender Transformation: Philo's Exegesis of the Joseph Narrative," in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond* (ed. Shaun Tougher; London: Duckworth, 2002), 103–21.

[92] V.22.8; VI.37.3; VII, IX–X.28.3: בשעה שהביאוהו לרומי כל הנשים שהיו רואות אותו היו שופעות דם מרוב יופיו.

[93] This motif was current in late antique and medieval midrashic sources: *Tanh.*, *Vayeshev* 5; *Midrash ha-Gadol* on Gen 39:14; Moses Gaster, *The Chronicle of Jerahmeel* (repr. H. Schwarzbaum; New York: KTAV, 1971), 94; *Sefer ha-Yashar* (ed. Lazarus Goldschmidt; Berlin: Benjamin Harz, 1923) 159–60; *Mahzor Vitry* (ed. Simeon Hurwitz; Nürnburg, 1923), 342. It also appears in the many of the versions of the Joseph narrative found in Islamic/Arabic literature and art, most notably *Qur'an*, Sura 12:22–53 (of Late Meccan provenance), where the women exclaim that Joseph is "no human being, but a noble angel" (12:30–32). For discussion of these sources, see Kugel, *Potiphar's House*, 28–65. See also Shalom Goldman, *The Wiles of Women/The Wiles of Men: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish and Islamic Folklore* (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 31–54; Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 50–56; Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's World: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 50–51. See also the Islamic sources

Whatever the cultural and literary background of these traditions, each is carefully situated within the martyrology's account of Rabbi Ishmael's gruesome death. Some recensions even report that the Roman Emperor decides to execute Rabbi Ishmael precisely in response to the violent reaction the martyr's beauty provokes in him: "When they brought him before the king, he asked him: 'Is there anyone in your nation more beautiful than you?' He answered: 'No.' He immediately decreed that he should be executed."[94] Later in the same scene, however, his beauty has precisely the opposite effect on the Emperor's daughter, who spies him through the window of the imperial palace[95] after hearing the baleful cries of the martyr for his decapitated colleague Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel. The text continues:

> She went to her father and said: "Father, I have one request from you." He said to her: "My daughter, I will grant whatever you ask, except for sparing Ishmael and his colleagues." She responded: "But that *was* my request!" He responded: "You can't have your way on this matter." She said: "If that's the case, then at least give me permission to remove the skin of his face (לפשוט עור פניו)." He immediately ordered that the skin of Ishmael's face be removed while he was still alive (בעודו חי).[96]

Rabbi Ishmael's death is cruelly enacted precisely through the removal of the very token of his special status, his beautiful face.

collected in *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in World Literature* (ed. John D. Yohannan; New York: New Directions, 1968), 158–220.

[94] *Ten Martyrs*, V.22.9; VI.37.4; VII, IX–X.28.4. I here translate recension V.

[95] *Ten Martyrs*, I–VII.22.31; IX–X 28.5. Compare *Jos. Asen.* 5:1–7, where Asenath catches sight of Joseph from a high window in the tower her father has built to help her safeguard her virginity and is immediately captivated by his beauty. Later in the text, Asenath mistakes an angel who has appeared before her for her beloved Joseph, whose beauty was apparently angelic like Rabbi Ishmael's (*Joseph and Asenath*, 14.1–17.6). For mention of how the women of Egypt look at Joseph from walls or windows, see *Jos. Asen.* 7:3–4; *Tg. Neof.* Gen 49:22; *Tg. Ps.-J.* Gen 49:22; Vulgate Gen 49:22. On the biblical motif of the woman at the window, see Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998), esp. 23–41.

[96] *Ten Martyrs*, I–VII.22.35–40; IX–X 28.7–11. I here translate recension V. The version of this pericope in Grünhut, *Midrash Shir Hashirim*, 4b, differs considerably from the ones found in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*. Here, the female figure is identified as a Roman matron (מטרוניתא) rather than as the Emperor's daughter. In addition, the figure of the Emperor is entirely absent from the scene, leaving the Roman matron to engage in an explicitly sexual dialogue with the martyr – she tries to seduce him into looking directly at her in exchange for saving his life. He rebuffs her, explaining that he is far more concerned with his ultimate reward than with his earthly existence. I believe that this version is earlier than the one found in the martyrology, where the Emperor preemptively refuses his daughter's request to save Rabbi Ishmael even before she has articulated it.

