

RA'ANAN S. BOUSTAN

From Martyr  
to Mystic

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112

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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Ra'anan S. Boustan

# 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

פְּעֻמּוֹן זָהָב וְרֵמוֹן פְּעֻמּוֹן זָהָב וְרֵמוֹן  
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 visibility 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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I dedicate this book in loving memory of my mother, Susan Abusch ז"ל, who, despite her numerous physical and emotional battles, always knew what was most important: the quality of the time spent together in human company.

Minneapolis, 3 May 2005, כד ניסן תשס"ה

Ra'anan S. Boustan

## Contents

Preface . . . . .	VII
Acknowledgements . . . . .	XI
Abbreviations, Signs, Transcription, and Transliteration . . . . .	XIX
<i>Introduction: The Emergence of a Jewish “Mystical” Literature</i> . . . . .	1
Reading Early Jewish Mystical Literature . . . . .	3
<i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> , Rabbinic Martyrology, and the Production of Heikhalot Literature . . . . .	6
Martyrs, Mystics, and the Legacy of Late Antique Jewish Literature . . . . .	13
<i>1. Heikhalot Literature and Rabbinic Martyrology</i> . . . . .	15
The Problem of Heterogeneity in the Study of Heikhalot Literature . . . . .	16
Early Jewish Mysticism from the Perspective of Material Culture . . . . .	23
The Limits of Reception-History . . . . .	26
<i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> and <i>The Story of the Ten Martyrs</i> : Toward a Literary History . . . . .	30
<i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> : Origins, Transmission, and Reception . . . . .	36
Evidence for <i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> from the Cairo Genizah . . . . .	46
Conclusion . . . . .	47
<i>2. From Individual Guilt to Collective Sin: The Formation of the Post-Talmudic Martyrological Anthology</i> . . . . .	51
Rudimentary Martyrological Compilations in Classical Rabbinic Literature . . . . .	55
Martyrdom and Sin: The Individualistic Theodicy of Rabbinic Martyrology . . . . .	60
<i>The Peccadillo Motif</i> . . . . .	63
Individual Culpability in the Martyrologies in the Babylonian Talmud . . . . .	67
The Limits of Theodicy: “This is Torah and this its reward?” . . . . .	69
The Shifting Identities of Two Rabbinic Martyrs . . . . .	71
The Rivalry between the Patriarch and the High Priest in Rabbinic Martyrology . . . . .	77

The Sale of Joseph, Collective Sin, and Vicarious Atonement in <i>Midrash Shir ha-Shirim</i> . . . . .	81
The Amalgamation of Rabbinic Martyrology and Yom Kippur Traditions . . . . .	85
The Frame Narrative of <i>The Story of the Ten Martyrs</i> . . . . .	92
Conclusion . . . . .	97
 3. <i>The Hagiographic Vita of a Priestly Rabbinic Martyr:</i> <i>The Figure of Rabbi Ishmael in The Story of the Ten Martyrs</i> . . . . .	99
Rabbi Ishmael in Classical Rabbinic Literature . . . . .	102
The Miraculous Conception of Rabbi Ishmael . . . . .	106
Rabbi Ishmael's Heavenly Ascent . . . . .	113
Rabbi Ishmael's Execution . . . . .	121
Rituals of Redemption: Rabbi Ishmael's "Death Mask" . . . . .	125
The Martyrdom of Rabbi Ishmael and Jewish-Christian Competition . . . . .	130
Metatron and Melchizedek as Priestly Prototypes . . . . .	133
A Hebrew Hymn for a High-Priestly Messiah . . . . .	139
Conclusion . . . . .	147
 4. <i>The Heavenly Cult of the Martyrs: Apocalyptic Forms in</i> <i>Rabbinic Martyrology</i> . . . . .	149
Jewish Martyr Cults in Late Antiquity: From Literature to Practice . . . . .	151
Atonement without Temple Cult: The Vicarious Suffering of the Righteous . . . . .	155
The Heavenly Altar and the Sacrificial Cult of the Martyrs . . . . .	165
The Blood of the Martyrs: A Motif in its Shifting Literary Contexts . . . . .	173
The Blood of Eschatological Vengeance in Late Palestinian Midrash . . . . .	182
The Demonization of Empire: The Fall of Sama'el and the Scapegoat Ritual . . . . .	185
Conclusion . . . . .	197
 5. <i>Apocalypse Now: Genre Inversion and Identity Reversal in</i> <i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> . . . . .	199
The Story of the Four Martyrs in <i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> § 107: Vestige or Adaptation? . . . . .	202
The <i>Yeridah</i> of Rabbi Ishmael in <i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> § 108 . . . . .	208
The Future Punishment of Sama'el and Rome in <i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> §§ 108–110 . . . . .	211
A Day of Pure Celebration in <i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> § 111 . . . . .	217
The Castigation of Emperor Lupinus in <i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> §§ 112–119 . . . . .	226

The Martyrdom of Emperor Lupinus in <i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> §§ 120–121	231
The Miraculous Power of the <i>Yored la-merkavah</i> . . . . .	239
Conclusion . . . . .	242
6. <i>The Making of the Merkavah Mystic: The Function of Post-Talmudic Martyrology in Heikhalot Rabbati</i> . . . . .	245
Reading Across the Seams: Narrative Framing Strategies in the <i>Ḥavurah</i> -account . . . . .	248
Martyrological Material and Narrative Framing in <i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> §§ 198–203 . . . . .	252
Martyrological Material and Narrative Framing in <i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> §§ 237–240 . . . . .	259
The Competing Representations of Rabbi Ishmael in Heikhalot Literature . . . . .	264
i. The Crown of the Priesthood in the Frame Narrative of <i>3 Enoch</i> (Synopsis, §§ 1–3) . . . . .	266
ii. Priestly Lineage and Ritual Praxis as Complementary Alternatives . . . . .	270
iii. Egalitarianism and Anti-Priestly Polemic in <i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i> . . . . .	275
Foundation Narratives and Inter-Communal Polemics in the Geonic Period . . . . .	281
Conclusion . . . . .	287
<i>Conclusion: Toward the Middle Ages</i> . . . . .	289
Appendix A: The Thematic Evolution of Post-talmudic Martyrology: A Schematic Diagram . . . . .	294
Appendix B: The Heavenly Trial Scene in <i>The Story of the Ten Martyrs</i> . . . . .	295
Bibliography . . . . .	303
Source Index . . . . .	337
Modern Author Index . . . . .	360
Subject Index . . . . .	361



# Abbreviations, Signs, Transcription, and Transliteration

## Monograph Series, Journals, and Reference Works

AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
<i>AJS Review</i>	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
AnBib	Analecta biblica
<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
<i>BA</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and S. A. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907).
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
<i>BMGS</i>	<i>Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies</i>
<i>BR</i>	<i>Biblical Research</i>
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca sacra</i>
BZRGG	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CCAR Journal</i>	<i>Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal</i>
CSCO	Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium
<i>DSD</i>	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
<i>DOP</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
EJM	Études sur le Judaïsme médiéval
<i>FJB</i>	<i>Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge</i>
FJS	Frankfurter Judaistische Studien
<i>GRBS</i>	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies</i>
HDR	Harvard Dissertations in Religion
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ISACR	Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
Jastrow	Marcus Jastrow, <i>A Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature</i> (New York: Judaica Press, 1985).
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JCP	Jewish and Christian Perspectives
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>

<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JJTP</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy</i>
<i>JPS</i>	Jewish Publication Society
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
<i>JSJSup</i>	Journal for the Study of Judaism: Supplement Series
<i>JSJT</i>	<i>Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSUp</i>	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
<i>JSP</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i>
<i>JSPSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha: Supplement Series
<i>JSQ</i>	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Jewish Social Studies</i>
<i>JTECL</i>	Jewish Traditions in Early Christian Literature
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>MGWJ</i>	<i>Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums</i>
<i>NHS</i>	Nag Hammadi Studies
<i>NovTSUp</i>	Novum Testamentum Supplements
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>OLA</i>	Orientalia Iovaniensia analecta
<i>OTS</i>	Old Testament Studies
<i>PAAJR</i>	<i>Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research</i>
<i>PCPS</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society</i>
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Modern Language Association</i>
<i>PRSt</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
<i>PVTG</i>	Pseudepigrapha Veteris Testamenti Graece
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
<i>REJ</i>	<i>Revue des Études Juives</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>RGRW</i>	Religions in the Graeco-Roman World
<i>RGVV</i>	Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten
<i>RHPR</i>	<i>Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse</i>
<i>SBLEJL</i>	Society of Biblical Literature Early Judaism and Its Literature
<i>SBLMS</i>	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
<i>SBLSP</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</i>
<i>ScrHier</i>	<i>Scripta hierosolymitana</i>
<i>SCS</i>	Septuagint and Cognate Studies
<i>SFSHJ</i>	South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism
<i>SHR</i>	Studies in the History of Religions
<i>SJLA</i>	Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity
<i>SPhilo</i>	<i>Studia philonica</i>
<i>SSLJM</i>	Sources and Studies in the Literature of Jewish Mysticism
<i>STDJ</i>	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
<i>STJHC</i>	Studies and Texts in Jewish History and Culture
<i>StPB</i>	Studia post-biblica

STS	Semitic Texts and Studies
SVTP	Studia in Veteris Testamenti pseudepigraphica
TCH	The Transformation of the Classical Heritage
TLZ	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
TSAJ	Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism
TSMEMJ	Texts and Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Judaism
TZ	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
UCOP	University of Cambridge Oriental Publications
VC	<i>Vigiliae christianae</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
YJS	Yale Judaica Series
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZRGG	<i>Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte</i>
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

All abbreviations of primary texts that appear in this study but are not given below may be found in Patrick H. Alexander, ed., *The SBL Handbook of Style for Ancient Near East, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999). This applies to all books of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, to Second Temple Jewish literature (including the so-called apocrypha and pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls), and to early Christian literature. I have avoided the use of abbreviations where I deem them an impediment to the non-specialist reader.

## Rabbinic Literature

### *Major textual compilations*

m	Mishnah	y	Jerusalem/Palestinian Talmud
t	Tosefta	b	Babylonian Talmud

### *Individual tractates cited*

Ber	Berakhot	Naz	Nazir
Kil	Kila'im	Sot	Sotah
Ḥal	Ḥallah	Git	Gittin
Shab	Shabbat	Qid	Qiddushin
Eruv	'Eruvin	BQ	Bava Qamma
Pes	Pesahim	BM	Bava Metsi'a
Yom	Yoma	BB	Bava Batra
Suk	Sukkah	San	Sanhedrin
Rosh	Rosh ha-Shanah	Shev	Shevu'ot
Ta'an	Ta'anit	AZ	'Avodah Zarah
Meg	Megillah	'Ed	'Eduyyot
Ḥag	Ḥagigah	Zev	Zevahim
Yev	Yevamot	Men	Menaḥot
Ket	Ketubbot	Hul	Hullin
Ned	Nedarim	Bek	Bekhorot

‘Arak	‘Arakhin	Nid	Niddah
Ohal	Ohalot	TevY	Tevul Yom
Neg	Nega‘im		

Thus, e.g., *bTa’an* 19a refers to Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Ta’anit*, page 19, folio a.

*Other rabbinic texts (mostly midrashic) cited*

AdRN	Avot de-Rabbi Natan	PRE	Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer
BdN	Baraita de-Niddah	PRK	Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana
Ber. Rbti	Bereshit Rabbati	Tg. Neof.	Targum Neofiti
DevR	Deuteronomy Rabbah	Tg. Ps.-J.	Targum Pseudo-Jonathan
EcclR	Ecclesiastes Rabbah	Tg. Yer.	Targum Yerushalmi
Eccl. Rbti	Ecclesiastes Rabbati	RuthR	Ruth Rabbah
ExodR	Exodus Rabbah	Sem	Massekhet Semaḥot
Frg. Tgs.	Fragmentary Targums	SER/SEZ	Seder Eliyyahu Rabbah/Zuta
GenR	Genesis Rabbah	SifreiDt	Sifrei Deuteronomy
LamR	Lamentations Rabbah	SifreiNum	Sifrei Numbers
LevR	Leviticus Rabbah	SongR	Song of Songs Rabbah
MekhSbY	Mekhilta de-Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai	SRdB	Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit
MekhY	Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael	Tan	Tanḥuma
MidProv	Midrash Proverbs	TanB	Tanḥuma Buber
MidPs	Midrash Psalms	Tg.	Targum
NumR	Numbers Rabbah	YalqM	Yalqut ha-Makhiri
Pesiq. Rbti	Pesiqta Rabbati	YalqSh	Yalqut Shim‘oni

Complete references to editions of these works can be found in the Bibliography.

*Signs Used in Transcriptions and Translations*

(text)	Addition needed for the translation
[text]	Restoration of text in a lacuna
{text}	Material appearing in only some versions of the text
<text>	Material written supralinearly in the manuscript
{{text}}	Material deleted by a censor
(?)	Uncertain whether the preceding text or translation is correct

*Additional Signs and Abbreviations*

<i>BhM</i>	Adolf Jellinek, ed., <i>Beit ha-Midrash</i> . 6 vols. Leipzig: Fridrikh Nies, 1853–1877. Reprint, Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1967.
G	Refers to the 23 Genizah fragments of Hekhalot texts published by Peter Schäfer in <i>Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur</i> , TSAJ 6 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984). G3/1a:2–7 refers to text 3, folio 1a, lines 2–7 in this edition.
<i>Synopse</i>	Peter Schäfer, ed., <i>Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur</i> , in collaboration with M. Schlüter and H. G. von Mutius, TSAJ 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981). Paragraph numbers from this edition are preceded by the paragraph sign § (e.g., <i>Synopse</i> , §§ 107–121).

*Ten Martyrs* Gottfried Reeg, ed., *Die Geschichte von den Zehn Märtyrern*, TSAJ 10 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985). Citations of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* refer to the recension, chapter, and paragraph numbers in this edition. Thus, e.g., *Ten Martyrs*, III–IV, VI–VIII.11.10–23 refers to recensions III, IV, VI, VII, and VIII, chapter 11, paragraphs 10–23. In this edition, page numbers for the Hebrew text are marked with an asterisk. Thus, Reeg, *Geschichte*, 55, refers to the German portion of the book, while Reeg, *Geschichte*, 55\*, refers to the Hebrew portion.

Note that in many passages cited from *Synopse* and *Ten Martyrs* certain textual units are found in some recensions but not in others. The numbering of paragraphs within citations is therefore often not perfectly sequential. In such cases, the reader is encouraged to consult the original critical edition.

## Transliteration

For the sake of accessibility, I have avoided diacritical marks for Hebrew transliteration except where they are absolutely necessary. I have followed the simplified system of transliteration presented in R. J. Zwi Werblowski and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), xiii:

א = ' (word-initial <i>alef</i> is not noted)	ל = l
ב = b	מ מ = m
ב = v	נ נ = n
ג ג = g	ס = s
ד ד = d	ע = ' (vowel)
ה = h	פ פ = p
ו = v	פ פ = f
ז = z	צ צ = ts
ח = ḥ	ק = q
ט = t	ר = r
י = y	ש = sh
ך כ = k	ש = s
ך כ = kh	ת ת = t

Dagesh Forte is represented by reduplication (e.g., *qiddush*), except for *shin* and *tsadiq*. All vowels (below) are shown in relation to the letter *mem* (מ).

מַ = a	מִי = i
מֵ = a	מֶ = o
מֶ = a	מֹ = o
מֵ = e	מֻ = u
מֶ = e	מֻ = u
מֵ = e	מִי = ei

ך̣ = i

ך̣ = vocal schwa (but not silent or medial schwa) is transliterated by “e” only when likely reflected in actual pronunciation

Note that “ei” (ײ) is to be pronounced something like the vowel sound in the English word “hay.”

I have chosen to follow the above system when transliterating the frequently used word *הַיְכָלֹת*, which I render *heikhal/ot* (e.g., *Heikhalot* literature), despite the more conventional spelling “Hekhalot” used in the field of early Jewish mysticism. It is my hope that readers unfamiliar with Hebrew pronunciation will thus be better able to engage in discussion concerning this literature. Otherwise, common proper names and other familiar phrases have generally been left in their established forms. Thus, I use spellings such as *baraita* (rather than *baraita'*), *Akiva* (rather than *Aqiva*), and *Ishmael* (rather than *Yishma'el*), except where context demands technical precision.

## Introduction

### The Emergence of a Jewish “Mystical” Literature

אם אתה רוצה להתייחד בעולם לגלות לך רז עולם וסתרי חכמה הוי שונה את המשנה הזאת והוי זהיר בה עד יום פרישתך אל תבין מה שלאחוריך ואל תחקור אמרי שפתותיך מה ש(ב)ליבך תבין ותדום כדי שתזכה ליופיות המרכבה הוי זהיר בכבוד קונך ואל תרד לו ואם ירדת לו אל תהנה ממנו סופך להטרד מן העולם כבוד אלהים הסתר דבר שלא תטרד מן העולם.

If you wish to single yourself out in the world, so that the mystery of the world and the secrets of wisdom are revealed to you, recite this teaching (*mishnah*) and be careful with it until the day of your passing. Do not (seek to) comprehend what is after you and do not examine the sayings of your lips; (seek to) comprehend that which is in your own heart and keep silent, so that you may be worthy of the beauty of the divine chariot-throne (*merkavah*). Be careful with the glory of your Creator and do not “descend” to it. But if you do “descend” to it, do not take enjoyment from it – your fate will be to be driven from the world. *The glory of God: conceal the matter* (Prov 25:2, in adapted form), lest you be driven from the world!

