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From Martyr to Mystic

Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making
of Merkavah Mysticism

Mohr Siebeck

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*This work is lovingly dedicated
to the memory of my mother*

Susan Krassner Abusch

פְּעֻמָּן זָהָב וְרִמּוֹן פְּעֻמָּן זָהָב וְרִמּוֹן
שְׁמוֹת כַּח לֵד

Preface

From Martyr to Mystic traces the historical emergence of the specific form of “mystical” discourse found in *Heikhalot Rabbati*, one of the central texts of Heikhalot literature. Heikhalot literature, written in both Hebrew and Aramaic and forming the earliest extensive collection of Jewish ascent and adjurational sources, crystallized as a distinct class of texts during Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages among Jewish groups in Palestine and Mesopotamia. While this literature encompasses a heterogeneous set of genres and themes, the discourse of visionary ascent known in modern scholarship as “Merkavah mysticism” unquestionably represents one of its most distinctive features – and perhaps its most significant contribution to subsequent Jewish religious thought and practice. But this study seeks to redress the widespread tendency among scholars to treat the diverse religious phenomena found in Heikhalot literature as a uniform expression of an essentially *sui generis* and thereafter unbroken tradition of Jewish mysticism. Instead, I pursue a genealogical approach to the formation of *Heikhalot Rabbati*, analyzing its novel religious idiom as a cultural artifact produced through “normal” historical and literary processes of continuity, appropriation, and innovation.

Toward this end, *From Martyr to Mystic* combines formal literary analysis with social and cultural history in an effort to situate firmly the development of Heikhalot literature in general and of *Heikhalot Rabbati* in particular within the broader context of late antique Jewish literary culture. More specifically, I argue that the creators of *Heikhalot Rabbati* sought to fashion a myth of origins for their distinct brand of heavenly ascent practice by radically reworking the narrative framework of the widely disseminated post-talmudic martyrology *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*, which was composed in Byzantine Palestine between the fifth and seventh centuries CE. I argue that *Heikhalot Rabbati* not only renders redundant the notion of atoning self-sacrifice that is the key to Israel’s future redemption in the martyrology, but also ascribes to the Heikhalot visionary the intercessory function of the martyr – here achieved bloodlessly through heavenly ascent and liturgical performance (chapter 5). This sophisticated act of literary appropriation reflects the wider ideological project of *Heikhalot Rabbati*, which portrays the Heikhalot visionaries as a special class of ritual experts whose power and authority derive from “esoteric” knowledge and practice. *Heikhalot Rabbati*, I argue, should thus be understood to have emerged as a part of a

broader effort to fashion a distinct social identity – both individual and corporate – for the Heikhalot visionary (chapter 6). In parsing the complex relationship between these works, I illuminate how the figures of the martyr and the mystic came to play parallel, yet competing, roles within the highly influential conceptions of history that were bequeathed to medieval Jewish communities by late antique Judaism.

Unlike most studies in the field of Jewish mysticism, this book does not employ the rather problematic category of “mysticism” as an analytical tool to establish its interpretative focus, scope, or approach. Instead, it treats “Merkavah mysticism” as a historically contingent category that is itself in need of interrogation. For this reason, I place scare-quotes around the terms “mysticism” and “mystical” throughout this study when referring to Heikhalot literature in order to caution the reader against importing universal or essential conceptions of “mysticism” into the material at hand. Instead, this study presupposes that the ritual and ideological dimensions of visionary ascent remained very much in flux in this period; even the most basic categories being applied to this domain of religious practice were under construction. This study is, therefore, attentive to the constraints that social context, literary form, and material conditions imposed on the shifting range of “meanings” that Heikhalot texts and other related Jewish literatures carried in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages (see especially chapter 1).

Research on early Jewish “mysticism” has, in my view, too often cordoned off Heikhalot literature from its contemporaneous religious and literary landscape. This scholarly tradition has preferred to place Heikhalot literature within a diachronic narrative in which it is little more than a preparatory phase in the evolution of the religious sensibility that reached full flower only with the emergence of the classical Kabbalah in the High Middle Ages. Seen from this vantage point, Heikhalot texts are primarily of interest for the ways they adumbrate these subsequent developments. Indeed, students of the Kabbalah – accustomed as they are to the systematization characteristic of medieval thought and philosophy – routinely conflate later applications of or elaborations on Heikhalot texts with the Jewish “mystical” and “magical” literatures of Late Antiquity. And even when Heikhalot literature has been read alongside (usually much earlier) rabbinic sources, the Heikhalot material has invariably been presented as either a radical alternative to or the esoteric counterpart of “normative” rabbinic Judaism. Heikhalot texts have thus been effectively isolated from the wider historical and cultural processes that are understood to have shaped other forms of Jewish culture in Late Antiquity.