Rabbi Ishmael remains impassive throughout the procedure until the executioner reaches the site where he wears his *tefillin* (מקום תפילין), at which point he lets out a loud and bitter scream. When the executioner asks him why he has only started to cry now, he responds that he is not mourning his own life (נשמתי) but rather the loss of his capacity to fulfill the commandment of putting on *tefillin*. This curious detail may be an allusion to the anthropomorphic notion that God himself dons *tefillin*, which is attested in both the Babylonian Talmud and the Hekhalot literature.[97] If, as it seems, Rabbi Ishmael possesses a replica of the divine visage, then it is no wonder that the amputation of the holiest portion of his face threatens the divine order itself. Indeed, the text reports that the cries that Rabbi Ishmael utters at precisely this point in the procedure reach up to heaven, threatening to return the world to primordial chaos and even to overthrow the throne of God.[98] In the face of this unleashed power, however, God insists that the angelic host not intervene to stop his death, since it will seal a contract between Him and His people on earth: "Let him alone so that his merit may endure for generations (שתעמוד זכותו לדור דורים)."[99] In a similar statement elsewhere in the martyrology, God makes this promise even more explicit: "The Holy One blessed be He said: 'Because of the merit (of the martyrs) I will redeem Israel and exact revenge from the enemies of God.'"[100]

The Ritual of Rabbi Ishmael's Mask

Furthermore, the very flesh that embodies Rabbi Ishmael's unique relationship to the divine will serve as a physical guarantee of God's enduring promise to Israel. According to the narrative, after Rabbi Ishmael's execution, the mask of his face is preserved in the treasury at Rome in defiance of the forces of decay and is brought out of safekeeping every seventy years for use in a truly bizarre ritual:[101]

[97] *b. Ber.* 6a; Schäfer, *Synopse*, §582. Other citations that express this same notion have been collected in Lieberman, *Sheqi'in*, 11–13. For an excellent discussion of this and other related material, see Arthur Green, *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997), 49–57.

[98] *Ten Martyrs*, I–VII.22.52–53: ועוד זעק שנייה ונזדעזע כסא הכבוד ובקש הב"ה להפוך את העולם לתוהו ובהו.

[99] *Ten Martyrs*, I, III–V 22.50; VI–VII 37.10; IX–X 28.14

[100] *Ten Martyrs*, VI.36.4: אמר הקב"ה בזכותן אני עתיד להושיע את ישרי ולעשות נקמה באיבי השם. Cf. VII.27.4.

[101] *Ten Martyrs*, II, IV–V, VII.22.65–73; IX.54.1–6. I translate here recension VII. A longer version of this passage also appears at *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 11b, where this alleged description of a Roman festival is attributed to Rav Judah in the name of Samuel. The variations between these versions are considerable. Recension IX is closest to the *Bavli* text, although somewhat more condensed. IV and V, which are almost identical, similarly have the same sequence of phrases as the *Bavli*, although their phraseology is different on a number of occasions. II and VII are closely related, since both similarly

> They take a healthy man and have him ride on [the back of] a cripple (מביאין אדם שלם ומרכיבין אותו על חיגר); they summon a herald who proclaims before them: "Let him who sees, see; and anyone who does not see, will never see (כל מי שיראה יראה וכל שלא יראה לא יראה)." They place the head of Rabbi Ishmael in the hand of the healthy man (ונותנין את ראשו של ר' ישמעאל ביד האיש השלם).[102] They call the healthy man Esau and the cripple Jacob because of his limp (בשבי שהוא צולע על ידיכו). And they proclaim: "Woe to him when this one rises up for the sin of the other. Woe to Esau, when Jacob rises up for the sin of Rabbi Ishmael's head (אוי לעשו כשיקום יעקוב בעון ראשו של ר' ישמעאל),[103] as it is written: *I will wreak my vengeance on Edom through My people Israel* (Ez 25:14).