*Heikhalot Zutarti* § 335<sup>1</sup>

Most will never merit direct experience of the divine; and even those few who, through correct practice and proper discipline, do successfully encounter the glory of God are enjoined to keep their heavenly knowledge secret, or suffer the consequences. Thus cautions this terse, though suggestive, fragment of Heikhalot literature, the earliest relatively systematic collection of Jewish “mystical,” “magical,” and “liturgical” writings, which took shape gradually from the end of Late Antiquity and continuing well into the Middle Ages (c. 600–1300).<sup>2</sup> But

<sup>1</sup> My translation follows the version of this unit in MS Oxford 1531, as transcribed in Peter Schäfer, ed., *Synopse zur Heikhalot-Literatur*, in collaboration with M. Schlüter and H. G. von Mutius, TSAJ 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981), 142–43. All references to Heikhalot literature refer to this edition, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> These dates are very approximate and encompass various disparate stages in the development of this literature. Just as Heikhalot literature contains some material that dates to the talmudic period (c. 200–600), it also continued to experience editorial-scribal revision, reorganization, and expansion into the early modern and modern period. The fluid and heterogeneous textual evidence for Heikhalot literature reflects its enormously complex composition-, redaction-, and transmission-histories. On the ongoing and open-ended literary processes that gave rise to Heikhalot literature and their implications for determining the dating and prov-

the text – part warning label and part advertisement – also integrates a promise of power into its threat of danger.<sup>3</sup> Its shrewd juxtaposition of the language of revelation with the rhetoric of secrecy is deftly calibrated to draw in the curious or adventurous reader and, at the same time, to lend an air of authority and authenticity to the larger literary project in which it is embedded.

This impressive encapsulation of the religious discourse of Heikhalot literature does not highlight – let alone specify – any of the ritual or liturgical practices so characteristic of this class of texts. The passage instead strategically invests the very act of textual recitation with ritual power (“If you wish to single yourself out in the world...recite this teaching [*mishnah*]...”). Precisely which Heikhalot text or texts the phrase “this *mishnah*” designates is not wholly clear from the immediate literary context.<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that one of the earliest extant references to Heikhalot texts, contained in a legal letter (*responsum*) penned by the Babylonian scholars Sherira and Hayya Gaon (c. 1000 CE), refers to them as *mishnayot* (sing. *mishnah*).<sup>5</sup> But whatever its precise referent, the passage in question is striking for the way it calls attention to the concrete “literariness” of the Heikhalot texts themselves. At least from the perspective of this unit, knowledge of divine secrets and the power this knowledge confers are the fruit of ongoing and repeated engagement with Heikhalot texts, and not of isolated moments of mystical experience. This self-reflexive gesture does more than illu-

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enance of its constituent literary components, see below in this chapter and my fuller discussion in chapter 1. Also, see chapter 1 for discussion of the highly problematic categories “mystical,” “magical,” and “liturgical” and their application to Heikhalot literature.

<sup>3</sup> The unit’s rhetoric of secrecy and danger is obviously playing on the well-known prohibitions in *mHag* 2:1. This passage from the Mishnah famously prohibits public exposition of three highly charged topics discussed in Scripture (i.e., prohibited sexual relations in Lev 18:6–23; the creation story in Gen 1; and Ezekiel’s throne-vision in Ezek 1 and 10). The passage then warns that “whoever looks into (כל המסתכל ב-) four things, it would be merciful for him if he had not come into the world: what is above, and what below, what is before, and what after (ומה ולאחור).” It is the threat articulated in the latter portion of the passage that most clearly finds an echo here in § 335.

<sup>4</sup> This question is further complicated by the shifting redactional contexts in which the unit is found. In most manuscripts, it seems to serve as an introductory framework for the document conventionally designated *Heikhalot Zutarti* (Schäfer, *Synopse*, §§ 335–497). In such cases, the phrase “this *mishnah*” might be understood to index (some portion of) the subsequent textual material, although it might equally refer to instruction internal to the passage itself. Some manuscripts signal orthographically a disjuncture between § 335 and what follows, while others link the unit to the preceding material in the corpus. In the final analysis, I believe that precision is impossible. In no recension or manuscript is the passage explicitly integrated into or harmonized with the surrounding material. Other Heikhalot texts also refer to themselves or other closely related material as *mishnayot* (sing. *mishnah*), esp. Schäfer, *Synopse*, § 419 and § 424 (*Heikhalot Zutarti*). On the interpretative possibilities for the term *mishnah* in § 335, see Annelies Kuyt, *The “Descent” to the Chariot: Towards a Description of the Terminology, Place, Function, and Nature of the Yeridah in Hekhalot Literature*, TSAJ 45 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 205–9.

<sup>5</sup> B. M. Lewin, ed., *Otsar ha-Geonim: Thesaurus of the Geonic Responsa and Commentaries*, 13 vols. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press Association, 1928–1943), 4.2:14.

minate the nature of ritual performance in the Heikhalot corpus. It also suggests that, at a formative moment in its literary evolution, Heikhalot literature began to take an interest in the potential ritual applications of its own textuality.

## Reading Early Jewish Mystical Literature

But how we are to decipher this enigmatic unit of Heikhalot literature, in particular its rhetoric of secrecy, its implicit conception of textuality, and its position and function within its wider literary context? This study is grounded in the conviction that the sorts of interpretative issues raised by this passage must be made central to the study of Heikhalot literature as a whole and, in turn, that careful attention to the literary composition and rhetorical dimensions of Heikhalot literature must come to inform our understanding of early Jewish mysticism more generally. It assumes that Heikhalot texts are neither transparent descriptions of religious experience nor straightforward prescriptions for ritual practice. Like all other literatures (religious or otherwise), the Heikhalot corpus grew out of a specific cultural and ideological project – and its literary forms and rhetorical structures manifest that particular genealogy. Indeed, the very act of assembling disparate Jewish “mystical,” “magical,” and “liturgical” material into relatively stable and coherent literary compositions was not an inevitable or necessary development. Instead, to my mind, the emergence of Heikhalot literature *as a body of literature* represents an extraordinary achievement in and of itself. In order to interpret the above passage, we must situate it within the broader historical trajectory that this process of literary innovation followed. Such analysis has the potential to illuminate not only formative stages in the emergence of early Jewish mystical discourse, but also the gradual process by which “Heikhalot literature” came to constitute a distinct and recognizable class of texts.

To date, efforts to analyze the rhetorical and ideological aims of Heikhalot texts have remained rather rudimentary. This deficit is due, at least in part, to the intricate formal organization of Heikhalot literature as well as its tortuous textual history. Heikhalot texts encompass an eclectic range of motifs, themes, and genres. The term “heikhalot” comes from the Hebrew word for the celestial “palaces” (הַיְכָלוֹת) within which God is said in this literature to sit enthroned and through which the visionary ascends toward Him and his angelic host. This form of religious praxis and experience is often referred to as “Merkavah mysticism” because of its preoccupation with Ezekiel’s vision of the divine chariot-throne (the *merkavah* of Ezek 1 and 10). But much – perhaps even the majority – of the material transmitted as part of the Heikhalot corpus does not in fact address the process of heavenly ascent through the celestial palaces nor is it concerned with the culminating vision of God sitting upon his chariot-throne. Like much late antique Jewish literature, including numerous classical rabbinic compilations,

Heikhalot texts reflect the pluriform and decentered character of Jewish religious culture and authority in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Historical analysis of Heikhalot literature has been bedeviled by its extreme level of textual instability, its generic hybridity, and an unusually fragmentary textual record. Early Jewish “mystical” writings not only conceal their own literary aims and ritual function but resist even the most fundamental efforts at social, geographic, and temporal classification.

In addition to the formidable obstacles created by the protracted process of redaction and transmission that produced Heikhalot literature as a literary corpus, the narrative framework of these texts further complicates the task of setting socio-historical parameters for interpretation. This narrative fabric was constructed using early rabbinic figures such as Rabbi Ishmael, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Neḥunya ben ha-Qanah (second century CE) as protagonists. These heroes from the “mythic” rabbinic past are not only the main characters in the narrative portions of this literature; but the texts also directly attribute their instructional content to these rabbis. A typical unit of Heikhalot literature frames the ritual instructions and ecstatic experiences it records as follows: “R. Ishmael said: ‘For three years R. Neḥunya ben ha-Qanah saw me in great anguish and in great affliction. . . .’”<sup>6</sup> The passage then recounts how R. Neḥunya ben ha-Qanah taught his pupil the appropriate ritual words and actions, and concludes: “R. Ishmael said: Every student of a scholar who repeatedly recites this great mystery, his stature will please him and what he says will be received.”<sup>7</sup> This pattern of “pseudepigraphic” attribution forms the backbone of Heikhalot literature, lending it a sheen of antiquity and authority.

Despite the transparently legendary character of these attributions, they have successfully fostered the sense among both Jewish mystics and many modern scholars that there may be a kernel of historical truth behind this literary fiction. Ever since Gershom Scholem’s foundational work on Heikhalot literature, scholars of early Jewish mysticism have tended to date most of the Heikhalot texts as fully redacted works as well as many of the traditions contained therein to the Talmudic period (c. 200–600 CE).<sup>8</sup> By advocating a relatively early date for Heikhalot literature, Scholem sought to situate early Jewish mysticism in the heart of rabbinic Judaism. According to this account, mystical praxis *as formulated in Heikhalot literature* constituted an important dimension of rabbinic religiosity from the very inception of the rabbinic movement and likely has roots even earlier in the period before the destruction of the Second Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. Despite significant difficulties with Scholem’s historical reconstruction

<sup>6</sup> Schäfer, *Synopse*, § 308 (*Merkavah Rabbah*).

<sup>7</sup> Schäfer, *Synopse*, § 311 (*Merkavah Rabbah*).

<sup>8</sup> Gershom G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 2d ed. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965), 12–13; idem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1954), 46–47.

(to which I will return in chapter 1), his early dating of the Heikhalot texts has been widely accepted. In many cases, even when scholars have significantly emended or even wholly rejected central aspects of Scholem's thesis, they have been reluctant to surrender the legitimacy that an early dating confers on the Jewish mystical tradition.

Thus, I suspect that neither the vagaries of redaction- and reception-history nor the conceit of pseudepigraphic attribution fully accounts for the persistent lack of consensus in the field concerning the place of Heikhalot literature within late antique Judaism in general and its relationship to rabbinic literature in particular. Much scholarship on early Jewish mysticism eschews socio-historical specificity, tending to bypass the visible surface features of "mystical" literature in favor of its deeper religious significance.<sup>9</sup> Within this interpretative framework, Heikhalot literature is primarily of value for the access it provides to the experiential dimension of late ancient Jewish spirituality.

In my view, however, it is not possible to study early Jewish mysticism as a religious phenomenon without sustained attention to the dynamic social life of Heikhalot texts. This study takes as its primary object of analysis the narrative strategies and pseudepigraphic architecture that the creators of Heikhalot literature employed to fashion an authoritative literary framework for early Jewish mystical praxis. In tracing the transformation of Heikhalot literature in its transmission from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, it examines the seminal influence that processes of textualization and narrativization exerted on the literary form of Heikhalot literature and, therefore, on its subsequent reception and interpretation. The detailed philological analysis so central to this study does not represent an end in itself. Instead, the study seeks to turn the formidable obstacles presented by the empirical literary evidence into opportunities for illuminating key moments in the dynamic development of early Jewish mystical discourse and practice.

Because of the nature of the literary evidence, this study ranges over equally vast expanses of space and time. At each step in my investigation, I attempt to take into account the socio-political context and regional literary culture out of which specific texts and manuscripts grew. I begin in the Middle Ages with the earliest extant textual witnesses to the Heikhalot corpus (c. 900–1600 CE). I then back up into the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods to explore the wider literary culture within which the Heikhalot authors were operating as well as the literary materials and forms on which they drew (c. 200 BCE–650 CE). Finally I move forward again to analyze the ideological and religious considerations that motivated the complex process of literary appropriation that produced one of

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<sup>9</sup> For an important, if at times excessively antagonistic, critique of this tendency in scholarship on Jewish mystical literature, see Gil Anidjar, "Jewish Mysticism Alterable and Unalterable: On Orienting Kabbalah Studies and the 'Zohar of Christian Spain,'" *JSS* n.s. 3 (1996): esp. 100–4 and n. 22.

the central documents of Heikhalot literature, known as *Heikhalot Rabbati* (c. 650–900 CE).

This project draws on a wide range of literary-historical methodologies, from traditional philological tools such as text-criticism, source-criticism, redaction-criticism and reception-history to methods cultivated in the fields of literary studies, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and ritual and performance theory. This eclectic-pragmatic approach reflects my understanding of religion as an essentially social phenomenon; it does not originate in the realm of private, subjective experience, only later to find expression in the domains of history and language. Like all forms of human culture, religious discourses and practices are the product of culturally specific and historically situated processes.

Indeed, as the anthropologist Talal Asad has so convincingly argued – and most historians of religion have since come to agree – the emergence of religion as a discrete object of academic inquiry is itself an artifact of modern Western intellectual and social history.<sup>10</sup> The field of Jewish mysticism, like the academic study of mysticism in general, has reinscribed modern Western conceptions of religion in its tendency to privilege interiority over embodied practice and the universal over the particular.<sup>11</sup> In anchoring this study in historical and social context, I hope implicitly to advance the proposition that even scholarship on the seemingly ethereal and otherworldly subject matter found in Heikhalot literature must remain firmly rooted in earthly realities.

### *Heikhalot Rabbati*, Rabbinic Martyrology, and the Production of Heikhalot Literature

The aim of this study is to offer a more adequate account of the cultural and religious forces behind the historical emergence of a Jewish mystical literature toward the end of Late Antiquity. In order to gain a purchase on this complex and far-reaching process of literary innovation, I have found it fruitful to isolate a well-defined facet of the Heikhalot corpus to serve as a window onto the production of this literature as a whole. In this book, I chart the literary formation of *Heikhalot Rabbati* (“The Greater [Book of Celestial] Palaces”), one of the central documents of Heikhalot literature.<sup>12</sup> Most importantly for my

<sup>10</sup> Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27–54; first published as “Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz,” *Man* n.s. 18 (1983): 237–59.

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent, nuanced account of the emergence of “mysticism” as an analytical category within Anglo-American philosophical and academic discourse, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, “The Making of Modern ‘Mysticism,’” *JAAR* 71 (2003): 273–302.

<sup>12</sup> On the various titles by which this work is known in the medieval manuscript tradition and the variety of text-forms that it assumes in different manuscripts, see Peter Schäfer, “Zum

purposes, *Heikhalot Rabbati* not only played a crucial role in the development of the Heikhalot corpus but it also presents a number of significant literary and thematic peculiarities that shed light on that larger process.

Scholars have long granted *Heikhalot Rabbati* privileged status when reconstructing the religious history and character of Heikhalot literature in general.<sup>13</sup> In large measure, this tendency to treat this composition as the quintessential expression of early Jewish mysticism – commonly known as “Merkavah (throne) mysticism” – stems from its apparent preoccupation with the theme of heavenly ascent. Indeed, for some, the text’s extensive and colorful descriptions of what the visionary will encounter during his journey to God’s throne seem to encapsulate the very essence of the human religious quest for proximity to the divine.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, in many respects, *Heikhalot Rabbati* is anything but typical of Heikhalot literature.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps most striking is *Heikhalot Rabbati*’s direct literary relation-

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Problem der redaktionellen Identität von *Hekhalot Rabbati*,” in *Hekhalot-Studien*, TSAJ 19 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 63–74. I take my translation of the title from James R. Davila, *Descenders to the Chariot: The People behind the Hekhalot Literature*, JSJSup 70 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 8.

<sup>13</sup> I consider Heikhalot literature to comprise the following works: 3 (*Hebrew*) *Enoch*, *Heikhalot Rabbati*, *Heikhalot Zutarti* (“the Lesser [Book of Celestial] Palaces”), *Ma’aseh Merkavah* (“The Working of the Chariot”), and *Merkavah Rabbah* (“The Great Chariot”). All of these works are found in Schäfer, *Synopse*, a synoptic edition of seven primary manuscripts of the corpus (MSS New York 8128, Oxford 1531, Munich 40, Munich 22, Dropsie 436, Vatican 228, and Budapest 228). For a review of the prior publication history of these works as well as their placement within these manuscripts, see *Synopse*, v–xxv. In addition, a number of fragments of Heikhalot literature found in the Cairo Genizah are collected in Peter Schäfer, ed., *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, TSAJ 6 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984). Schäfer and his team in Berlin have also produced a concordance for and translation of the corpus: Peter Schäfer, ed., *Konkordanz zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, in collaboration with G. Reeg, 2 vols., TSAJ 12, 13, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986–1988); Peter Schäfer, et al., trans., *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur*, 4 vols., TSAJ 17, 22, 29, 46 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987–1995). It should be noted that I intentionally exclude the works *Re’uyyot Yehezqel* (“The Visions of Ezekiel”), *Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit* (“The Great Order of Creation”), and *Massekhet Heikhalot* (“Tractate of the Palaces”) from the corpus, since, despite some general affinities, they differ in significant ways from this central group of works. For discussion of the boundaries of the corpus, see especially Peter Schäfer, “Tradition and Redaction in Hekhalot Literature,” in *Hekhalot-Studien*, 8–16.

<sup>14</sup> This tendency to view the heavenly ascent of Heikhalot literature in subjective, experiential terms has been most influentially expressed by Gershom G. Scholem in his now classic *Major Trends*, 40–79; also idem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, esp. 12–19. Scholem’s views have been expanded in a number of discussions of *Heikhalot Rabbati*, especially Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, AGAJU 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1980); Morton Smith, “Observations on *Hekhalot Rabbati*,” in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 142–60.

