Hekhalot/Merkabah literature

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Hekhalot literature represents the earliest extensive collection of Jewish mystical writings from Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Hekhalot compositions are characterized by a unique, if eclectic, literary style. These texts consist variously of detailed descriptions of the topography and denizens of the heavenly realms, the elaborate protocols for the liturgy performed by the angels before God, as well as the actual hymns of praise of which this heavenly liturgy consists, and, most distinctively, ritual instructions to enable the practitioner either to ascend to heaven or to bring angels down to earth. The term *hekhalot* comes from the Hebrew word for the celestial palaces or temples (sing. *hekhal*) within which God and his angelic host reside. The form of religious praxis and experience described in Hekhalot literature is often also referred to as "Merkavah mysticism" because it draws upon the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot-throne (the *merkavah* of Ezek 1:10).

This diverse literature resists easy geographic and chronological classification. Written in Hebrew and Aramaic, with traces of Greek, Latin, and Persian influence, Hekhalot literature developed in the major centers of Jewish learning – Palestine and Iraq. While the corpus may contain traditions from the second to fifth centuries CE, it emerged as a recognizable and distinct genre of literature only during the second half of the first millennium (Boustan 2006).

Modern scholars have access to Hekhalot texts primarily through manuscripts from medieval western Europe produced in the twelfth century and after (Schäfer 1981). In addition, more than twenty fragments of Hekhalot texts have been retrieved from the CAIRO GENIZAH (Schäfer 1984). Significant differences exist between the materials contained in the Genizah fragments and those that were transmitted within the European manuscript tradition. This disparity between its "Oriental" and "European" branches suggests that Hekhalot literature circulated in a wide variety of forms along different regional trajectories. Hekhalot literature cannot simply be divided into stable "works," but represents a relatively open-ended set of compositions that remained in flux as they were transmitted and actively refashioned by later scribes (Schäfer 1988). The complex literary and scribal processes that shaped this literature complicate any attempt to reconstruct its formative literary and textual history.

Absolute criteria for delimiting the boundaries of the Hekhalot corpus on internal, formal grounds also prove elusive. The following compositions are generally considered to belong to Hekhalot literature proper: *3 (Hebrew) Enoch*; *Hekhalot Rabbati* ("The Greater [Book of Celestial] Palaces"); *Hekhalot Zutarti* ("The Lesser [Book of Celestial] Palaces"); *Ma'aseh Merkavah* ("The Working of the Chariot"); *Merkavah Rabbah* ("The Great [Book of] the Chariot"); and, finally, a series of relatively autonomous adjurational complexes known as *Sar ha-Torah* ("Prince of the Torah"), texts that promise the practitioner angelic assistance in acquiring and retaining knowledge of Torah. Embedded within or appended to these major literary units are a number of formally distinct texts, most significantly the Shi'ur Qomah ("The Measure of the [Divine] Body") materials that catalogue the sizes and names of the limbs of God's gargantuan body. While Hekhalot literature does exhibit certain formal and thematic affinities to ancient Jewish magical texts, the two corpora employ appreciably different ritual techniques and, most likely, reflect distinct sociological profiles (Bohak 2008: 329–39).

The authorial voice of Hekhalot literature is anonymous and collective, as is typical for much rabbinic literature. Rabbinic figures from second-century Palestine – most commonly, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva – serve as the protagonists of Hekhalot literature

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and the tradents of its esoteric teachings. This pseudonymous framework serves as an authorizing strategy to anchor Hekhalot literature to the increasingly hegemonic rabbinic tradition.

Hekhalot literature centers upon two principal themes, heavenly ascent and angelic adjuration. Gershom Scholem (1965) accorded temporal and thematic priority to the ascent narratives; the heavenly journeys continue the form of ecstatic mysticism attested in earlier Jewish (and Christian) apocalyptic writings and in the Dead Sea Scrolls, while the "magico-ritual" elements found in the corpus mark the subsequent degeneration of its original "mystical" impulse. More recent scholarship has emphasized the degree to which ritual practice pervades every facet of Hekhalot literature. In both ascent and adjuration, movement between the earthly and heavenly realms is achieved through the meticulous performance of ritual speech and action. And even the aim of the ascent process has been profoundly shaped by a ritual-liturgical sensibility: the culmination of the ascent, as conceived in Hekhalot literature, primarily consists in the practitioner's participation in the heavenly liturgy (*unio liturgica*) and his commission by God to communicate his abiding love for his people Israel (Schäfer 2009: 243–330).

The heterogeneity, fluidity, and pseudonymity that characterize Hekhalot texts create formidable obstacles for determining the *Sitz-im-Leben* of this literature with any precision. It is perhaps not surprising that theories have nevertheless multiplied. Scholem situates Hekhalot literature within the main currents of rabbinic Judaism from the second century onward. In sharp contrast, David Halperin (1988) detects in this literature the populist ideology of the Jewish masses, who sought an accessible – and immediate – path to the revelation of Torah. Michael Swartz (1996) interprets the *Sar ha-Torah* literature as an expression of the aspirations of "secondary elites" who served Late Antique Jewish communities as minor religious functionaries; while these low-status scribes were deeply influenced by the scholastic culture of the rabbis, they found themselves excluded from rabbinic institutions of learning and thus resorted to magical means for acquiring mastery of Torah. James Davila (2001) argues that Hekhalot literature and the Jewish magical texts, when taken together as a coherent corpus, reflect the religious vocation of a guild of Jewish shamans whose transformative experience of mystical ecstasy empowered them as healers and ritual experts. Rachel Elior (2004) believes that Hekhalot literature preserves a continuous stream of ancient priestly tradition intended to compensate for the loss of the sacrificial cult following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE. Scholarship has only just begun the interrelated tasks of situating Hekhalot literature within its (changing) sociohistorical context(s), defining its relationship to other branches of Jewish literary culture, and analyzing the religious phenomena it both describes and embodies.

SEE ALSO: Akiba, Rabbi; Apocalypses, Christian; Apocalypses, Jewish; *Enoch, Books of (1, 2, 3 Enoch)*; Magic, Jewish; Piyyut (Jewish liturgical and secular poetry); Prayer, Jewish; Shi'ur Qomah (Jewish mystical texts).

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