The ritual is deeply obscure, although it seems to reflect Jewish perceptions of Roman barbarism. Another passage in the Babylonian Talmud reports that "every Roman legion carries with it several scalps and do not be surprised at this, since they place the scalp of Rabbi Ishmael on the heads of their kings (קרקיפלו של ר' ישמעאל מונח בראש מלכים)."[104] More than a century ago, Samuel Rapaport read the version of this passage in *Avodah Zarah* as an allusion to a carnivalesque practice introduced into the *Ludi Saeculares* by the Roman emperor, Philip the Arab (244–49 CE), around 247 CE in which a normal man rode upon a limping dancer wearing a mask. According to this explanation, the ritual's symbolism reflected the internal political struggles between Philip and his rival, Decius.[105] Indeed, the customary formula used by the herald to proclaim the start of the *Ludi Saeculares*, at least according to the Roman historian Suetonius, is strikingly close to the crier's phraseology in the mask ritual: "The herald invited the people in the usual formula to the games which 'no one had ever seen or would ever see again (*quos nec spectasset quisquam nec spectaturus esset*).'"[106] Yet, whatever the

Hebraize what must be the Aramaic original of certain portions of the text. I note only those textual variations that are significant for my argument.

[102] IV–V.22.67 reads: "They dress him in the clothes of the first man; they bring out the face of Rabbi Ishmael and place it on his head (ומלבישין אותו בגדו של אדם הראשון ומביאין קלסתר פניו של ר' ישמעאל ומניחין אותו על ראשו)." In this formulation, Rabbi Ishmael's face is spoken about precisely in the manner of God's countenance (i.e. קלסתר פניו). In *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 11b and IX.54.3, the word used for the mask is קרקיפלו.

[103] IV–V.22.71 adds: "and when God destroys evil Edom (והב"ה יאבד אדום הרשה)."

[104] *b. Hul.* 123a.

[105] Samuel Rapaport, *Erekh Millin* (Warsaw, 1852; repr. Jerusalem: Makor, 1970), 57–63 (s.v. איד). However, the medieval commentator Rashi, clearly familiar with *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*, interpreted the passage in light of the martyrology's narrative of redemption (*b. 'Abod. Zar.* 11b, ד"ה קרקיפלו של ר' ישמעאל).

[106] Suetonius, *Claud.* 21.1 (J. C. Rolfe, trans., *Suetonius* [vol. 2; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997], 39). Cf. Herodian 3.8.10: "So heralds traveled throughout Rome and Italy summoning all the people to come and attend the games the likes of which they had never seen before and would not see again" (C. R. Whittaker, trans., *Herodian* [vol. 1; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1969], 313). These sources as well as several

historical origins of this material, *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* clearly presents this macabre pageant as a Roman celebration of the Jews' bad fortune, and not as a struggle within the imperial family. Moreover, by redeploying this material within this narrative context, the martyrology seems to be making the case that the Romans' hubristic display of Rabbi Ishmael's face is bound to backfire. They mistake the meaning of their own actions: rather than signifying their power, the ritual in fact enacts the long-held wish that Jacob avenge the crimes of Esau, the legendary ancestor of Edom, which is systematically identified with Rome throughout late antique and medieval Jewish literature.[107]

Earlier in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*, Rabbi Ishmael has foreseen that it will be his fate to serve as an instrument of God's redemption of Israel. As he is moving about in heaven, led by his angelic guide Metatron, he comes across an altar. Puzzled, he asks the angel: "What do you sacrifice on this altar? Do you have cows, rams, and sheep in heaven?" When the angel responds that they "sacrifice the souls of the righteous on it (אנו מקריבין עליו נפשותיהם של צדיקים)," Rabbi Ishmael says: "I have now learned something I have never heard before."[108] In fact, it is this final piece of revealed knowledge that seals Rabbi Ishmael's decision to return to earth to report to his colleagues what he has learned, apparently now satisfied that his death at the hands of the Roman authorities will not be in vain. He immediately descends and bears witness to what he has just seen in heaven.[109] A passage in the medieval midrashic compilation *Numbers Rabbah* expresses this sacrificial theology in strikingly similar language:

> Another explanation of the text, *Setting up the Tabernacle* (להקים את המשכן; Num 7:1) – Rabbi Simon expounded: When the Holy One, blessed be He, told Israel to set up the Tabernacle, He intimated to the ministering angels that they also should make a Tabernacle, and when the one below was erected the other was erected on high. The latter was the Tabernacle of the "youth" (הנער), whose name is Metatron, and therein he offers up the souls of the righteous to atone for Israel in the days of their exile (שבו מקריב נפשותיהם של צדיקים לכפר על ישראל בימי גלותם). The reason scripture says "(את) the Tabernacle" is because another tabernacle was erected simultaneously with it. In the same way it is

others are cited in Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: JTS, 1942), 145 n. 7.

[107] On the symbolism of Edom/Esau in Jewish culture, see esp. Gerson D. Cohen, "Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (ed. A. Altmann; Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1967), 19–48; Yuval, *Shene goyim*, 18–34.

[108] *Ten Martyrs*, I–IX.20.1–5.

[109] *Ten Martyrs*, I–X.21.1–3.

written, *The place, O Lord, which you have made for yourself to Dwell in, the Sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established* (Ex 15:17).[110]

The phrase נפשותיהם של צדיקים (or in some variants נשמותיהם של צדיקים) runs like a red thread through the numerous passages in contemporary Jewish sources that describe this heavenly cult of the martyrs.[111] Yet, unlike these loose units, *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* integrates this notion into a coherent narrative framework. As the human manifestation of the purity and beauty of heavenly high priest Metatron, Rabbi Ishmael is both the elected high priest and atoning sacrifice of the people of Israel.

Preliminary Conclusions

Although it is impossible to fix with any confidence the precise social and historical context within which late Jewish martyrology developed, its direct literary and ideological relationship to the purity literature of the Jewish communities of late antique Palestine – coupled with its unequivocal anti-Roman imagery – strongly suggests that it is the product of Byzantine Jewish culture. Certainly, its vivid portrayal of Rabbi Ishmael as a redeemer figure who is fated to be play an instrumental role in the liberation of Israel from the yoke of Roman rule resonates with the apocalyptic writing that flourished among Jews in this period.[112]

[110] *Num. Rab.* 12:12 (I have slightly modified the translation in Judah J. Slotki, *Numbers Rabbah* [2 vols.; London: Soncino, 1939], 1.482–83).

[111] E.g., *Midrash aseret ha-dibrot* (Jellenik, *Beit ha-Midrash*, 1.64); *Seder gan eden* (Jellenik, *Beit ha-Midrash*, 3.137); *Midrash Adonai be-hokhma yasad ha-aretz* (Jellenik, *Beit ha-Midrash*, 5.63). Compare *b. Menah.* 110a; *b. Hag.* 12b; *Yalq. Sh.* 189 (376b); *Yalq. Sh.* 339 (417c), where the heavenly altar is discussed although the notion of human sacrifice is absent. See also the fascinating Tosafist gloss that cautiously weighs the burning question of whether it is "the souls of the righteous" or "fiery sheep" (כבשים של אש) that are sacrificed on the heavenly altar (*b. Menah.* 110a, קרבן ד״ה מיכאל שר הגדול עומד ומקריב עליו). On the atoning blood of the martyrs in Jewish tradition, see Yuval, *Shene goyim*, 110–16 and 159–69.