My emphasis on the situated nature of “Merkavah mysticism” represents, at least in part, a reaction to the scholarly literature that stems from this homogenizing tendency. To this end, this study aims to illuminate the particular historical circumstances and ideological motivations that led the creators of *Heikhalot*

Rabbati to formulate their novel conception of heavenly ascent as an esoteric ritual discipline. I thereby pointedly emphasize the role of Heikhalot literature in the transformation of Jewish religious thought from its largely decentralized roots in Late Antiquity to its gradual drive towards systematization in the High Middle Ages.

For scholars principally interested in the ancient or late ancient phases of Jewish “mystical” and “magical” traditions, this study aims to refocus attention on the particular historical contexts of Byzantine Palestine (circa 400–700 CE) and geonic Mesopotamia (650–1000 CE), which I believe served as the primary cultural matrix for the emergence of Heikhalot literature. I am convinced that many diverse elements of this literature – from its conception of visuality to its cosmology and eschatology – can best be interpreted within this specific historical frame of reference. Thus, for example, I interpret certain prominent themes in the narrative traditions about Rabbi Ishmael through the lens of the passionate debates concerning artistic representation and the liturgical-ritual use of icons and relics that riveted Byzantine Christian society (see chapters 3 and 4).

I also see my work as contributing to the renewed interest in the broader Jewish culture of Byzantine Palestine. It is only in the past few years that Jewish historians have begun to recognize the degree to which the period of Byzantine-Christian rule in Palestine (circa 350–650 CE) served as a seminal stage in the development of Judaism and Jewish society. This period saw the increasing dissemination of rabbinic culture and the gradual consolidation of rabbinic authority. At the same time, Byzantine Jewish culture continued to be characterized by the type of social and religious diversity that had been a hallmark of Jewish communal life in the earlier Hellenistic and Roman periods. No scholarly consensus has yet emerged concerning the nature and status of the rabbinic movement in Byzantine Palestine, nor is it yet obvious how we ought to interpret the palpable tensions, attested to in a variety of literary and archaeological data, between the extension of rabbinic hegemony and the persistent heterogeneity of Jewish culture.

I show at numerous points throughout this study that the Jewish literary culture of Byzantine Palestine was not dominated solely by rabbinic learning and practice, which, in any case, hardly constituted a uniform or internally consistent tradition in this period. But I have also found it equally difficult to adopt the position – recently advocated by some – that the various cultural forms associated with the late antique synagogue (e.g., liturgical poetry, synagogue art, and perhaps Heikhalot literature itself) developed largely outside the realm of rabbinic influence and possibly even in opposition to it. In my view, the liturgical, narrative, and midrashic works produced in this period hint at a dynamic and complex interaction between the “rabbinic” tradition of the study-house and the “priestly-cultic” tradition of the synagogue. Indeed, rabbinic and liturgical elements are so seamlessly integrated in many texts from this period that any

attempt to develop reliable criteria for classification is severely hampered, if not wholly undermined.

I have, therefore, preferred a differentiated and localized approach to the social and institutional forces that shaped the Jewish literary culture of Byzantine Palestine. For example, I argue in chapter 6 that a considerable number of *Heikhalot* compositions use the figure of Rabbi Ishmael – priest, rabbi, and aspiring visionary – to explore the tensions between the rabbinic ideal of scholastic discipline and the priestly model of authority based on lineage. Significantly, not all *Heikhalot* texts resolve this tension in the same way, formulating a range of distinct and often competing ideological positions. I hope that these results will encourage others to undertake formal and linguistic studies of specific literary texts and genres in order to build a cumulative picture of the institutional history of Jewish society in Byzantine Palestine.

In addition to engaging issues in the field of Jewish Studies, this project also aims to contribute to the recent groundswell of research into the complex and, in many cases, reciprocal influences between Jewish and Christian culture in Late Antiquity. Most research on Jewish–Christian relations in Late Antiquity has traditionally focused on its initial phases during the first four centuries of the Common Era, culminating with the decriminalization and increasing institutionalization of Christianity under the Emperor Constantine and his immediate successors. But, more recently, a number of scholars have emphasized the myriad ways in which Jews and Christians continued to inhabit a common discursive terrain even after substantive social, legal, and theological differences had emerged between the two groups. As one contribution to this growing area of research, my analysis reveals a set of provocative affinities between post-talmudic rabbinic martyrology and a wide variety of early Christian texts and traditions (see chapters 3 and 4).

My conviction that formal analysis of *Heikhalot* literature ought to be wedded to historical investigation of late antique Jewish literary culture has generated considerable organizational challenges, many of which I fear I have only partly surmounted. In trying to find a suitable structure for this study, I have needed to balance and, ultimately, integrate close attention to the compositional features and narrative structure of the sources with synthetic discussion of their major themes. Readers who are primarily interested in the broad thrust of this study may wish to pass over its highly technical sections. I have provided an extensive introduction and conclusion for each chapter to help the reader access my basic findings as well as navigate my sometimes quite intricate textual readings. But, while the detailed literary analysis on which the book's argument largely depends can be hard-going at times, I felt that to do any less would be to gloss over the intensely local, profoundly malleable, and often endlessly contested nature of religious discourse and practice.

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