<sup>15</sup> A paragraph-by-paragraph outline of *Heikhalot Rabbati*’s contents can be found at Schäfer, *Übersetzung*, 2:xxv–xxxii. For a near-comprehensive list of the manuscripts and fragments containing parts or the whole of the macroform as well as discussion of its shifting forms, see Schäfer, “Handschriften,” 201–18; also Kuyt, *Descent*, 125–32; James R. Davila, “Prolegomena to a Critical Edition of the Hekhalot Rabbati,” *JJS* 45 (1994): 208–26, esp. 208 n. 1. See my full review of this evidence in chapter 1, pp. 36–46.

ship with *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*, a post-talmudic anthology of rabbinic martyr-stories that traces the enduring conflict between Judaism and Rome from the early history of the Jewish people to their ultimate redemption from Roman rule.<sup>16</sup> The inclusion within *Heikhalot Rabbati* of a version of this widely circulated martyrology represents a puzzling anomaly within Heikhalot literature and therefore serves as a provocative and potentially revealing link between Heikhalot literature and the wider sphere of late antique Jewish literary culture.<sup>17</sup>

Previous scholars have read the literary affinities between *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* and Heikhalot literature – especially *Heikhalot Rabbati* – as evidence that the martyrology originated within the same circles that produced early Jewish mystical literature. Precisely because the two works share central characters, a common narrative setting, and a wide range of source-material, their literary relationship is easy to mistake for a common social context and religious sensibility.

The work of Moshe David Herr and Joseph Dan is typical of this earlier mode of scholarship. Thus, Herr confidently writes that

the occupation of some of the martyrs with mystical speculation, a fact which earned for them an important role in the *heikhalot* literature, led the circles of the mystics known as the “Ba‘alei ha-Merkavah” to create a legendary *aggadah* which entered the later Midrashim and which described the successive tortures and executions of ten martyrs, giving as its reason for all this the sin of Jacob’s sons in selling their brother Joseph into slavery... The legend of the Ten Martyrs mystically united various affairs, creating an artificial harmonization, while obliterating real actual and historical background. This is no wonder, *for its creators had no interest in historical accuracy, but were mystics.*<sup>18</sup>

The “mystical” quality that Herr finds in the martyrology does not so much signify a mode of religious experience and practice as it constitutes a counter-intuitive, even anti-rationalist, mode of historical and causal reasoning. In his view, this sensibility differs fundamentally from the historiographic conventions

<sup>16</sup> A comprehensive critical edition and accompanying translation of the martyrology appears in Gottfried Reeg, ed., *Die Geschichte von den Zehn Märtyrern*, TSAJ 10 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985), in which ten distinct recensions of the work are printed synoptically. The manuscripts and previous printed editions for the various recensions are reviewed on pages 16–32. English translations of the anthology are found in 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 University Press, 1990), 143–65; idem, “The Ten *Harugei Malkhut*,” in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, ed. D. Roskies (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 46–48. A post-talmudic dating for *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* was already suggested in the nineteenth century by Leopold Zunz, *Die synagogale Poesie des Mittelalters*, 2d ed., (Frankfurt: J. Kauffmann, 1920; repr., Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967), 139–44; also Philip Bloch, “Rom und die Mystiker der Merkabah,” in *Festschrift zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag Jakob Guttmanns* (Leipzig: Gustav Fock, 1915), 113–24.

<sup>17</sup> This material is found at *Synopse*, §§ 107–121 and § 198; MS New York JTS 8128 also includes martyrological material at § 139.

<sup>18</sup> Moshe David Herr, “The Ten Martyrs,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 15:1006–8. The italics are mine.

of normative rabbinic literature – not to mention the rules of modern (post-Enlightenment) historical-critical research. Moreover, Herr seems to imply that Jewish mystics and martyrs are united by a common and intertwining history that reaches back to the earliest generations of rabbinic Judaism.

Like Herr, Dan has argued in a series of detailed studies that the religious and historical sensibility of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* is an expression of the religious exuberance of “Merkavah mysticism.”<sup>19</sup> In his view, the historical framework of the martyrology reflects the mystics’ steadfast conviction that their special access to transcendent forms of knowledge confers upon them the power to depart radically from conventional conception of historical causality.

Only people who possessed a profound meta-historical sensibility such as this (בעלי כוונה תחושה מטה-היסטורית) could have brought together ten sages of different generations and depicted their martyr-deaths as belonging to a single set of events. [...] It seems that in this one can pinpoint the link between the mystical plot (העלילה המיסטית) of *Heikhalot Rabbati* and the pseudo-historical plot of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*: the meta-historical daring (ההעזה המטה-היסטורית) that generates impossible scenarios from the perspective of the accepted historical tradition, but thereby reflects, in keeping with the beliefs of the *yordei ha-merkavah*, the inner-meaning (המשמעות הפנימית) of history in a truer form than does dry chronology. This is neither ignorance nor disregard, but a deep belief in the reality of a hidden history pressing toward its apocalyptic-eschatological culmination; and it is precisely this conviction that engenders in the *yored merkavah* both the strength for mystical ascent to the sphere of the palaces and chariot and the power to create historical frameworks that are ludicrous in light of the well-accepted facts. The connection between the *Story of the Ten Martyrs* and the literature of the *yordei ha-merkavah* is not to be located in any single passage of text, but in their common approach to historical reality – and to that which is within and beyond that reality.<sup>20</sup>

Not only does Dan attribute the martyrology’s “hidden history” of the Jewish people to the mystical consciousness at the heart of Heikhalot literature, but he also implies that, for all intents and purposes, the “martyr narrative” of *Heikhalot Rabbati* and *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* articulate identical ideological and religious messages.

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Dan, “*Heikhalot Rabbati* and *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*” (Hebrew), *Eshel Be'er Sheva* 2 (1980): 63–80; idem, *The Hebrew Story in the Middle Ages* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 62–66; idem, “*The Story of the Ten Martyrs*: Its Origins and Development” (Hebrew), in *Studies in Literature Presented to Simon Halkin*, ed. E. Fleischer (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1973), 15–22. See also his cursory treatment of the martyrological material in *Heikhalot Rabbati* in Joseph Dan, *Apocalypse Then and Now* (Hebrew) (Hertselyiah: Yedi'ot Ahronot, 2000), 80–84. On the text-critical aspect of Dan’s argument, see chapter 1, pp. 31–33.

<sup>20</sup> Dan, “*Heikhalot Rabbati* and *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*,” 80. The translation is mine. Dan reiterates this view of the historical dimension of Heikhalot literature in “The Concept of History in Heikhalot Literature” (Hebrew), in *Essays on Jewish Culture: The Aharon Mirsky Jubilee Volume*, ed. Z. Malachi (Lod: Habermann Institute for Jewish Research, 1986), 117–30. This article appears in English in *Jewish Mysticism*, 4 vols. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998–1999), 1:189–203, esp. 198–201.

I believe that such assertions concerning the essential nature of mystical experience and the mystically oriented disposition it supposedly engenders do little to account for the intimate and often paradoxical relationship between Heikhalot literature and *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*. In this study, I take a radically different approach to this problem, analyzing the thematic and textual overlap between Jewish martyrology and Heikhalot literature primarily as a literary phenomenon. Rather than viewing Heikhalot literature as the generative locus for late Jewish martyrology, I show that the martyrological material contained in *Heikhalot Rabbati* is the product of a sophisticated exercise in literary adaptation that seeks to appropriate central elements of post-talmudic martyrology to its own novel purposes.

This approach grows, in part, out of my conviction that the diverse forms and themes found in Heikhalot literature cannot be reduced to various expressions of a unified and cohesive Jewish mystical tradition that has crystallized around an experiential core. Like other compositions in the Heikhalot corpus, *Heikhalot Rabbati* employs a wide variety of literary genres and forms, ranging from elaborate poetic compositions to terse instructional passages, to address an equally wide array of interrelated motifs.<sup>21</sup> To name only the most well developed of these: it provides ritual instruction for and narrative accounts of the process of heavenly ascent in which a human visionary journeys through a sequence of celestial palaces (usually seven) to reach the chariot-throne of God (the *merkavah* of Ezek 1 and 10); it prescribes other magical-theurgic techniques for the purpose of adjuring various angelic powers to confer knowledge and power on the practitioner;<sup>22</sup> it depicts the elevated social status granted those who successfully engage in these practices; it records the heavenly liturgy recited in praise of God by His angelic entourage; it describes in florid and obscure language the almost inconceivably colossal body of God; and it explores the often antagonistic relationship between the angels and their human counterparts on earth. This somewhat heterogeneous set of thematic interests is generally shared by the other documents of Heikhalot literature, although, to be sure, each work differs significantly in the prominence and meaning it accords them.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For a fundamental discussion of the different literary forms and thematic concerns in *Heikhalot Rabbati*, see Arnold Goldberg, "Einige Bemerkungen zu den Quellen und der Redaktionellen Einheiten der grossen Hekhalot," *FJB* 1 (1973): 1–49; repr., in *Mystik und Theologie des rabbinischen Judentums: Gesammelte Studien I*, ed. Margarete Schlüter and Peter Schäfer, TSAJ 61 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 49–77.

<sup>22</sup> It is not my intention here to enter into a discussion of the numerous problems attendant upon the label "magic." Insofar as the label serves to identify a general domain of practice, I am satisfied with its usefulness for the present context. Elsewhere, however, I follow Jonathan Z. Smith's recommendation that "middle-range typologies," such as "healing," "divining," and "execrative," should replace the rather clumsy and problematic term "magic" ("Trading Places," in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. M. Meyer and P. Mirecki, RGRW 129 [Leiden, Brill, 1995], 13–27, esp. 16–7).

<sup>23</sup> On the considerable differences among the corpus' various literary components, see

## Source Index

### Hebrew Bible

#### *Genesis*

	134
1	2
14:17–20	136–37
14:18	136–37
14:18–24	134
14:19–20	136
18:9	106
21:1–3	106
22:1–19	163
22:8	163
22:12	132
37:31	88–89
38	52, 191
39	123
49:22	122
49:22–26	140
49:25	140

#### *Exodus*

	64, 188
12–40	192
15:1	188
21:16	52, 82–84, 92–93, 187, 193, 206, 213–214, 296, 301
22:22	63–64, 74–75
22:23	75
23:21	119
25:9	169
25:40	169
31:8	146
32	279
33:15	119
39	89

#### *Leviticus*

9:3	90
10:1–6	161
16	80, 89, 150, 186, 194–95
16:6–10	186
16:8	196
16:16	196
16:20–22	186
16:22	186, 196
16:30	161–62
18:6–23	2

#### *Numbers*

23:10	170
25:6–8	158
25:13	158

#### *Deuteronomy*

6:5	66
24:16	147, 184
26:19	71
32:43	175
32:47	296

#### *Joshua*

21:43	296
23:14	296

#### *Judges*

10:6	299, 300
13:2–7	106

*1 Samuel*

2:21 106  
25:29 168

*2 Samuel*

21:14 161

*1 Kings*

8:13 165, 166  
22:19 170

*2 Kings*

9:7 175

*Isaiah*

3:3 159  
5:7 298  
6:1–3 170  
6:3 43  
24:21 188–89, 194, 214  
34:6 188  
34:7 188  
40 192  
52 64  
52:6 230  
53 53, 157  
60:17 298  
61 187  
61:10 143  
63:1 185, 193  
63:1–6 182  
63:2 183, 185

*Ezekiel*

1 2, 3, 10, 141, 170  
3:12–13 170  
9:6 161  
10 2, 3, 10, 141, 170  
24:4 193, 213  
25:14 126

*Joel*

4:3 80  
4:5 182  
4:21 298

*Amos*

2:6 86

*Habakkuk*

2:20 170

*Zechariah*

2:3 138  
4:14 138  
13:7 81

*Psalms*

9:13 175, 183–84  
12:6 127  
17:14 70  
44:23 66, 85  
50:5 164  
72:14 175  
79:10 175  
91:15 230  
97:10 180  
110:1 137  
110:4 134–39  
110:6 184  
144:9 225  
144:15 140, 268

*Proverbs*

1:8–13 86  
11:8 238  
25:2 1

*Job*

6:10 83

*Song of Songs*

1:3 85  
1:12 299, 300

*Lamentations*

2:4 160  
3:16 78  
4:20 160

<i>Daniel</i>		<i>Psalms LXX</i>	
3:1–30	164	32:2–3	225
7:9	186	42:4	225
10:20–21	190	56:7–9	225
12:1	135, 190	70:22	225
<i>1 Chronicles</i>		80:1–3	225
21:15	163	80:2	225
28:11–12	169	91:1–3	225
<i>2 Chronicles</i>		97:4–6	225
2:3	168	107:1–3	225
24:17–22	166	146:7	225
<i>Numbers LXX</i>		<i>Daniel LXX</i>	
23:10	170	3:86	170
		<i>Genesis Vulgate</i>	
		49:22	124

### Classical Greek and Latin Authors

<i>Dionysius of Halicarnassus</i>		<i>Plato</i>	
<i>Antiquities of Rome</i>		<i>Cratylus</i>	
1.76	227	397e	54
<i>Euripides</i>		<i>Republic</i>	
<i>Iphigenia at Aulis</i>		5.468e–496a	54
1371–1395	54	<i>Plutarch</i>	
<i>Phoenician Woman</i>		<i>Theseus</i>	
930–1018	54	2.6.36	106
<i>Herodian</i>		<i>Romulus</i>	
3.8.10	126	2.5	106
<i>Livy</i>		3	227
1.3.10	227	4.2	106
<i>Philostratus</i>		<i>Alexander</i>	
<i>Life of Apollonius</i>		3.1–2	106
1.4	106	<i>Quintus Curtius</i>	
		<i>History of Alexander</i>	
		1	106

<i>Suetonius</i>		<i>Vitellius</i>	
<i>Claudius</i>		16	231
21.1	126	<i>Pseudo-Callisthenes</i>	
<i>Domitian</i>		<i>Alexander Romance</i>	
12.2	181	7–13	106

### Pre-Rabbinic Jewish Literature

<i>IQM (War Scroll)</i>		46:1	120
9:15–16	190	47:2–4	172
13:10	135	47:4	176
17:5–8	135	85:59	190
17:6–7	190	91:7–9	188
		102:3–103:4	170
		106	100
<i>IQS (Rule of the Community)</i>		<i>4 Ezra</i>	
3:20	135	7:11–21	63
<i>4Q203</i>		13:1–4	120
7 i	194	4:35	170
<i>4Q180–181</i>		<i>Joseph and Aseneth</i>	
	194	5:1–7	124
		7:3–4	124
<i>4Q<sup>c</sup> Amram<sup>b</sup></i>		14:1–17:6	124
3:2	135	<i>Josephus Flavius</i>	
<i>11QMelchizedek</i>		<i>Antiquitates judaicae</i>	
	134–35	2.228–237	106
2:4–10	194	2.238–253	106
<i>2 Baruch</i>		14.420–430	176
30:1–5	170	5.276–285	106
		9.168	166
		11.169	157
		12.255–256	157
<i>1 Enoch</i>		<i>Bellum judaicum</i>	
6	190	1.312–313	176
9:1	190	4.10	136–37
10:4–8	150, 194	5.419	53
10:11	190	<i>Vita</i>	
14	150, 170	1	106
20:5	135, 190	38	76
22:9	170		

*Jubilees*

6:18	150, 170
6:22	150, 170
34	294
34:12–19	87
34:13	184
34:18	184

*Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*  
(Pseudo-Philo)

18:5	157
18:5–6	163
35:3	157
42	106

*2 Maccabees*

	176–77
6:7–9	176
6:18–42	53, 151
6:29	157
7	177, 179
7:1–42	212, 56
7:36	172
7:37–38	53, 151, 157
8:3	172
14:45–46	177
15:12–16	157

*4 Maccabees*

	56, 176–78, 185
1:11	53, 151
6:28	53, 151
6:28–29	177
9:9	177
10:11–21	177
12:12–18	177
17:18–19	177
17:20–22	53, 151
17:21–22	157
17:22	177, 179
18:6–19	177
18:11	163

*Odes of Solomon*

19:6–10	100
---------	-----

*Psalms of Solomon*

10:1	66
------	----

*Sibylline Oracles*

3.307–313	172
-----------	-----

*Testament of Moses*

	185
8:1–5	175
9	53
9:1–7	151, 175–76
9:6–7	172
9:7	53, 157
10:1–10	176
10:2	135

*Testament of Gad*

2:3	86
-----	----

*Testament of Levi*

2–8	265
3:4–10	150, 170
5:1	150, 170
5:6	135
14:6	265

*Testament of Zebulun*

3:2	86
-----	----

*Wisdom of Ben Sira*

50:1–28	89
---------	----

*Wisdom of Solomon*

3:1–6	170
-------	-----

*Philo*

<i>De somniis</i>	
2.67	162

*De vita Mosis*

1.5.20–24	106
1.6.25–29	106

## New Testament

<i>Gospel of Matthew</i>		4:14	150, 170
1–2	100	5:6	135
23:35	166	5:10	135
<i>Gospel of Mark</i>		6:20	135
6:14–29	124	7:3	135
<i>Gospel of Luke</i>		7:15	135–36
1–2	100	7:17	135
1:45	140	7:21	135
1:48	140	8:1–5	150, 170
6:20–22	140	9:8–12	150, 170
7:23	140	9:11–22	194
10:23	140	9:23–24	150, 170
11:27	140	<i>Jude</i>	
11:51	166	9	135
<i>Gospel of John</i>		<i>Revelation</i>	
1:29	194	4–5	171–73, 185, 226
<i>Acts of the Apostles</i>		5:8	225
6:15	120–21	5:8–10	225
7:54–60	14	6:1–17	172
<i>Romans</i>		6:9–11	172
3:24–26	157	8:1–11:19	188
<i>2 Corinthians</i>		8:3–5	172
12:1–4	21	9:13	172
<i>Philippians</i>		11:1	172
2:17	163	11:19	182, 170
<i>2 Timothy</i>		11:19–12:17	197
4:6	163	12	197
<i>Hebrews</i>		12:7	190
1:5–2:18	134–36, 151, 162	12:10–12	194, 197
	135	14:18	172
		15:1–16:21	188
		16:6	172
		16:7	172
		17:6	172
		18:24	172
		19:11–16	172
		20:1–10	150, 194
		20:4	172–73