[112] See the material collected in Yehudah Even Shmuel, *Midreshei Geulah* (2nd ed.; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1954); A. Wünsche, *Kleine Midraschim zur jüdischen Eschatologie und Apokalyptik* (vol. 3 of *Aus Israels Lehrhallen*; Hildesheim: Olms, 1967). On the historical circumstances of the emergence of this literature, see most notably Joseph Dan, *Apocalypse Then and Now* (Hertzeliya: Yediot Ahronot, 2000), 49–92 [Hebrew]; idem, "Armilus: The Jewish Anti-Christ and the Origins and Dating of the Sefer Zerubbavel," in *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco* (ed. P. Schäfer and M. Cohen; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 73–104; idem, *The Hebrew Story in the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 43–46 [Hebrew]; Martha Himmelfarb, "Sefer Zerubbabel," in *Rabbinic Fantasies* (ed. D. Stern and M. J. Mirsky; New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), 67–70; Robert L. Wilken, "The Restoration of Israel in

Moreover, the martyrology's use of the "annunciation" scene in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* betrays an interest in the origins of the messiah akin to the portrait of Menahem son of Amiel and his mother Hephtzibah in the seventh-century Hebrew apocalypse *Sefer Zerubbabel*.[113] Read within this cultural context, the martyrology offers a similarly incisive critique of Byzantine Christian society in this period, as well as of the place of the Jewish community within it. It is tempting to see its virulent anti-imperial polemic as the Jewish counterpart of Christian–Jewish debates of the Late Roman and Byzantine periods.[114]

Biblical Prophecy: Christian and Jewish Responses in the Early Byzantine Period," in *"To See Ourselves as Others See Us". Christians, Jews, and "Others" in Late Antiquity* (ed. J. Neusner and E. S. Frerichs; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), 443–71, esp. 453–61; Abba Hillel Silver, *A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel* (Boston: Beacon, 1959), esp. 36–57; M. Buttenweiser, *Outline of the Neo-Hebraic Apocalyptic Literature* (Cincinnati: Jennings, 1901). On the use of this material for historical reconstruction, see Joseph Yahalom, "On the Value of Literary Sources for Clarifying Historical Questions," *Cathedra* 11 (1979): 125–36 [Hebrew].

[113] Martha Himmelfarb has rightly suggested that "the figure of Hephtzibah should be understood as a counterpart to the figure of the Virgin Mary in contemporary Byzantine culture" ("Sefer Zerubbabel," 69). On the relationship between Hephtzibah and the Virgin Mary, see Himmelfarb's fuller discussion in "The Mother of the Messiah in the Talmud Yerushalmi and Sefer Zerubbabel," in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Greco-Roman Culture* (vol. 3; ed. P. Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming). See also Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbala* (Princeton: Princeton UP, forthcoming 2002); Israel Lévi, "L'apocalypse de Zorobabel et le roi de Perse Siroès," *Revue des etudes juives* 71 (1920): 60. The birth narrative of the Davidic messiah Menahem is found in a number of classical rabbinic sources (e.g., *y. Ber.* 2,4 [5a]; *b. Sanh.* 98a). For the text of *Sefer Zerubbabel*, see Even Shmuel, *Midreshei Geulah*, 55–88; Jellenik, *Beit ha-Midrash*, 2.54–47; Solomon A. Wertheimer, *Batei Midrashot* (2nd ed.; Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1954), 2.497–505. For English translation, see Himmelfarb, "Sefer Zerubbabel," 71–81.

[114] For the flourishing of *Adversus Iudaeos* literature specifically in the seventh to ninth centuries in Byzantium, see especially Averil Cameron, "Disputations, Polemical Literature and the Formation of Opinion in Early Byzantine Literature," in *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Medieval Near East* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 42; ed. G. J. Reinink and H. J. L. Vanstiphout; Leuven: Peeters, 1991), 91–108; Gilbert Dagron and Vincent Déroche, "Juifs et chrétiens dans l'Orient du VII^e siècle," *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991): 17–273; Vincent Déroche, "La polémique anti-judaïque au VI^e et au VII^e siècle, un mémento inédit, les *Kephalaia*," *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991): 275–311; M. Waegemann, "Les traités adversus Iudaeos: aspects des relations judéo-chrétiens dans la monde grec," *Byzantion* 56 (1986): 195–313; Peter Hayman, "The Image of the Jew in the Syriac anti-Jewish Literature," in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us*, 423–41; David M. Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 116–83. For Jewish anti-Christian literature in this period, see Wout Jac. van Bekkum, "Anti-Christian Polemics in Hebrew Liturgical Poetry of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries," in *Early Christian Poetry* (ed. J. Den Boeft and A. Hilhorst;

