

Shi'ur Qomah (Jewish mystical texts)

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Shi'ur Qomah ("The Measure of the [Divine] Body") refers to a class of Jewish "mystical" texts in Hebrew that catalogue the precise size and secret name of the limbs of God's body. The dimensions of each body part are given in parasangs (Persian miles), thereby stressing the gargantuan proportions of the divine body. The names of God's limbs are formed from long strings of mostly unintelligible letters (*nomina barbara*). Shi'ur Qomah texts largely consist of stereotyped units that take the following form: the distance from limb A (e.g., his ankles) to limb B (e.g., his knees) is X myriad parasangs; the name of right limb B (e.g., his right knee) is such-and-such and the name of left limb B (e.g., his left knee) is such-and-so. The sequence of these units begins from the soles of God's feet and proceeds upwards to his head and face and then downward again to his toes.

The tradition of the Shi'ur Qomah, although distinct, seems to belong to the early Jewish mystical corpus known as Hekhalot literature (see HEKHALOT/MERKABAH LITERATURE). Hekhalot texts likewise provide similar catalogues of the outsized physical proportions of certain angels or record the astronomical distances between the various levels of the heavenly realm. Moreover, Shi'ur Qomah and Hekhalot texts both depict a common cast of rabbinic protagonists as the transmitters of their teachings (e.g., Rabbi Akiba, Rabbi Ishmael). Shi'ur Qomah compositions circulated in a wide variety of textual forms – some extensive, others only brief excerpts – and they are variously found as relatively free-standing compositions or integrated within larger works of Hekhalot literature. For these reasons, the Shi'ur Qomah can best be considered a sub-genre of Hekhalot literature rather than a discrete and stable text (Herrmann 1988 *contra* Cohen 1985).

The date and provenance of the Shi'ur Qomah as well as its primary purpose remain

matters of intense disagreement among scholars. Gershom Scholem argued that this tradition developed in first- and second-century CE Palestine as a form of early rabbinic exegesis of the Song of Songs; the biblical description of God's body in Song 5:11–16 served as the object of esoteric speculation, but also as the culmination of the visionary experience attained through the process of heavenly ascent described elsewhere in Hekhalot literature (Scholem 1965: 36–42). Other scholars, however, have since argued that the Shi'ur Qomah did not originate in either the esoteric exegesis or mystical experiences of the early rabbis, but emerged only toward the end of Late Antiquity as a form of ritual-liturgical practice (Cohen 1983). Indeed, Shi'ur Qomah compositions are nowhere explicitly associated with the themes of heavenly ascent and visionary experience in Hekhalot literature (Schäfer 2009: 306–15). Rather, the intensive focus in the Shi'ur Qomah upon the precise knowledge of divine names and its explicit instructions for their recitation suggest that this enigmatic tradition represents a distinctive variant of the widespread use in Late Antique Jewish culture of divine and angelic names for the purpose of gaining blessings such as longevity, knowledge, and power.

SEE ALSO: Akiba, Rabbi; Magic, Jewish; Prayer, Jewish.

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