## Rabbinic Literature

<i>Mishnah</i>		<i>Sotah</i>	
<i>Kila'im</i>		10:1–3	158
1:3	300	10:5–11:5	158
<i>Shabbat</i>		11:10	158
9:3	186	13:4	72, 73
<i>Yoma</i>		<i>Bava Qamma</i>	
4:2	186	7:5	67
6:6	186	<i>Sanhedrin</i>	
7:5	88	13:1	164
8:8–9	105	<i>Shevu'ot</i>	
<i>Hagigah</i>		1:4	105
2:1	2	<i>Horayot</i>	
<i>Sotah</i>		2:5–7	121
9:15	159	<i>Menahot</i>	
<i>Avot</i>		13:22	63
1:12	267	<i>Hullin</i>	
2:8	142	8:16	126
3:1	116	<i>Ohalot</i>	
5:8	65	4:2	153
<i>Nega'im</i>		<i>Niddah</i>	
2:1	105	4:17	111
<i>Niddah</i>		<i>Talmud Yerushalmi</i>	
3:7	111	<i>Berakhot</i>	
10:7	112	2.4 (5a)	107
<i>Tevul Yom</i>		4.5 (8c)	168
1:4	300	5.3 (9c)	75
<i>Tosefta</i>		9.3 (13d)	160
<i>Kila'im</i>		9.7 (14b)	56
1:2	300	<i>Pe'ah</i>	
<i>Hallah</i>		1.1 (16b)	66
1:10	102	8.9 (21b)	66
<i>Shabbat</i>		<i>Shevi'it</i>	
15:17	68	4.2 (35a)	56, 58, 68, 74
<i>Yoma</i>		<i>Shabbat</i>	
1:12	105	16.1 (15c)	160
4:6–9	105, 161	<i>Yoma</i>	
<i>Hagigah</i>		1.1 (38c)	63
2:3–4	21, 283	2.2 (39d)	105

6.5 (43d)	186	89a	70
7.5 (44b–c)	89, 161, 294	119b	67
8.8 (45b–c)	105, 161	152b	168
<i>Ta'anit</i>		<i>ʿEruvin</i>	
1.1 (64a)	127	21b	56
2.2 (65b)	99, 131	65a	160
4.5 (69a)	67	<i>Pesahim</i>	
4.8 (69a–b)	166	50a, 56	58, 72
<i>Hagigah</i>		56a, 131	
2.1 (77b)	21, 56, 69, 80, 81, 283	<i>Yoma</i>	
2.4 (77a)	141	9b	63, 72
<i>Nazir</i>		23a	105
9.1 (57c)	131	42a	149
<i>Sotah</i>		67a	186
5.7 (20c)	56	67b	195
9.14 (24b)	72, 73, 75, 76, 294	68a	186
<i>Sanhedrin</i>		86a	105, 141, 161
3.6 (21b)	68, 74	<i>Sukkah</i>	
3.16 (21b)	56, 58	20a	105
10.1 (27c)	66	45b	160
10.4 (29c)	164	52b	138
<i>Horayot</i>		<i>Mo'ed Qatan</i>	
3.7 (48b)	121	28a	162
<i>Talmud Bavli</i>		<i>Ta'anit</i>	
<i>Berakhot</i>		8a	66
3a	103	11a	66
5a	66	18b	56, 58, 69, 179
5a–b	66	21a	66
6a	125	24b–25a	159
7a	103	29a	95, 96
28b	75	<i>Megillah</i>	
35b	300	3a	262
38b	300	6a	127
58a	182	<i>Hagigah</i>	
61b	56, 70, 141	12a	169
62b	163	12b	167
66a	56	14–15b	283
<i>Shabbat</i>		14a	159
32b	65	14b	21, 117, 141–42, 279
33b	159	<i>Yevamot</i>	
55a–b	158	80a	105
88a–89a	114	<i>Ketubbot</i>	
88b	115, 116, 300	19a	68

105b	102	110b	58, 164
111a	168	113b	158
<i>Nedarim</i>		<i>Makkot</i>	
10a	67	12a	190
32b	136–37	<i>‘Avodah Zarah</i>	
<i>Sotah</i>		4a	159, 161
10b	191	8b	56, 57, 73
33a	72	11b	125–26
48b	72, 73, 75	16b–18b	57
<i>Gittin</i>		17b	65, 68
36b	300	17b–18a	56, 229–30, 238
55b–56a	63, 67	18a	57, 68, 230
55b–57a	231	<i>Zevahim</i>	
57a	63, 67	62a	167
57b	56, 163, 166, 179	88b	89, 161
58a	77, 83, 102, 121	<i>Menahot</i>	
68a–b	232	29b	56, 70
<i>Qiddushin</i>		110a	168–69
31b	105	<i>Hullin</i>	
39b	56, 69	49a	102
40b	66	91b	120
<i>Bava Qamma</i>		92a	182
60a	161	123a	126
<i>Bava Metsi‘a</i>		142a	56, 69, 80
30b	67	<i>Bekhorot</i>	
84a	122	27a	112
<i>Bava Batra</i>		<i>‘Arakhin</i>	
10b	56, 58, 72	16a	89, 161
17a	153	16b–17a	67
58a	122	<i>Niddah</i>	
91a	106	30a–b	111
91b	159		
116a	66	<i>Midrash and Other Rabbinic Works</i>	
<i>Sanhedrin</i>		(when multiple versions are found in the	
11a	72, 73, 75	Bibliography, I have indicated the edition)	
14a	56, 73, 122	<i>Aggadat Bereshit</i>	
14b	57		131–33
47a–b	66, 71	31:3	99, 132
74a	68, 74	43	136–37
92b	123	64	136–37
96b	166	<i>Avot de-Rabbi Natan Genizah Fragment</i>	
98a	107	T.–S. AS 74.324	
101a	66	1a:1–21	79
102	159		

- Avot de-Rabbi Natan A*  
 53, 77, 78, 80  
 2:2 136–37  
 12 191  
 12:4 168  
 16 300  
 26 168  
 34 135, 138  
 36 79  
 38 64, 73, 74, 75, 79, 90,  
 81, 294  
 Addendum B (Schechter 156)  
 191  
*Avot de-Rabbi Natan B*  
 53, 74, 77, 78, 79, 82  
 41 64, 73, 74, 75, 77–78,  
 294  
*Baraita de-Niddah* (Horowitz)  
 108, 111  
 1:1 112  
 1:2 111  
 1:4 112  
 2:3 112  
 2:5 112  
 3:4 111–12  
 5:1–34 108  
*Bereshit Rabbati*  
 to Gen 6:2 195  
 to Gen 37:26 147, 184, 187  
*Deuteronomy Rabbah*  
 2:37 183  
 11:10 168, 191  
*Ecclesiastes Rabbah*  
 3:16 166  
 3:17 56, 179  
 9:7 163, 191  
 10:4 166  
*Exodus Rabbah*  
 230, 194  
 15–52 192  
 18:5 192  
 21:8 192  
 30:18 182  
 33:4 167  
 35:4 160  
 35:6 167  
 45:4 146  
*Genesis Rabbah*  
 9:8 66  
 26:4 136–37  
 33:1 66  
 35:2 160  
 43:6 136–37  
 56:4 191  
 56:7–9 163  
 56:10 136–37  
 63:12 182  
 68:12 120  
 69:7 167  
 75:1 127  
 75:4 182  
 77:3 190  
 78:3 120  
 92:1 66  
 98:20 140  
*Lamentations Rabbah*  
 Proem 23 166  
 1:16, § 46 78, 80  
 1:16, § 50 56, 163, 178–79  
 2:2, § 4 86, 93–94, 166  
 4:13, § 16 166  
*Leqah Tov to Song*  
 1:3 293  
*Leviticus Rabbah*  
 10:6 89, 161  
 14:2 116  
 15:4 160  
 20:8–12 162  
 20:12 161  
 25:6 136–37  
*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai*  
 to Exod 6:2 163  
 to Exod 20:7 161  
 to Exod 21:13 56, 58, 69  
*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*  
*Pisha* 1 158  
*Pisha* 7 163  
*Pisha* 11 161, 163  
*Shirata* 2 56, 188  
*Shirata* 10 167, 168

- 'Amaleq 1 166  
*Bahodesh* 7 105, 161  
*Bahodesh* 10 66  
*Neziqin* 9 157  
*Neziqin* 18 64, 73, 74, 102, 154,  
 159, 294  
*Midrash Aggadah*  
 to Num 30:15 166  
*Midrash ha-Gadol*  
 to Gen 39:14 123  
 to Exod 19:20 114  
*Midrash Proverbs*  
 9:2 141  
 1:8–13 86  
*Midrash Psalms*  
 184–85  
 3:7 127  
 9:13 86, 93, 94, 183–84  
 16:10–11 153  
 76:3 136–37  
 91:8 230  
 93:1 180  
*Midrash Shir ha-Shirim* (Grünhut)  
 301  
 to Song 1:3 (3a) 85, 150, 187  
 to Song 1:3 (3a–7a)  
 35, 81  
 to Song 1:3 (3b) 74  
 to Song 1:3 (3b–4a)  
 82, 207  
 to Song 1:3 (4a) 84, 113, 119, 133,  
 295–97  
 to Song 1:3 (4b) 80, 124, 132  
 to Song 1:3 (6b) 238–39  
 to Song 6:2 (42b)  
 161  
*Numbers Rabbah*  
 10:5 106  
 11:3 232  
 12:12 169  
 17:2 163  
*Pesiqta Rabbati*  
 (Ulmer unless otherwise noted)  
 17:8 (Friedmann 90a–b)  
 188  
 20 294  
 20, § 11 114, 115  
 20, §§ 11–12 115, 116  
 20, §§ 11–20 114  
 22, § 20 230  
 34, § 4 158  
 34–37 143  
 36, § 2 144  
 36, § 3 144  
 36, § 7 127  
 37 146  
 37, § 7 182–83  
 37, § 8 143  
 40 163  
 43 56, 179  
*Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*  
 7:11 188  
 15:7 166  
 22 183  
 26:3 163  
 26:11 161  
*Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer*  
 1 188  
 8 136–37  
 13 196  
 23 196  
 28 136–37  
 38 86  
 45 196  
 46 114, 195–96  
*Ruth Rabbah*  
 6:4 56, 69, 80, 81  
*Seder Eliyyahu Rabbah*  
 77  
 28 (30) 56, 73, 79, 179, 294  
*Seder Eliyyahu Zuta*  
 19 (=PRE 1) 185–86  
*Semaḥot*  
 8:7–8 74, 294  
 8:7–15 60, 74  
 8:8 60  
 8:9 56, 60, 65  
 8:12 60  
 8:13 60  
 8:15 179

<i>Sifra</i>		<i>Vayeirah</i> 23	163, 191
<i>Emor</i> 9:5	56, 58, 69, 179	<i>Vayeishev</i> 5	123
<i>Tazria' Nega'im</i> 1:5		<i>Bo</i> 4	188
	105	<i>Ki-tissa</i> 34	104
<i>Sifrei Deuteronomy</i>		<i>Naso</i> 11	268
§ 32	56, 66, 71	<i>Va-ethannan</i> 6	191
§ 38	158	<i>Tavo</i> 2	56, 71
§ 280	147, 159, 184	<i>Tanhuma Buber</i>	
§ 307	56, 66, 68, 230, 238	<i>Noah</i> 4	86
§ 343	127	<i>Vayishlah</i> 4	182
<i>Sifrei Numbers</i>		<i>Vayeishev</i> 2	86
§ 75	141	<i>Bo</i> 6	188
§ 131	158	<i>Tavo</i> 4	56, 71
§ 161	105	<i>Yalqut ha-Makhiri</i>	
<i>Song of Songs Rabbah</i>		to <i>Isa</i> 1:9	72
1:4	21	<i>Yalqut Shim'oni</i>	
1:3	85		184
2:13	138	to <i>Gen</i> § 44	195
3:6	190	to <i>Gen</i> § 142	86
4:4	89, 162	to <i>Exod</i> § 182	188–89
4:10	183	to <i>Deut</i> § 837	56
8:9	72, 73	to <i>Deut</i> § 938	179
<i>Tanhuma</i>		to <i>Kgs</i> § 189	167
<i>Bereshit</i> 7	300	to <i>Isaiah</i> § 424	188
<i>Noah</i> 5	86	to <i>Ezek</i> § 339	167
<i>Lekh lekha</i> 2	58	to <i>Psalms</i> § 869	184
<i>Lekh lekha</i> 15	136–37	to <i>Lam</i> § 1029	179

## Targumic Texts

<i>Fragmentary Targums</i> <sup>PVNL</sup>		28:12	120
to <i>Gen</i>		37:28	86
14:18	136–37	37:31	90
<i>Targum Neofiti</i>		49:22	124
to <i>Gen</i>		49:26	140
14:18	136–37	to <i>Lev</i>	
49:22	124	16:9–10	195
<i>Targum Pseudo-Jonathan</i>		16:21	195
to <i>Gen</i>		<i>Targum Yerushalmi</i>	
14:18	136–37	to <i>Gen</i>	
		28:12	120

## Heikhalot literature

(according to the *Synopse*; strictly for the sake of ease, I also designate the conventional divisions of major compositional units)

<i>3 Enoch</i>		§§ 81–306	39, 40
§ 1	267–69, 274	§§ 81–321	40
§§ 1–2	266, 267	§§ 81–335	40
§§ 1–70	41	§§ 81–193	39
§§ 1–71	18	§ 84	240–41
§ 2	104, 267	§ 85	240
§ 3	267–69, 279	§ 86	240, 241
§§ 1–3	118, 247, 266–70	§§ 88–94	40
§§ 4–20	28, 117	§ 92	208
§ 5	208	§ 94	208, 222
§§ 5–6	142	§§ 94–106	41, 43
§ 6	117	§ 95	40
§§ 7–8	117	§§ 95–105	39
§ 8	118	§ 98	274
§ 9	208	§§ 105–235	39
§ 10	208	§ 106	208
§ 17	190	§§ 106–121	39
§§ 35–38	44	§ 107	32, 202–8, 211, 253
§ 42	190	§§ 107–108	253
§ 59	208	§§ 107–109	154
§ 60	208	§§ 107–110	201, 242
§ 61	208	§§ 107–111	227
§§ 61–62	267	§§ 107–121	8, 11, 16, 30, 41, 43, 46, 199–202, 242, 245, 246, 249, 252, 292, 294
§ 62	208	§ 108	189, 194, 200, 204, 208–11, 213–14, 253
§§ 64–65	222, 256	§§ 108–110	84, 150, 187–88, 189, 190, 211–17
§ 68	208	§§ 108–111	239
§§ 71–80	41, 116	§§ 108–121	189
§ 72	208	§ 109	93, 94, 214, 257
§§ 76–77	276, 277	§ 110	44, 214–15, 224, 240–41
§ 79	116	§§ 110–113	40, 46
<i>Heikhalot Rabbati</i>		§ 111	44, 47, 166, 200, 201, 205, 210, 117–26, 234, 263
§ 81	208	§§ 111–121	189, 202
§§ 81–93	41, 43, 239, 251	§§ 112–113	217, 226–27
§§ 81–98	39	§§ 112–119	226–31
§§ 81–102	39	§§ 112–121	242
§§ 81–106	202	§ 117	211, 228
§§ 81–120	39	§§ 117–121	217, 254
§§ 81–121	18		
§§ 81–157	39		
§§ 81–193	39		
§§ 81–277	28, 38, 40, 41, 42, 45		

- § 118 44, 211, 224, 227, 228  
 §§ 118–121 46  
 § 119 44, 211, 224, 229  
 §§ 119–121 41  
 § 120 39, 200, 211, 222,  
 233–39  
 §§ 120–121 231–39  
 § 121 44  
  
*“David-apocalypse”*  
 §§ 122–126 37, 41, 43, 44, 154, 201,  
 210, 224  
 §§ 122–145 269  
 §§ 123 72, 224  
 §§ 124–126 225  
 § 125 104  
 §§ 127–129 41  
  
*Aggadat Rabbi Ishmael*  
 § 130 44, 45, 103  
 §§ 130–138 37, 43, 44, 139, 210, 278  
 §§ 130–151 41  
 §§ 137–140 263, 292  
 § 138 45, 103  
 § 139 8  
  
*Aggadat ha-Mashiah*  
 § 140 269  
 §§ 140–145 43, 44, 212, 269  
  
*“Metatron piece”*  
 §§ 147–149 38  
 §§ 148–149 117  
  
*Heikhalot Rabbati (continued)*  
 § 151 103  
 § 152 39, 212, 254  
 §§ 152–154 41, 43  
 §§ 152–158 40, 46  
 §§ 152–174 18  
 §§ 152–196 253  
 §§ 152–197 223  
 §§ 155 41  
 §§ 156–164 41  
 §§ 156–173 43  
  