Ironically, however, the narrative's repudiation of Byzantine political power reflects the same fascination with the nature of visuality that was at the stormy center of the iconoclastic debates of seventh- to ninth-century Byzantium. Indeed, the martyrology – and in particular its view of the capacity of Metatron's human form to bridge the gap between the upper and lower worlds – seems to engage fully the central questions of the acrimonious debates that shook the Byzantine Christian world concerning the role of physical representation of angels and saints in enabling human beings to come into contact with the divine.[115] Peter Brown has recently noted how "Jewish criticisms of Christian image-worship as a form of idolatry play a significant role in the literature of the 630s and 640s."[116] However, is it also possible that, far from giving voice to any ideological predilection for aniconic modes of representation that this literature so often attributes to the Jews, the redactor(s) of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* framed the ritual of Rabbi Ishmael's mask precisely in terms of the theoretical assumptions that underlay the widespread use of iconic relics in Christian worship? Certainly its vivid account of how the Romans preserved the skin of Rabbi Ishmael's face for ritual purposes bears an uncanny resemblance to the haunting images – and the stories that surrounded them – of Christ's face that circulated throughout the East in this period, in particular the Mandylion and other similar representations on fabric and wood.[117] Like the meticulous portraits of various NT figures that filled the Christian apocrypha, the image of Rabbi

Leiden: Brill, 1993), 297–308; Nicholas de Lange, "A Fragment of Byzantine Anti-Christian Polemic," *JJS* 41 (1990): 92–100; idem, "Jewish Attitudes to the Roman Empire," in *Imperialism in the Ancient World* (ed. P. Garnsey and C. Whittaker; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978), 255–81. See also the analysis of Jewish–Christian relations in this period in Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, "Religious Contacts in Byzantine Palestine," *Numen* 36 (1989): 16–42.

[115] On the liturgical function of representations of angels and the significance of these images within the Iconoclastic debates, see especially Glenn Peers, *Subtle Bodies: Representing Angels in Byzantium* (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 32; Berkeley: U. of California, 2001); idem, "Hagiographic Models of Worship of Images and Angels," *Byzantion* 68 (1998): 407–20; idem, "Imagination and Angelic Epiphany," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 21 (1997): 113–31; Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954): 85–150.

[116] Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 245. For considerations of the possible role of the Jews in the iconoclastic controversy, see also Averil Cameron, "The Language of Images: The Rise of Icons and Christian Representation," in *Changing Cultures in Early Byzantium* (Aldershot, UK: Variorum, 1996), 95–137, esp. 35–40; Vincent Déroche, "Léontios de Néapolis, *Apologie contre les juifs*," *Travaux et Mémoires* 12 (1994): 43–104; Robin Cormack, *Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and its Icons* (London: George Philips, 1985), 106–18.

[117] See the photographs of these images that appear on cloth and wood and the essays discussing them in *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation* (ed. H. L. Kessler and G. Wolf; Villa Spelman Colloquia 6; ed. Bologna: Nuovo Alfa, 1998).

Ishmael painted by the martyrology can be characterized, in Gilbert Dagron's words, as "an icon in words in response to an immense desire to visualize."[118] It is fair to say, then, that at least some Jews and at least some Christians could agree that the possibility of redemption is bound up in the ritualized manipulation of these repositories of "otherworldly" presence. It would, of course, be wrong to view the martyrology's narrative of collective redemption through atoning human sacrifice as a mere derivative of the regnant Christian paradigm. Instead, what we have seen is a pointed attempt to appropriate salient elements of Christian sacred history, while still formulating innovative and even idiosyncratic claims about Rabbi Ishmael's (semi)-divine nature in distinctive literary and cultural terms.

[118] Gilbert Dagron, "Holy Images and Likeness," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991): 25 and the primary sources cited there in n. 17.