 §§ 157–252 39  
 § 159 119  
 § 160 120  
 § 161 224  
 §§ 163–164 49, 210, 223  
 § 164 120  
 § 165 41  
 §§ 166–173 41  
 § 169 210  
 §§ 172–173 223  
 § 174 42, 223  
 §§ 175–177 41  
 §§ 178–181 42, 43  
 §§ 178–188 53, 223  
 §§ 182–188 42, 43  
 §§ 189–196 42, 43  
 §§ 189–277 18  
 §§ 190–201 40, 46  
 § 193 39  
 § 197 42  
 §§ 198 8, 11, 16, 30, 46, 249,  
 253–55, 257, 263  
 §§ 198–203 239, 246, 251, 252–59,  
 260, 263  
 §§ 198–259 142  
 §§ 198–268 30, 42, 43, 114, 246,  
 249–50  
 § 199 254–55, 260  
 §§ 199–200 142  
 §§ 199–201 269, 275–76  
 § 200 254–56  
 §§ 200–201 274  
 § 201 255–56, 276  
 §§ 201–203 250  
 §§ 201–218 250  
 § 202 257–59  
 §§ 202–203 257  
 § 203 154, 234, 257–58, 263  
 §§ 203–205 208  
 §§ 204–205 250  
 §§ 204–236 259–60, 275  
 § 206–212 250  
 §§ 213–214 40  
 §§ 213–215 250  
 § 216 220, 250, 255  
 §§ 216–218 208, 210  
 § 217 250  
 § 218 250

§§ 219–223	250	§ 259	279
§§ 219–237	250	§ 260	250
§§ 221–223	40, 45	§§ 261–266	250
§ 224	250, 279	§ 267	250
§§ 224–228	45, 208, 279	§ 268	250
§ 225	274	§ 269	40
§§ 225–228	239, 246, 248, 250, 251, 270	§§ 269–277	42, 43, 45
§ 227	255	§ 270	40
§ 229	40, 45	§§ 271–273	40
§§ 229–231	250	§ 274	40
§§ 232–236	208, 250, 277	§ 275	40
§ 233	259	§ 276	40
§ 234	261, 277	§ 277	38, 40
§§ 234–235	275	§§ 278–279	42, 27
§ 235	276, 277	§§ 278–280	38, 118, 271 272
§§ 235–242	39	§§ 278–282	272
§ 236	224, 260–61	§ 279	272
§§ 236–240	40	§ 280	42
§ 237	250, 260	§§ 281–294	42
§§ 237–240	239, 246, 251, 252, 259–64	§§ 281–298	39, 43
§ 238	208, 257, 259, 260, 262	§§ 281–303	38
§§ 238–240	79, 250, 260–63, 276, 277	§§ 281–306	18, 38, 39, 43, 240, 278–79
§§ 238–243	250	§§ 287–288	240
§§ 238–251	263	§ 288	278
§ 239	260–61, 274, 275, 277	§ 295	117
§§ 239–240	222	§§ 295–296	42
§ 240	261, 276, 277	§§ 297–303	42
§ 241	262	§§ 297–304	39
§§ 241–243	250	§ 298	38
§§ 241–251	259	§ 299	38
§§ 242–251	39	§§ 299–306	39, 43
§ 243	208	§ 304	273
§§ 244–246	250	§§ 304–305	38, 42
§§ 244–251	250	§ 305	222, 262, 276, 278, 289
§§ 246–250	40	§ 306	38, 39, 40, 42
§ 247	250	<i>Pereq Rabbi Neḥunya ben ha-Qanah</i>	
§ 248	250	§§ 307–314	38, 42, 271, 272
§ 249	250	§§ 307–317	38
§ 250	250	§ 308	4
§ 251	250	§§ 308–309	272
§§ 252–257	250	§§ 308–312	118, 272
§ 253	28	§§ 309–310	103
§ 258	208	§ 310	271
§§ 258–259	117, 248, 250, 259, 263, 278–79	§ 311	4
		§ 313	118, 273

§§ 313–314 272  
 § 314 118

*“Metatron piece”*

§§ 315–317 38, 42  
 §§ 316–317 117

*“Great seal/terrible crown piece”*

§§ 318–321 38, 39, 42, 43  
 §§ 320–321 39

*Collection of prayers*

§ 322 39  
 §§ 322–334 38, 39, 42, 43

*Heikhalot Zutarti*

§ 335 1, 2, 19, 38  
 §§ 335–374 18, 42  
 §§ 335–497 2  
 §§ 338–339 21, 204, 283  
 §§ 344–345 21, 204, 283  
 § 345 279  
 § 356 120  
 §§ 375–386 18  
 §§ 396–397 119  
 §§ 402–403 374  
 § 407 209  
 §§ 407–408 117, 279  
 §§ 407–421 254  
 §§ 407–426 11, 18, 37  
 § 419 2, 19  
 § 424 2

*Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit*

§ 459 167

*Shi‘ur Qomah*

§§ 468–488 18

*Adjurational material*

§§ 489–495 38, 39, 40  
 § 501 40, 103

*Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit*

§§ 532–538 43

*Ma‘aseh Merkavah*

§§ 544–596 18, 273  
 §§ 560–570 118, 272  
 § 562 254  
 § 565 118  
 §§ 579–585 274  
 §§ 579–591 11, 37, 273–74  
 § 581 11, 37  
 § 582 125  
 § 583 273–74  
 §§ 583–585 273  
 § 584 273–75  
 § 586 262, 274, 276  
 §§ 587–591 274

*“Akatriel passage”*

§ 597 103, 104

*“Adjuration of the Sar ha-Panim”*

§§ 623–639 23

*Merkavah Rabbah*

§§ 655–708 18, 271  
 § 667 103  
 §§ 671–672 21, 204, 283  
 § 672 209, 279  
 §§ 675–676 271  
 §§ 675–684 118  
 § 677 272–73  
 §§ 677–679 271–72  
 § 678 272–73  
 § 679 273  
 § 680 271  
 §§ 680–681 271  
 §§ 682–684 271  
 § 683 272  
 §§ 685–687 11, 37  
 § 686 104, 210, 276

*Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit*

§ 719 167  
 § 772 167

§§ 787–788	43	T.–S. AS 142.94 (G5)	
§§ 790–798	43	1a–b	40
§§ 807–808	43	1a:15–1b:2	260
§§ 810–818	43	1b:9	261
		1b:17	261
		1b:18	261
<i>3 Enoch</i>			
§§ 882–884	266	T.–S. K 1.97 (G6)	
		2a–b	40
<i>Shi'ur Qomah</i>		T.–S. K 21.95.C (G8)	
§§ 939–973	18		208, 210, 267, 269
		2a:2–16	266
		2a:12–23	262, 289
		2a:12–24	278
		2a:14	278
		2a:16	278
		2a:19	278
		2a:23–2b:24	270
		2b:12–13	276
		2b:21–24	262, 277, 289
		2b:22	204, 210
<i>3 Enoch (Alexander).</i>			
See also §§ 1–80; §§ 882–884		Antonin 186 (G19)	
15B	169	1b/17	103
15B:2–5	104	T.–S. K 21.95.A (G21)	
15B:5	121	1a–2a, 114	
		1b/13–14	115
		2a/13	115
		2a/15	104
<i>Heikhalot Genizah fragments</i>		Oxford Heb. F.56	
T.–S. K 21.95.S (G1)		125a	40, 45
A–F	40		
T.–S. K 21.95.K (G2)			
1a–2b	40		
T.–S. K 21.95.M (G3)			
	234		
1a–2b	40		
1a:2–7	47, 218		
1a:3–4	218		
T.–S. K 21.95.I (G4)			
2a–b	40		

## Jewish Magical Literature

<i>Sefer ha-Razim</i>		T.–S. K 1.35 + T.–S. K 1.48	
7.1–3	168	1b–2a	210

Late Antique and Medieval Hebrew Apocalypses,  
“Minor” Midrashim, and Early Hebrew Narrative Literature

- Aggadat ha-Mashiah*  
(or “Messiah Aggadah”).  
See under Heikhalot literature,  
§§ 140–145
- Aggadat Rabbi Ishmael.*  
See under Heikhalot literature,  
§§ 130–138
- Chronicle of Jerahmeel*  
123  
§ XXV 195  
“David-apocalypse.”  
See under Heikhalot literature,  
§§ 122–126
- Haggadat Shema‘ Yisra‘el*  
Jellinek, *BhM*  
5:165–66 114
- Ma‘ayan Hokhmah*  
Jellinek, *BhM*  
1:57 115  
1:58–61 114  
1:61 115
- Megillat Ahima‘atz*  
247, 284–86
- Midrash Adonai be-hokhmah yasad  
ha-arets*  
Jellinek, *BhM*  
5:63 169, 221  
5:67 225
- Midrash ‘aseret ha-dibrot*  
Jellinek, *BhM*  
1:64 169
- Midrash ‘aseret ha-shevatim*  
Eisenstein, *Ozar Midrashim*  
2:466 227
- Midrash elleh ezkerah*  
92, 120, 166  
Eisenstein, *Ozar Midrashim*  
2:440–43 34  
Jellinek, *BhM*  
2:64–72 34  
2:71 180
- Midrash Konen*  
Jellinek, *BhM*  
2:29 143
- Nistarot R. Shim‘on ben Yoḥai*  
Even Shmuel, *Midreshei Ge‘ulah*  
195 107, 227
- Pirqei Mashiah*  
Jellinek, *BhM*  
3:68 192–93
- “Rabbi Ishmael’s Miraculous  
Conception.”  
See under *Story of the Ten Martyrs*  
11.1023; 15.1130
- Seder Gan ‘Eden*  
Jellinek, *BhM*  
3:132 140, 146  
3:137 169
- Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit*  
7, 38, 43, 167  
See also under Heikhalot literature

<i>Sefer ha-Yashar</i>		10.1–3	82, 202, 206–7
	123, 285	10.1–11	52
		10.3	205–7
<i>Sefer Yossipon</i>		10.4–11	202
		10.10	86
15 (Flusser 70–75)		10.11	86
	56, 179	10.21–24	202
		10.26–30	202
<i>Sefer Zerubbabel</i>		10.27	206–7
	35, 38, 107, 126, 128,	10.27–34	206–7
	227	10.29	206
		10.29–31	207
Even Shmuel, <i>Midreshei Ge'ulah</i>		10.30	205–6
55–88	107	10.31	206
79–80	107	10.32	93, 94, 203
		10.34	206
Jellinek, <i>BhM</i>		11.6–7	209
2:54–47	107	11.10–23	110–11
Lévi, “L’apocalypse”		11.11	133, 113
129–160	107	11.11–22	139
132–33	121	11.16–23	110
		11.17	111
Wertheimer, <i>Batei Midrashot</i>		11.18	111
2:497–505	107	11.18–21	135
		11.19	111
<i>Story of the Ten Martyrs</i>		11.20–23	111
(cited according to Reeg, <i>Ten Martyrs</i> ;		11.23	111
note that recensions are not specified)		12.1	203, 205
4.3	93, 94	13.1	208, 211, 220
5	35	13.2	209
5.1	298	15.1	212
5.1–9	84, 150, 187, 295,	15.1–4	113, 119, 133, 200
	298–300	15.3	120, 135
5.2	297, 298, 300	15.4	268
5.2–9	84, 150, 187, 295–97,	15.4–20.6	116
	298–300	15.5	202
5.3	301	15.6	209
5.4	298–99	15.10	113, 122
5.5	299	15.11	111
5.6	299, 301	15.11–30	110
5.8	299, 301	15.16	111
5.9	299, 301	15.16–18	135
6.1	96	15.20	189, 211
7.1–2	95	15.20–28	84, 150, 187, 211,
8.6	83		295–97
10–22	34, 93, 294	15.21	295–96
10.1	206–7, 227, 228	15.21–28	193, 212, 295–97
		15.22	296

15.23	296	22.20–25	79
15.24	295, 296, 300	22.22–23	69
15.25	296	22.27	93, 94, 203
15.26	296	22.31	124
15.27	86, 296, 301	22.32	122
15.28	296	22.33	122
16.1–3	212	22.35–40	124
16.1–6	150	22.39–42	179
16.1–8	187–88, 189, 213–16	22.49–50	69
16.3	194	22.50	125, 133, 181–82
16.5	203	22.52–53	125, 132
16.9–10	234	22.54	139
16.10	166	22.63	139, 166
17.6–12	233–36	22.65–73	125
17.7	234	22.67	126
18.1	297, 301	22.71	126
18.1–3	84, 150, 187, 211, 212, 295–97	23.1–27	44, 139
18.2	186, 297	23.1–28	225
18.3	297	23.1–29	72, 201
19.1	213, 216	23.28–29	139
19.1–4	150, 187–88, 189, 194, 212–16	24	35
19.2	214	24–28	113, 294
19.3	215	25	35
19.4	215, 240–41	25.1	150, 298
20.1	115, 165	25.1–6	84, 187, 295, 298–300
20.1–5	149, 165–66	25.2	298, 300
21.1	222	25.5	299, 301
21.1–3	149	25.6	299, 301
21.2	115, 218, 220	27.1	96
21.2–10	200, 217–19	27.1–4	95
21.4	218	27.4	125, 182
21.5	201, 218, 219, 234	28.1–2	122
21.6	219	28.1–18	95
21.6–9	219	28.3	123
21.7	219	28.4	124
21.8	219	28.5	124
21.9	219	28.7–11	124
21.10	166, 201, 219, 221, 234	28.10–11	179
21.12	93, 94	28.13–14	69
22.1–57	193	28.14	125, 133, 181–82
22.6–7	122	28.15–17	132
22.8	123	29	93
22.9	124	29.1–31.62	95
22.14	80, 81	29.2–9	70
22.16	95	29–32	59
22.17–73	95	30.2–11	59
		31.18–19	59
		31.32–63	59

31.66–67	59	45	203
33	93	46	93
35	93	49	93
36.1–4	95	50	93
36.4	151, 182	50.3–5	180
37.1–2	122	50.6–8	179, 181, 186
37.3	123	51	93
37.4	124	51.4–24	193
37.9	69	51.18–19	179–80, 186
37.10	125, 181–82	51.23	140
38	93	51.24	121
40	93	52.1–3	181–82
40.17	230	52.5–9	184
40.38	234–35	54.1–6	125
40.38–42	233–37	54.3	126
40.39	235		
40.40	235, 237		
40.41	235–36, 237		
40.42	236		
40.43–46	238		
43	93, 180		
43.1–20	193		
43.13–15	179–89, 186		
43.20	121, 140		
44	93		

*Tefillat R. Shim'on ben Yoḥai*Even Shmuel, *Midreshei Ge'ulah*

284 107, 227

*Toledot Yeshu*

107–8

*Piyyut (Hebrew liturgical poetry)*

<i>Arzei ha-levanon (Goldschmidt, Seder ha-qinot)</i>		<i>Azkir gevurot</i>	
82–85	92, 95–96, 155	line 160	90
		line 276	146
<i>Ashkenazi Seder 'Avodah (Goldschmidt, Maḥazor)</i>		<i>El 'ir gibborim (David)</i>	
2:483–85	146		114
2:485	146		
2:486–87	146	<i>Seliḥah elleh ezkerah (Goldschmidt, Maḥazor)</i>	
<i>Attah konantah 'olam be-rov ḥesed (Mirsky)</i>		2:568–573	34, 91, 92, 95–96, 155
line 98	90	2:569	86
<i>Az be-ein kol (Yahalom)</i>			
lines 551–554	89–90		
lines 691–696	145–46		

## Other Jewish and Christian Texts from Late Antiquity

<i>Acts of Andrew and Matthias</i>		<i>Ephrem Syriacus</i>	
24	190	<i>In Genesim</i>	
		11.2.4	137
<i>Apocalypse of Abraham</i>		<i>Gospel of Thomas</i>	
13:6–14	150, 194	§ 79	140
30:14–16	188	<i>Hypostasis of the Archons</i>	
<i>Apocalypse of Zephaniah</i>		94,4–96,14	191
11:1–6	157	<i>Ignatius</i>	
<i>Apocryphon of John</i>		<i>To the Romans</i>	
	171	2.2	163
11:15–18	190	4.2	163
<i>Apostolic Constitutions</i>		<i>Irenaeus</i>	
7.33.5	171	<i>Adversus haereses</i>	
<i>Ascension of Isaiah</i>		1.30.9	191
2:1–6	191	<i>Jerome</i>	
7:9–12	191	Letter 73	
11:8–9	100	5	137
<i>3 Baruch</i>		<i>Quaestiones Hebraicae ad Gen</i>	
4:8	191	14:18–19	137
11:8	171	<i>Martyrdom of Marian and James</i>	
12:1–8	171	12.7	188
14:1–2	170–71	<i>Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas</i>	
15:2	171	4:3–9	14
16:3	188	10:1–14	14
<i>2 Enoch</i>		11:2–12:7	14
9	150, 170	<i>Melchizedek (NHC IX,1)</i>	
37	120		134
69:10	120	<i>Protevangelium of James</i>	
71–72	100		108
<i>Epiphanius</i>		11	100
<i>Panarion</i>			
55.6.1	137		

*Questions of Bartholomew*

28–29            17–172

*Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII,1)

39,14–32        191

*Theodoret**Haereticarum fabularum compendium*

1.14            191

## Qur'an

Sura 12:22–53    123

## Geonic Responsa

*Natronai ben Hilai*Brody, *Teshuvot Rav Natronai*

626            283

*Se'adyah ben Joseph*Lewin, *Otsar ha-Geonim*

1:17            283

*Sherira ben Hananiah*Lewin, *Iggeret Rav Sherira*

72–105        284

*Sherira ben Hananyah and  
Hayya ben Sherira*Lewin, *Otsar ha-Geonim*

4.2:10–13      283

*Hayya ben Sherira*Lewin, *Otsar ha-Geonim*

4.2:14            2, 284

4.2:15            283

4.2:16            281

4.2:18            282

4.2:20–21        284

## Select Modern Author Index

- Abrams, Daniel 24, 27–28, 104, 281  
Abrams, Judith 59  
Alexander, Philip S. 22, 28, 29, 151, 223  
Anidjar, Gil 5, 48  
Aptowitzer, Avigdor 151, 167  
Asad, Talal 6  
Avenarie, Friedrich 64, 65, 89
- Beit-Arié, Malachi 24–25  
Biale, David 20, 79, 107, 128  
Bloch, Philip 8, 20, 31, 36  
Bonfil, Robert 283, 285  
Bowersock, Glen W. 54  
Boyarin, Daniel 54–55, 57, 58–59, 63,  
100–101, 122, 245  
Brody, Robert 281, 282, 283, 286  
Brown, Peter 129, 155–56  
Büchler, Adolph 61, 65, 74
- Chernus, Ira 12, 210, 249, 251–52  
Cohen, Gerson D. 127, 178, 285  
Cohen, Shaye J. D. 63, 108–9, 153
- Dagron, Gilbert 130  
Dan, Joseph 8–9, 17, 24, 31–33, 40, 45,  
107, 116, 151, 169, 190, 191, 195, 199,  
203–4, 248, 271, 279–80, 284, 285  
Davila, James R. 7, 11, 19, 26, 28–29,  
37, 45, 134, 135, 286  
Deutsch, Nathaniel 117, 119, 167, 267
- Elior, Rachel 20, 91, 264–66, 270  
Elman, Yaakov 25, 61–63, 66, 67, 70,  
157–58, 161, 162, 281
- Fishbane, Michael A. 14, 19, 59, 120,  
143–44, 266, 285  
Frankfurter, David 14, 152, 170, 172,  
198
- Goldberg, Arnold 10, 29, 30, 33, 58,  
141, 144–45, 156, 183, 199, 249–50,  
264  
Goldin, Simhah 55, 65, 156  
Goodblatt, David 68, 76, 78, 156, 238,  
284  
Grätz, Heinrich 20, 31, 36, 249  
Grabbe, Lester L. 150, 194  
Grossman, Avraham 174, 285  
Gruenwald, Ithamar 7, 17, 20, 112, 120,  
136, 137, 223, 248, 250, 256, 259,  
265–67, 273, 278
- Halperin, David J. 11, 17, 21–22, 26, 43,  
114, 141, 248, 278, 279, 286  
Herr, Moshe D. 8–9, 31, 82  
Herrmann, Klaus 17, 24–25, 43, 44,  
293  
Himmelfarb, Martha 19, 22, 88, 107,  
121, 150, 165, 170, 194, 209, 210,  
250, 265, 270, 275  
Hirshman, Menahem 72, 102, 131  
Horbury, William 13, 53, 68, 90, 108,  
133, 179
- Irshai, Oded 79, 90, 91
- Jacobs, Andrew S. 128, 130
- Kerkeslager, Allen 152–153  
Kister, Menahem 64, 74, 75, 77, 78, 80,  
86, 196  
Kraemer, David 61–63, 66, 67, 70,  
157–58, 160  
Krauss, Samuel 31, 76, 107, 126, 182  
Kuyt, Annelies 2, 7, 11, 24, 30, 33, 37,  
204, 208, 220, 224, 248, 250–52, 255,  
258, 261, 263, 267, 269, 270, 271, 273,  
274, 277, 278

- Lerner, M. B. 60, 75  
Levine, Lee I. 52, 91, 122, 131  
Licht, Jacob 175–76  
Lieberman, Saul 31, 74, 76–77, 109, 112,  
116, 125, 126  
Liebes, Yehudah 103–4
- Maier, Johann 21, 45–46, 57, 233, 248,  
271  
Marienberg, Evyatar 108, 110  
Murray-Jones, C. R. A. 20, 117, 248,  
259, 267, 268, 279, 280
- Reed, Annette Yoshiko 92, 101, 108, 117,  
130, 150, 165, 170, 171–72, 195, 225  
Reichman, Ronen 248, 280  
Reiner, Elchanan 154–55
- Sanders, E. P. 60–61, 66, 75  
Schäfer, Peter 1, 6–7, 11, 17–21, 22, 23,  
25, 26–28, 31, 34, 36–40, 42, 45, 46,  
92, 93, 107, 114, 147, 167, 190, 196,  
209, 223, 241, 248, 251, 267, 269, 271,  
273, 276, 277, 279, 284, 286, 293  
Schiffman, Lawrence H. 230, 248  
Schlüter, Margarete 1, 10, 30, 45, 58,  
144, 156, 248, 260, 284, 293  
Scholem, Gershom G. 4–5, 7, 11, 19–22,  
36–37, 38, 39, 72, 103, 144, 167, 191,  
223, 230, 232, 248, 265, 279, 285, 286  
Schwartz, Joshua 109, 172, 182, 183
- Schwartz, Seth 55, 79  
Schwemer, Anna Maria 13, 43, 53, 72,  
152, 157, 166, 172, 224  
Smith, J. Z. 10, 156  
Smith, Morton 7, 36, 228, 249, 250  
Stern, David 8, 30, 110  
Stökl Ben Ezra, Daniel 87, 194  
Swartz, Michael D. 20, 24, 25–26, 29,  
37, 89, 90, 92, 110, 116, 118, 223, 230,  
266, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 277, 278,  
288
- Ta-Shma, Israel M. 23, 109, 174  
Teugels, Lieve M. 128, 131–32
- Urbach, Ephraim E. 18, 21–22, 60–61,  
65, 66, 68–69, 87, 248, 256
- van Henten, Jan Willem 54, 151, 157,  
164, 177–78, 254
- Wolfson, Elliot R. 11, 14, 22–23, 110,  
117, 120, 141, 190, 239, 267, 281, 285
- Yahalom, Joseph 73, 79, 89–90, 91,  
145–46, 151, 266  
Yuval, Israel Jacob 55, 100–101, 127,  
156, 173–74, 185
- Zeitlin, Solomon 31, 74, 87–88, 175

## Subject Index

- Aaron (biblical figure)
- as contested figure in Heikhalot literature 266–75, 279–80, 288, 291–92
  - death of as atonement 158, 161–62
  - priestly function of in Yom Kippur liturgy 89–90, 145–46
  - as prototype for Messiah 138
- Abraham (patriarch) 132, 136–37, 141–42, 158, 160, 163, 177, 191
- Abu Aaron of Baghdad 284–85
- Acts of Apostles 120–21
- Adam 63, 121–22
- adjurations 113
- and heavenly ascent in Heikhalot literature 18–19, 22, 26, 38, 48, 111, 118–19, 264, 270–73, 276, 278, 288
  - *See also* “magical” literature or practice; *Sar-Torah* texts
- Adversus Iudaeos* literature 128
- Akatri’el 44, 103–4
- altar, heavenly 134, 149–50, 165–73, 186, 197, 242
- angel(s)
- appearance of 84, 100, 106–13, 119–20, 148, 264, 290
  - demonic, fallen, or rebellious 117, 194–95
  - of divine countenance 113, 119, 208, 210, 213, 228, 229, 233
  - as heavenly prosecutor 83–84, 93, 187–93, 211, 296–97, 298–99, 301
  - as heavenly High Priest 133–39, 149, 165–70, 242
  - in Heikhalot literature 3, 10, 18–20, 22, 26, 118–19, 240, 270–73
  - liturgy performed by 41–43, 223–25, 119–20
  - purity of 84, 100, 106–13, 119–20, 148, 264, 290
  - as rivals of humans 114–19, 142
  - of Torah-study 10, 18–20, 22, 26, 118–19, 240, 270–73
  - *See also specific names*
- anthology
- *Story of the Ten Martyrs* as 30–34, 51–53
- Anti-Christ 107
- *See also* Armilos
- Antioch 153
- Antiochus IV 177, 231
- apocalyptic literature
- Byzantine neo-Hebrew 35, 106–7, 121, 128, 151, 190–93, 241, 247, 291
  - generic features of 165, 169–73, 209–10, 247, 269–70
  - and Heikhalot literature 19–21, 43–45, 117, 140, 208–11, 211–17, 225–26, 247, 269–70, 276–79, 286–87, 291–92
  - early Jewish and Christian 120, 150–51, 175–78, 185, 186–88, 197–98, 225
  - and *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 13–14, 52, 150–51, 165–73, 185, 186–87, 190–94, 197–98, 241, 290–92
  - *See also specific texts*
- Apollonius of Tyana 106
- ‘*Aqedah* 132, 163–64
- Armilos 107, 227
- Arzei ha-levanon* 92, 95–96, 155
- *See also* under *Story of the Ten Martyrs*
- ascent to heaven
- and adjurations in Heikhalot literature 18–19, 22, 26, 38, 48, 111, 118–19, 264, 270–73, 276, 278, 288
  - angelic opposition to 114–19, 142
  - in apocalyptic literature 165, 169–73, 209–10, 247

- of Enoch-Metatron 104, 117, 118–19, 142
- experiential aspects of 15–16, 26, 139–40, 209–10, 220, 271, 292–93
- of Moses 22, 114–19, 291
- of R. Akiva 4, 100, 104, 210, 257, 271, 276–77, 283
- of R. Nehunya ben ha-Qanah 45, 248, 270
- of R. Ishmael in Heikhalot literature 84, 114, 199–200, 208–11, 217–18, 239–42, 246–64, 266–70, 275–81, 287–88, 290–92
- of R. Ishmael in *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 81–85, 113–21, 147–48, 208–11, 290–91
- ritual techniques for 2–4, 10, 15–17, 19, 26, 30, 84, 114–19, 147–48, 199–201, 208–11, 217–18, 239–42, 246–64, 266–70, 275–81, 287–88, 290–92
- Ashkenaz
  - purity practice in 109, 111–13
  - transmission of Heikhalot literature in 40, 43–44, 267
- Ashmedai 232
- atonement
  - as central to *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 183, 197–98, 290
  - death, martyrdom, or suffering as mechanisms for 12–13, 66, 105, 155–64, 177, 180–81, 189
  - for sale of Joseph 52, 55–56, 81–85, 87–92, 99, 165, 290, 301
  - personal 66
  - sacrificial cult as mechanism of 160
  - scapegoat ritual as mechanism of 194–97
  - vicarious, for collective sin 12–13, 52–53, 55, 59, 71, 85, 87–92, 97, 133, 149–50, 157–64, 177, 180–81
- Avihu (biblical figure) 161–62
- ‘Avodah service
  - sale of Joseph motif in 53, 89–91
  - and post-talmudic rabbinic martyrology 91, 290
  - representation of High Priest in 89–90, 145–46
- ‘Aza’el 117, 193, 195–96
- Azaryah (biblical figure) 69, 164, 178–79
- ‘Aza’zel 80, 150, 194–96
- ‘Azzah 117
- Babylonia 247–48, 277–78, 281–87, 289
- Baraita de-Niddah* 108–9, 111–13
- Bar-Kokhba (Simon bar Kosiba) 74
- Bar-Kokhba Revolt 74–76, 175
- Baruch (pseudonymous author) 168, 170–71
- Bat-gol* 73, 229, 279, 295
- beauty
  - of God or his throne 1, 119–20, 254
  - of Israel’s biblical ancestors 121–25
  - of Jesus Christ 121
  - of Joseph 122–24
  - of prophets and martyrs 120–21
  - of R. Abbahu 122
  - of R. Yoḥanan 122–23
  - as theme in execution of R. Ishmael 102, 121–25
  - transmitted from Metatron to R. Ishmael at conception 84, 100, 106–13, 119–20, 148, 264, 290
- blood
  - of eschatological vengeance 149, 172–73, 175, 177, 179–85, 186, 245
  - of Isaac 163–64
  - of Israel 173, 180, 182–85
  - on Joseph’s cloak requiring redemption 84, 87–90, 184
  - of Jesus Christ 182, 197
  - of martyrs 149–51, 172–85
  - as medium of atonement or expiation 84, 87, 151
  - of paschal offering 163–64
  - of the righteous 172–73, 175–77, 183–85
  - as source of impurity 116, 291
  - of Zechariah 166
- Caesarea 131
- chariot-throne See *merkavah*
- Christ See Jesus Christ
- Christianity
  - anti-Jewish polemics in 128–29
  - atoning (self-)sacrifice in 162–64, 171–73, 194, 197

- cult of relics, martyrs, or saints
  - in 129–30, 153–55, 165
- hagiography in 121
- influence of on rabbinic martyrology 53, 59, 62–63, 83, 100–101, 107–8, 130–39, 147–48, 178, 197–98, 199, 291, 293
- Jewish polemics against 107–8, 128–33, 137, 173–74, 182–89, 199
- Palestine as Holy Land in 128, 153–54
- relationship of to Judaism 54–55, 88, 100–101, 106–7, 130–33, 147–48, 149–51, 157–58, 173–74, 245–46
- relationship of to Roman Empire 128
- worship of Mary in 140
- cosmology 114, 167, 256, 269
- countenance or face
  - angel of the divine 113, 118–20, 208, 210–12, 213, 228–29, 233, 254
  - of God 119–21, 126
  - of Jacob on chariot-throne 120
  - of Jesus Christ 129–30
  - of martyrs, prophets, or saints 120–21
  - of R. Ishmael 93, 101, 118–20, 124–30, 149
  - of R. Yoḥanan 122–23
- Crusades
  - Christian claims on Palestine during 153–54
  - Jewish chronicles of 58–59, 71, 174
  - Jewish responses to 101, 173–74, 293
- cult
  - of Christian martyrs or saints 129–30, 153–55, 165
  - Graeco-Roman hero- 54
  - of Maccabean martyrs 153
  - of Mary 140
  - of (rabbinic) martyrs in heaven 134, 149–50, 165–73, 197–98, 221, 291
  - of rabbinic martyrs as strictly literary phenomenon 151–55
- Daniel (biblical book) 69, 177–78
- David (biblical figure) 78, 106–7, 134, 158, 224–25
  - *See also* under genealogy; Messiah(s)
- “David-apocalypse” 37, 41, 43–45, 72, 139, 154, 210, 224–26, 241
- Day of Atonement *See* Yom Kippur
- death
  - of Aaron 162
  - apparent, of Joseph 87–88
  - atoning, redeeming, or expiatory
    - function of 63, 66, 102, 105, 132–33, 155–82, 200, 220–21, 290
  - of Hadrian 76
  - of Jesus Christ 132–33, 157, 162–63, 197
  - of the Messiah 130
  - of Miriam 162
  - of Nadav and Avihu 161–62
  - of Samuel the Small 71–75
  - of Taxo and his sons 175–76
  - of Zechariah 166
  - *See also* martyrdom
- Decius (Emperor) 126
- demons 117, 193, 194–96
- Deuteronomy 175
- devil 107, 176, 191, 197
- Diocletian (Emperor) 228
- dirges 73–74, 77–81, 83
- Dumiʿel 259, 277
- Edom
  - Esau as legendary ancestor of 127, 186
  - as Rome 127, 182–83, 187–89
- Egypt 85, 124, 152, 160, 171, 192
  - Rome compared to 188–89
- Elijah 138, 192
- Elisha the High Priest 102
  - *See also* under R. Ishmael
- Elisha ben Abuya 69
- Emperor
  - daughter of 93, 124–26
  - decrees execution of rabbinic martyrs 82–83, 124, 202–7, 210
  - in dialogue with rabbi(s) 179–80, 202–7
  - destruction of household of 200, 226–31, 329, 242–43
  - executed in place of rabbinic martyrs 12, 179, 189, 199–200, 217, 231–39, 242–43, 291
  - studies Torah 82–84, 92, 187, 202, 211
  - *See also* specific names

- empire
- Christian discourse of 128–29
  - *See also* Roman Empire
  - 1 *Enoch* 117, 191
  - 2 (*Slavonic*) *Enoch* 137, 167, 171
  - 3 (*Hebrew*) *Enoch* 7, 18, 28, 41–42, 44, 104, 142, 169, 223, 256
  - and apocalyptic genre 208, 241, 247
  - boundary between angels and humans in 116–118
  - within Heikhalot corpus 37, 190, 269–70
  - R. Ishmael as High Priest in 247, 266–70, 279
- Enoch
- contrasted with R. Ishmael 100
  - transformed into Metatron 104, 117, 118–19, 142, 267–68
- Enosh 118
- Ephraim (Messiah) 143–47
- Esau 126–27, 182, 184, 185–86, 227
- eschatology
- in classical rabbinic literature 73, 76, 130, 137–38, 158–60
  - cosmic versus personal 127, 177–78
  - in early apocalyptic literature 175–78
  - in Heikhalot literature 224, 226, 239–40, 269, 277–78
  - in late Palestinian Midrash 182–85
  - in *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 12, 150–51, 185–90
  - and Yom Kippur 145–47, 194–95
  - *See also* messianism
- esotericism
- geonic responsa concerning 2, 281–84, 286–87
  - in *Megillat Ahima'ats* 284–87
  - as motif in Heikhalot literature 1–3, 21, 91, 141, 201, 246–48, 256, 259–60, 263, 274, 275–81
- Esther (biblical book) 231
- evil
- in apocalyptic literature 150–51
  - impulse 300
  - Rome as kingdom of 82, 180, 187, 190, 227
  - Sama'el as embodiment of 185–97
- exegesis
- of the *ʿAqedah* 163–64
  - of Ezekiel's throne-vision 141–42
  - of Joseph story 85–86, 122
  - and “merkavah mysticism” 21–23
  - of Nadav and Avihu episode 161–62
  - of Song of Songs 84–85
- Exodus (biblical book) 52–53, 63–64, 74–75, 82–84, 89, 92–93, 119, 187, 188, 279
- experience, mystical or religious
- limitations of as analytical category 2, 3–6, 8–10, 15–16, 19–20, 48–49, 279
  - and exegesis 21–23
  - as represented in Heikhalot and apocalyptic literature 15–16, 26, 139–40, 209–10, 220, 271, 292–93
- expiation *See* atonement
- Ezekiel (prophet) 3, 141
- Ezekiel (biblical book) 3, 21, 141
- Ezra (biblical figure) 73
- foundation narrative
- for “merkavah mysticism” 201, 245–46, 281–87
  - for rabbinic movement 4, 12, 19
  - for Rome 227
- Gabriel 111, 166
- Gedullah*-hymns 41, 43, 239–41, 251
- genealogy
- impure 240
  - Patriarch's Davidic 77–81, 138–39
  - R. Ishmael's priestly 102–4, 106–13, 118, 138–39, 246–47, 258–59, 264–281
- Genesis 52–53, 129, 134, 163–64
- Genizah, Cairo
- Heikhalot texts from 7, 16, 17, 36, 37, 39–40, 45, 46–47, 48, 115–16, 204, 208, 277–78, 292
  - pilgrimage texts from 154
  - rabbinic texts from 79
- geonic period 26, 36, 247, 266, 293
- Geonim 289
- on esoteric practices and teachings 2, 281–84, 286–87
- Gnosticism 19–20, 134, 171, 190–91

- God
- angels of 43, 69–71
  - blood soaked robe of 149, 172–73, 175, 177, 179–85, 186, 245
  - face of 119–21, 126
  - power of name of 67–68, 83, 111, 230–31
- Golden Calf 279–80
- Hadrian (Emperor) 51, 76
- Haggai (prophet) 73
- hagiography 53
- Christian 53, 121
  - R. Ishmael's life in *Story of the Ten Martyrs* as 81, 99–100, 107, 142, 147–48, 149, 154
  - rabbinic biography as 56–57, 102–5
- Haman 231
- harugei malkhut* See under martyr(s)
- Hasidei Ashkenaz 24, 240, 285, 293
- Hasidim 67
- havurah*-material 39, 239, 276–77
- as foundation narrative for “merkavah mysticism” 142, 248–52, 259–63, 274–75, 277, 287, 292
  - and *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 246–47, 252–59, 280, 288, 291–92
- Hayya ben Sherira Gaon 2, 281–86
- heaven(s)
- angelic liturgy in 41–43, 119–20, 223–25, 271, 274
  - in apocalyptic literature 165, 169–73, 209–10, 247
  - ascent to 2–4, 10, 15–19, 26, 30, 45, 84, 113–21, 139–40, 147–48, 165, 169–73, 199–201, 208–11, 217–18, 239–42, 246–64, 266–70, 275–81, 287–88, 290–92
  - divine tribunal in 83–84, 93, 187–193, 211, 296–97, 298–99, 301
  - sacrificial cult of rabbinic martyrs in 134, 149–50, 165–73, 186, 197, 242
  - temple in 104, 149–51, 165–73, 264–66
  - water in 278–80
- Hebrew Bible 53, 106, 134, 170, 175
- See also *individual books*
- Hebrews (NT book) 100, 133–37, 147, 151, 162, 291
- Heftsiyah 107
- Heikhalot literature
- adjurations and ascents in 18–19, 22, 26, 38, 48, 111, 118–19, 264, 270–73, 276, 278, 288
  - and apocalyptic literature 19–21, 43–45, 117, 140, 208–11, 211–17, 225–26, 247, 269–70, 276–79, 286–87, 291–92
  - egalitarian ethos in 275–81
  - heavenly ascent in 84, 114, 199–200, 208–11, 217–18, 239–42, 246–64, 266–70, 275–81, 287–88, 290–92
  - heterogeneity of 16–23
  - literary approaches to 23–30
  - mysticism as category applied to 3–10, 15–16, 19–20, 48–49, 279
  - pseudepigraphy in 4–5, 19, 201
  - R. Ishmael as aspiring mystical initiate in 84, 114, 199–200, 208–11, 217–18, 239–42, 246–64, 266–70, 275–81, 287–88, 290–92
  - *yeridah* vocabulary in 11, 208–9, 269, 277–78
- Heikhalot Rabbati*
- anti-priestly polemic of 275–81
  - as foundation narrative for “merkavah mysticism” 201, 245–46, 281–87
  - as inversion of *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 8–14, 16, 30–36, 199–239, 252–64
  - literary structure and transmission history of 36–48
  - *yeridah*-vocabulary as distinctive to 11, 208–9, 269, 277–78
- Heikhalot Zutarti* 1–2, 7, 11, 18, 29, 37–38, 41–42, 120, 284
- High Priest
- Aaron as 89–90, 145–46
  - Jesus Christ as 133–37
  - Melchizedek as 100, 133–38
  - Metatron as angelic 133–39, 149, 165–70, 242
  - Michael as angelic 166–71
  - as messianic figure 88–91, 139–47

- R. Ishmael as 71, 77–81, 99–100, 102–5, 133–35, 246–47, 258–59, 264–281, 290–92
- ritual function of in Yom Kippur liturgy 88–91, 145–47, 161–62
- as rival of Patriarch 71, 77–81, 138, 263, 288, 290, 292
- Simon in Ben Sira as 89
- vestments of linked to tunic of Joseph 53, 88–91
- Hillel 73
- Holy of Holies 104, 146
- Holy Land 128, 153–54
- holy man 155–56
- Ḥutspit the Translator 56, 69, 80, 94–96, 183
- hymn(s)
  - angelic or chariot-throne 41–43, 119–20, 223–25, 271, 274
  - to Ephraim (Messiah) 143–47
  - eschatological 176
  - *Gedullah*-hymns 41, 43, 239–41, 251
  - within Heikhalot literature 28, 36, 41–45, 223–25, 243–44, 292
  - to high priest on Yom Kippur 145–47
  - to Mary 140
  - *Qedushah* hymns 41, 43, 120, 212
  - in praise of God 119–20, 271, 274
  - to R. Ishmael 139–47
  - *See also* liturgy; *piyyut*
- iconoclasm 129–30
- Ignatius 163
- impurity
  - genealogical 240
  - menstrual 107–8, 111–13, 240
- Iraq 281–82, 288, 292
- Isaiah (biblical book) 159, 185–86, 188, 192
- Islamic period 20, 183, 281
- Israel
  - blood of 173, 180, 182–85
  - collective or national sin of 60–63, 81–85
  - Jacob as legendary ancestor of 90, 126–27, 186
  - redemptive punishment or suffering of 83, 97, 242
- Italy 284–85
- Jacob (patriarch) 84, 121–22, 140, 158, 177
  - countenance of carved on *merkavah* 120
  - as legendary ancestor of Israel 90, 126–27, 186
  - mourning for Joseph 87–88
  - sons of sell Joseph 8, 82–84, 90, 184, 213, 219, 221, 297
- Jerusalem 56, 63, 67, 76, 82, 122, 134, 145, 153–54, 163, 167–69, 203, 232
- Jerusalem Temple 4, 62–63, 80, 82, 90–91, 103–4, 108, 152–54, 156, 160–61, 166, 167–69, 170, 180, 232, 263, 264–66, 270, 273
  - *See also* cult; priestly traditions; temple(s)
- Jesus Christ
  - atoning blood of 182
  - as child of impurity 107–8
  - compared with R. Ishmael 100, 106–8, 130–39
  - countenance of 129–30
  - death of 132–33, 157, 162–63, 197
  - as High Priest 133–37
  - in Jewish anti-Christian polemic 107–8, 131–32
  - and Melchizedek in Hebrews 133–37, 147, 151, 162, 291
  - as Messiah 132
  - miraculous birth of 100
  - as revealer 171
  - as sacrificial offering 133–37
- Jewish people *See* Israel
- Jewish War 75–76
- John the Baptist 124
- Joseph (patriarch)
  - beauty of 122–24
  - R. Ishmael the martyr modeled on 122–24
  - sale of as central motif in *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 8, 52–53, 81–92, 97, 99, 123, 150, 173, 184–85, 187, 194, 206, 211, 221, 290, 296–98, 301

- tunic of linked to vestments of High Priest 53, 88–91
- Josephus 106
- Joshua (biblical figure) 158
- Jubilees* 53, 85, 87–89, 184
- Judah the Baker 56, 69, 79–80, 94–96, 121, 140, 183
  
- Karaism 145
- Keruvim* 224, 229, 254, 267–68
- Kiddush ha-shem* See martyrdom
  
- Leviticus 80, 89–91, 150, 161–62, 186, 194–97
- liturgy
  - and Heikhalot literature 28, 36, 41–45, 223–25, 243–44, 292
  - relationship of to rabbinic literature 91–92, 146–47
  - for Yom Kippur 53, 89–91, 145–46, 290
- Ludi Saeculares* 126
- Lulianus (martyr) 56, 58, 68, 179
- Lupinus (Emperor)
  - destruction of household of 200, 226–31, 329, 242–43
  - executed in place of rabbinic martyrs 12, 179, 189, 199–200, 217, 231–39, 242–43, 291
  - symbolic meaning of name 227–28
  
- ma'aseh merkavah*
  - as exegetical discipline 21–22
- Ma'aseh Merkavah* 7, 18, 25, 37, 141–42, 273–74
- Maccabean martyrs 153, 175, 178, 182
- Maccabean Revolt 175
- “magical” literature or practice 18–21, 22, 113, 115, 209–10, 230, 232, 251, 261, 268–69, 270–73, 281–84, 288
  - See also adjurations
- makarismoi* 140–42
- Malachi 73
- martyr(s)
  - beauty of 102, 120–25
  - blood of 149–51, 172–85
  - cultic veneration of 129–30, 134, 149–50, 153–55, 165–73, 197–98, 221, 291
  - death, execution, or suffering of 53, 55–60, 63–71, 82–83, 97–98, 181, 183, 197
  - Maccabean 153, 175, 178, 182
  - priests as 155–57
  - rabbis as 51–81, 92–98, 121–25, 165–73
- martyrdom
  - as contested domain in Christianity and Judaism 53–55
  - of Hutspit the Translator 56, 69, 80, 94–96, 183
  - of Judah the Baker 56, 69, 79–80, 94–96, 121, 140, 183
  - of Lulianus and Pappus 56, 58, 68, 179
  - and mysticism 13–14
  - of R. Akiva 56, 58–59, 70, 72, 85, 141, 164, 183
  - of R. Hanina ben Teradyon 56–60, 65, 67–69, 93–96, 183–84
  - of R. Ishmael ben Elisha 121–25
  - of R. Judah ben Bava 56–57, 73–74, 93–96, 180
  - of Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel 93–96, 124, 184, 206–7
  - of Roman Emperor 12, 179, 189, 199–200, 217, 231–39, 242–43, 291
  - as vicarious atonement or expiation 63, 66, 102, 105, 132–33, 155–182, 200, 220–21, 290
- “martyr narrative” (*Heikhalot Rabbati* §§ 107–121) 12, 199–239, 242–43, 245–47, 249–54, 257, 263, 280, 287–88, 289–92
- martyrology
  - apocalyptic forms in 13–14, 52, 150–51, 165–73, 185, 186–87, 190–94, 197–98, 241, 290–92
  - Christian 53–55
  - in classical rabbinic literature 55–81
  - as genre 55–71
  - inverted 12, 199–239, 242–43, 245–47, 249–54, 257, 263, 280, 287–88, 289–92
  - as polemic 107–8, 128–33, 137, 173–74, 182–89, 199

- theodicy in , 60–71
- *See also specific texts*
- Mary (biblical figure) 100, 103
- cult of 140
- as menstruant 107–8
- as mother of Anti-Christ 107
- as mother of Jesus Christ 107–8
- mask-ritual 93, 101–2, 126–30, 149
- Massekhet Semahot* 35, 53, 60, 74–75
- Megillat Ahima'ats* 247, 285–87
- Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* 53, 63–65, 73, 74–77, 80, 84–85, 158
- Melchizedek 100, 133–38
- Menaḥem (Messiah) 106–7
- Menaḥem ben Ammiel 107, 121
- merkavah* (divine chariot-throne)
  - countenance of Jacob carved on 120
  - hymns of or to 223–25, 271, 274
  - visions of 1, 3–4, 7, 10–11, 23, 141, 204–5, 208–211
  - *See also yored la-merkavah*
  - “merkavah mysticism” 3–10, 15–16, 19–20, 30, 48–49, 201, 264–66, 281, 293
- Merkavah Rabbah* 7, 18, 37, 271–73, 276
- Meshach 164
- Messiah(s) 158–60, 192–93
  - as Anointed for War 138
  - Davidic 106–7, 121, 138
  - dying 130
  - Ephraim in *Pesiqta Rabbati* as 143–47
  - hymns to 139–47
  - Jesus Christ as 132
  - Melchizedek as prototype for 136–39
  - Menaḥem as 106–7
  - Menaḥem son of Ammiel as 107, 121
  - priestly 102, 136–39, 139–47
  - R. Ishmael as quasi- 91, 102, 139–47
  - son of Joseph 130, 138
  - suffering 143–45
  - *yored-merkavah* as quasi- 241
  - “Messiah Aggadah” 43, 44, 269
- messianism 12, 106–7, 130, 139–47, 158–60
- Metatron
  - as angel of divine countenance 119–20
  - as angelic High Priest 133–39, 149, 165–70, 242
  - as angelic scribe 187, 214–16
  - compared to Melchizedek 133–39
  - as heavenly prototype for R. Ishmael 133–39, 291
  - identified with God 272
  - and Michael 135, 167
  - names of 43, 116, 119, 167, 272
  - as R. Ishmael's *angelus interpretis* 83–84, 93, 104, 113–21, 132, 144, 165–70, 193, 202, 209–10, 211, 218, 256, 267–69, 291, 296–97
  - as transformed Enoch 104, 117, 118–19, 142, 267–68
  - transmits his beauty and purity to R. Ishmael 84, 100, 106–13, 119–20, 129, 148, 264, 290
- Michael
  - as angelic High Priest 166–71
  - as Israel's guardian angel 135, 187, 190–93, 213, 216, 221, 229, 296
- middat ha-din* *See* Principle of Justice
- midrashic literature
  - motif of ten martyrs absent from early 73, 85–87
  - in Byzantine Palestine 79, 91–92, 144–47, 160, 174, 183–85, 197–98
- Midrash elleh ezkerah* 34, 92, 120, 166, 180
  - *See also Story of the Ten Martyrs*
- Midrash Shir ha-Shirim* 34–35, 56, 77, 81–85, 86, 92, 95–96, 124, 150, 161, 207, 238–39, 295–97, 301–2
- miqveh* *See* ritual bath
- miraculous conception or birth
  - of Anti-Christ Armilos 107
  - in Graeco-Roman culture 106
  - in Hebrew Bible 106
  - of Jesus Christ 100
  - of Messiah Ephraim 144
  - of Messiah Menaḥem (ben Ammiel) 106–7
  - of R. Ishmael 100, 104, 106–13, 121, 131, 139, 147, 200, 246–47, 258, 267
- Miriam (biblical figure) 158, 161–62
- Mishael (biblical figure) 69, 164, 178

- Mishnah 1–2, 19, 78, 88, 105, 112, 158, 261, 277
- Mordechai (biblical figure) 213
- Moses 145–46, 158, 160–61, 271
- ascending to heaven to receive Torah 22, 114–19, 291
  - contrasted with R. Ishmael 100, 114–19, 268–69, 291
  - death of 168
  - shown future destruction of Temple 160–61
  - shown future martyrdom of R. Akiva 71
- motif of trivial sin in rabbinic martyrology 63–67, 83
- motif of Joseph's sale
- as organizing principle for Story of the Ten Martyrs 8, 52–53, 81–85, 97, 99, 123, 150, 173, 184–85, 187, 194, 206, 211, 221, 290, 296–98, 301
  - transmitted in synagogue liturgy 88–92
  - as Yom Kippur tradition 85–92
- motif of ten rabbinic martyrs
- absent in earlier rabbinic sources 73, 85–87
  - post-talmudic martyrology organized around 9, 84–85, 97, 99, 123, 150, 173, 184–85, 187, 194, 206, 211, 221, 290, 296–98, 301
- music in heaven 223–225, 242–43
- *See also* hymns
- myth of origins *See* foundation narrative
- mystic *See yored la-merkavah*
- mystical fellowship *See havurah*
- mysticism
- limitations of as analytical category 3–10, 15–16, 19–20, 48–49, 279
  - and magic 18–20, 22
- myth of origins *See* foundation narrative
- Nadav (biblical figure) 161–62
- names, magical 67–68, 83, 111, 142, 230–31
- New Testament *See* specific books
- Noahide laws 276
- North Africa 281, 286
- Ofannim* 224, 229, 254, 267–68
- Ozhayah fragment 210, 270, 277
- pagans 54, 108, 155–56
- Palestine
- as Christian Holy Land 128, 153–54
  - in geonic/Islamic period 281–87
  - Jewish regional culture and literature of 79, 91–92, 101, 108–9, 111–13, 144–47, 160, 174, 183–85, 197–98, 247, 265, 281–87
  - rejected as provenance for Heikhalot Rabbati 36, 228
  - as provenance of *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 51–52, 55, 87, 97, 108–13, 139–47, 174, 183–85, 197–98, 287–88, 290–91
  - religious communities of 55
  - under Roman rule 57
- Pappus (martyr) 56, 58, 68, 179
- pardes* episode 21
- Patriarch 221
- Davidic lineage of 77–81
  - as figure in Heikhalot Rabbati 47, 219, 222, 224, 260–63
  - as martyr 71–81, 99
  - as rival of High Priest 71, 77–81, 138, 263, 288, 290, 292
  - *See also* Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel
- patriarchate
- abolishment of 78–79
  - in competition with priesthood 78–81
- Paul (apostle) 21, 157
- Pereq R. Nehunya b. ha-Qanah* 38, 42
- Peshitta* 136
- Philippus (Emperor) 126
- Philostratus 106
- Phineas (biblical figure) 158
- pilgrimage practice
- Christian 128, 153–54
  - Jewish 152–55
- Pirqei Mashiah* 192–93
- piyyut*
- as conduit for sale of Joseph motif 88–92
  - relationship to rabbinic literature 91–92, 146–47

- versions of *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 34, 88, 91–92, 95–96
- *See also specific titles*
- plague(s)
  - against Egypt 188–89
  - as eschatological punishment of Rome 188–89, 215–17, 222, 227
  - inflicted by *yored la-merkavah* upon his enemies 240–41
- polemics
  - anti-imperial 182–83, 185–97
  - anti-priestly 275–81
  - Christian anti-Jewish 128–29
  - Jewish anti-Christian 107–8, 128–33, 137, 173–74, 182–89, 199
- post-talmudic period
  - definition of 51–52
  - rabbinic martyrology in 8, 31, 35, 51–53, 71–73, 82, 97–98, 99, 164, 168–69, 197–98, 199, 289–91
- Potiphar's wife 123
- priest(s)
  - as martyrs 155–57
  - as mystics 264–66
  - and rabbis 91–92, 146–47
  - as social class in Byzantine Palestine 108–9, 111
  - *See also High Priest*
- Priest of Righteousness 138
  - *See also Melchizedek*
- Prince of the Countenance (*Sar ha-Panim*) 113, 119, 208, 210, 213, 228, 229, 233
  - *See also Metatron; Suriya*
- Prince of Light 135
- Prince of the Torah (*Sar ha-Torah*) 118–19, 240, 270–73
- Principle of Justice
  - contrasted to Sama'el 187–193
  - function of in *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 83–84, 93, 187, 193, 211, 296–97, 298–99, 301
- prophecy
  - end of in Israel 73
  - of Samuel the Small 72–77
  - of Zechariah 138
- Proteus 106
  - pseudepigraphy, in Heikhalot literature 4–5, 19, 201, 264–66
- purity
  - as pre-condition for adjuration and ascent practice 111–21
  - menstrual 107–8
  - transmitted by Metatron to R. Ishmael 84, 100, 106–13, 119–20, 129, 148, 264, 290
- purity practice
  - in Ashkenazi Jewish culture 109, 111–13
  - in Byzantine Palestine 108–13
- Qairawan (North Africa) 281–82
- Qatspi'el 267
- Qedushah* hymns 43, 120, 212
- Questions of Bartholomew 171–72
- Qumran 135
- R. Abbahu 122, 131, 159, 184
- R. Akiva 159, 168
  - compared to Jesus 59
  - in Heikhalot literature 4, 100, 104, 210, 257, 271, 276–77, 283
  - as martyr 56, 58–59, 70, 72, 85, 141, 164, 183
  - in development of rabbinic theodicy 60–61, 64–66, 77
  - role of in *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 59–60, 93–96
- R. Eleazar ben 'Arakh 141
- R. Eleazar ben Damah 203, 257
- R. Eleazar ben Harsom 94–96
- R. Eleazar ben Shammua 93–96, 179, 193, 257
- R. Eliezer (“the Great”) 257
- R. Hanina ben Dosa 159–60
- R. Hananyah ben Hakhinai 93–96, 257
- R. Hanina (Hananyah) ben Teradyon
  - in *Heikhalot Rabbati* 200, 228–39
  - has vision of ascending letters of Torah 230–31
  - as martyr 56–60, 65, 67–69, 93–96, 183–84
  - as master of Divine Name 230–31

- R. Ishmael ben Elisha
- ascent to heaven of 81–85, 113–21, 147–48, 199–200, 208–11, 217–18, 239–42, 246–64, 266–70, 275–81, 287–88, 290–92
  - as aspiring mystical initiate in Heikhalot literature 84, 114, 199–200, 208–11, 217–18, 239–42, 246–64, 266–70, 273, 275–81, 287–88, 290–92
  - beauty of 84, 100, 102, 106–13, 119–25, 148, 264, 290
  - as central figure in *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 59, 71–72, 81, 98, 100–101
  - in classical rabbinic literature 102–5
  - compared to Enoch 100
  - compared to Jesus Christ 100, 106–8, 130–39
  - compared to the Messiah Ephraim 143–47
  - compared to Moses 100, 114–19, 268–69, 291
  - countenance or face of 93, 101, 118–20, 124–30
  - as High Priest 71, 77–81, 99–100, 102–5, 133–35, 246–47, 258–59, 264–281, 290–92
  - hymn to 139–47
  - martyrdom of 121–33
  - as messianic or semi-divine figure 100–101, 139–47
  - and Metatron 83–84, 93, 100, 104, 106–21, 132, 144, 148, 165–70, 193, 202, 209–10, 211, 218, 256, 264, 267–69, 290–91, 296–97
  - miraculous conception of 100, 104, 106–13, 121, 131, 139, 147, 200, 246–47, 258, 267
  - priestly lineage of 102–4, 106–13, 118, 138–39, 246–47, 258–59, 264–281
  - purity of 84, 100, 106–13, 119–20, 129, 148, 264, 290
  - relics of 124–30
  - as rival of Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel 34, 52–53, 56, 59–60, 71–85, 91, 93–97, 99, 124, 138, 166, 193, 203, 263, 288, 290, 292
- R. Judah ben Bava 56–57, 73–74, 93–96, 180, 203, 207, 257
- R. Judah ben Damah 203, 207, 257
- R. Judah the Patriarch 67, 76
- R. Neḥunya ben ha-Qanah
- ascent to heaven of 45, 248, 270
  - as master of esoteric knowledge in Heikhalot literature 4, 45, 47, 112, 114, 142, 148, 200, 205, 208–9, 213, 218, 221–22, 224–25, 242, 246, 248, 251–263, 217–77, 283
  - as potential martyr 232–39, 242–43
- R. Simeon bar Yoḥai 66, 160
- R. Simeon ben Azzai 94–96, 183
- R. Simeon ben Ḥaggai 94–96
- R. Yoḥanan 57, 122–23
- R. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai 141–42, 257
- R. Yosei ben Qisma 57
- Rabban Gamaliel 95–96, 299
- Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel
- martyrdom of 93–96, 124, 184, 206–7
  - in martyrological material in *Heikhalot Rabbati* 203, 207, 219–22, 257–58, 260–63, 277
  - as Patriarch 71, 77–81, 138, 263, 288, 290, 292
  - as rival of R. Ishmael ben Elisha 34, 52–53, 56, 59–60, 71–85, 91, 97, 99, 124, 138, 166, 193, 203, 263, 288, 290, 292
- rabbis, the
- in contact or conflict with Rome 12, 57–58
  - as holy men 155–56
  - as martyrs 51–81, 92–98, 121–25, 165–73
  - nature and scope of authority of 12–13, 73, 91–92, 146–47
  - and priests or priestly traditions 91–92, 108–9, 111, 146–47, 167–68
  - as pseudonymous heroes of Heikhalot literature 4–5, 12, 19, 201, 264–66
  - *See also specific names*
- rabbinic literature, classical
- and apocalyptic literature 60
  - cosmology in 114, 167
  - cultic and liturgical traditions in 88–89, 91–92, 146–47

- eschatology in 73, 76, 130, 137–38, 158–60
- and Heikhalot literature 5, 19–21, 264–66
- martyrologies in 51–81
- R. Ishmael in 102–5
- theodicy in 56, 60–71, 81, 82, 157–58
- Revelation (NT book) 151, 162, 171–73, 183–88, 197–98, 225–26
- righteous, the
  - blood of 172–73, 175–77, 183–84
  - Ḥananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah as 172–73, 175–77, 183–85
  - heavenly cult of souls of 149–50, 165–73
  - miraculous powers of 282–83
  - *post-mortem* fate of 153, 177–78, 197–98, 221, 225
  - problem of suffering of 65–71, 97–98
  - R. Ishmael’s parents as 109–11
  - vicarious death or suffering of 155–64, 221
- ritual(s)
  - adjurational, in Heikhalot literature 14, 18–19, 22, 26, 38, 48, 111, 118–19, 264, 270–73, 276, 278, 288
  - of celebration 220–26, 242
  - for heavenly ascent in Heikhalot literature 2–4, 10, 15–17, 19, 26, 30, 84, 114–19, 147–48, 199–201, 208–11, 217–18, 239–42, 246–64, 266–70, 275–81, 287–88, 290–92
  - of High Priest on Yom Kippur 88–91, 145–47, 150, 161–62
  - idolatrous 68
  - of mourning 73–74, 77–81, 83, 220–26
  - of purification 83, 110–11, 122
  - of R. Ishmael’s death mask 93, 101–2, 124–30, 149
  - of scapegoat 89, 149, 150, 185–86, 194–97, 211–17
  - of veneration of martyrs 151–52, 155
  - *See also* impurity; purity
- ritual bath 83, 110–11, 122
- Rome
  - Christianization of 83, 128
  - as demonic power 185–97, 227
  - compared to Egypt 188–89
  - Esau as legendary ancestor of 126–27, 182, 184, 185–86, 227
  - eschatological destruction of 12, 125–30, 166, 182–83, 185–97, 200, 211–39, 242
  - Jewish and rabbinic attitudes toward 7–8, 12, 31, 57, 125–30, 182–97
  - Jewish and rabbinic martyrs arrested and/or executed in 57–58, 101–2, 123–25, 179–81, 203–4, 253
  - R. Ishmael’s “death mask” preserved and used in 125–30
  - Sama’el as guardian angel of 150, 187, 190–97, 211–17
- Romulus 227
- Rufinus 228
- sacrifice *See* cult; temple(s)
- Sama’el
  - compared to Principle of Justice 187, 193
  - as Israel’s prosecutor 191–93
  - in “gnostic” texts 191
  - punishment of 150, 211–17
  - in rabbinic literature 191–92
  - as Rome’s guardian angel 150, 187, 190–97, 211–17
  - as scapegoat 194–97, 211–17
  - in Second Temple apocalyptic 190–91
  - uncommon in Heikhalot literature 190–91
  - “Sama’el apocalypse” 150, 185–97, 211–17
- Samuel Gaon 283
- Samuel the Small 72–77
- Sanhedrin 82, 257–58
- Sar ha-panim* *See* Prince of the Countenance
- Sar-Torah* texts 26, 38, 42, 43, 45–46, 118–19, 240, 270–73, 278, 284
- *See also* Prince of the Torah
- Saul 121, 161
- scapegoat 89, 149, 150, 185–86, 194–97, 211–17
- Se’adyah ben Joseph Gaon 283, 286

- Second Temple period or literature 20–21, 53, 56, 78, 85, 87–90, 99, 150–51, 153–54, 156–57, 165, 169–70, 194, 196, 225, 265–66, 290
- Seder 'Avodah* See under 'Avodah service
- Sefer Zerubbabel* 35, 38, 107, 121, 128, 227
- Seir 186, 293
- Seliḥah elleh ezkerah* 34, 88, 91–92, 95–96
- See also under *Story of the Ten Martyrs*
- Shadrach 164
- Shem 136–37
- Shema'* 59
- Shemḥazai 195
- Sherira Gaon 281–82
- Simon bar Kosiba See Bar-Kokhbasin
- collective or national versus individual 60–63, 81–85
- of generation of Enosh 118
- of Joseph's brothers 8, 52, 55–56, 81–85, 87–92, 99, 165, 290, 301
- motif of the trivial or minor in rabbinic martyrology 63–67, 83
- See also atonement
- Solomon 232
- soul(s)
- of martyrs sacrificed on heavenly altar 149, 165–73, 219–21
- of righteous hidden under heavenly altar or throne 168–70, 221
- Stephen (biblical figure) 120–21
- Story of the Ten Martyrs*
- as anthology 30–34, 51–53
- as anti-Christian polemic 107–8, 128–33, 137, 173–74, 182–89, 199
- apocalyptic features of 13–14, 52, 150–51, 165–73, 185, 186–87, 190–94, 197–98, 241, 290–92
- in contrast to classical rabbinic martyrology 51–56, 58–60, 71, 81–85
- cultic idiom of 149–50, 165–73, 186, 197, 242
- in dialogue with Christian culture 53, 59, 62–63, 83, 100–101, 107–8, 125–39, 147–48, 171–73, 178, 197–98, 199, 290–91, 293
- frame-narrative of 92–97
- and Heikhalot literature 8–14, 16, 30–36
- as influenced by late antique synagogue 53, 88–92, 97, 99, 145–46, 155, 290
- and “inverted martyrology” of *Heikhalot Rabbati* 199–239, 252–64
- and *Jubilees* 53, 85, 87–89, 184
- *piyyut* versions of 34, 88, 91–92, 95–96
- as product of Byzantine Palestine 51–52, 55, 87, 97, 108–13, 139–47, 174, 183–85, 197–98, 287–88, 290–91
- R. Ishmael as central figure in 59, 71–72, 81, 98, 100–101
- sale of Joseph as organizing principle of 8, 52–53, 81–85, 97, 99, 123, 150, 173, 184–85, 187, 194, 206, 211, 221, 290, 296–98, 301
- tension between High Priest and Patriarch in 34, 52–53, 56, 59–60, 71–85, 91, 93–97, 99, 124, 138, 166, 193, 203, 263, 288, 290, 292
- and Yom Kippur liturgy 53, 88–92, 145–46, 290
- study-house, rabbinic 91, 266, 288
- Suetonius 126
- suffering
- of Israel 83, 97, 242
- in *Heikhalot Rabbati* 242–43, 291
- as mark of piety 97–98
- as mechanism for vicarious atonement 12–13, 66, 71, 97–98, 105, 143–47, 149–50, 155–64, 177, 197, 245
- Messiah 143–47
- of rabbinic martyrs 53, 55–60, 63–71, 82–83, 97–98, 181, 183, 197
- in rabbinic theodicy 60–71
- Rome's eschatological 188–89, 197, 229–30
- Suriya (Prince of the Countenance) 142, 208, 210, 211, 213, 227, 228, 229, 233, 253–54

- synagogue 153  
 – as institutional influence on *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 53, 88–92, 97, 99, 145–46, 155, 290  
 – and rabbinic study-house 91–92, 146–47  
 – status of among Byzantine Jews 108–9, 111
- Talmud  
 – Babylonian 51, 57–60, 61–62, 67–70, 103–4, 109, 122, 125, 126, 136–38, 164, 167, 194–95, 230, 231, 232, 262, 300  
 – cultic traditions in 53  
 – martyrologies in 51, 55–60, 67–69, 230  
 – mystical traditions in 21  
 – Palestinian 51, 53, 68, 70, 76, targumic literature 90–91, 120, 136–37  
 Taxo 175–76  
*tefillin* 124–25  
 temple(s)  
 – heavenly 104, 149–51, 165–73, 264–66  
 – in Jerusalem 4, 62–63, 80, 82, 90–91, 103–4, 108, 152–54, 156, 160–61, 166, 167–69, 170, 180, 232, 263, 264–66, 270, 273  
 – pagan 155–56  
*Testament of Moses* 175–76, 185  
 theodicy  
 – attitudes toward in rabbinic literature 157–58  
 – as motif in rabbinic martyrology 56, 60–71, 81, 82  
 Titus (Emperor) 231  
*Toledot Yeshu* 107  
 tombs  
 – of Maccabean martyrs 153  
 – of rabbinic sages 153–54  
 – of righteous dead as pilgrimage destinations in Judaism 152–55  
 Torah  
 – burnt during martyrdom of R. Ḥanina ben Teradyon 68, 82, 230  
 – knowledge of acquired through ritual practices 14, 26, 270–73  
 – received by Moses in heaven 22, 114–19, 291  
 – studied by Roman Emperor 82–84, 92, 187, 202, 211  
 Trajan (Emperor) 179  
 Tuvia ben Eliezer 293  
 ‘Uzzah 177  
 vengeance, divine 149, 172–73, 175, 177, 179–85, 186, 245  
 vestments of High Priest  
 – atoning function of 53, 88–91, 99, 161–62  
 – symbolically linked to blood-stained tunic of Joseph 88–91  
 vision(s)  
 – in dreams 58  
 – Ezekiel’s 3, 141  
 – of God and/or his chariot-throne 1, 3–4, 7, 10–11, 23, 204–5, 208–211  
 – of Graeco-Roman gods 106  
 – of heavenly tribunal 211–17  
 – of John of Patmos 171–73  
 – Joseph son of Joshua’s 58, 72  
 – of King David enthroned in heaven 223–25  
 – of paradise or world-to-come 140  
 – R. Ḥanina ben Teradyon’s 230–31  
 – R. Ishmael’s in Heikhalot literature 10–11, 18–23, 84, 103–4, 139–142, 145 199–200, 208–11, 217–18, 239–42, 246–64, 266–70, 275–81, 287–88, 290–92  
 – R. Ishmael’s in *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 81–85, 113–21, 147–48, 208–11, 290–91  
 – of water in heaven 278–80  
 – See also ascent to heaven  
 visuality 108, 112–13, 122, 129–30  
 Vitellius (Emperor) 231  
 water-test in heaven 278–80  
 Yaldabaoth 191  
 Yavneh 75–76

- yeridah*
- absent from most recensions of *Story of the Ten Martyrs* 32
  - contrasted with heavenly ascent in apocalyptic sources 114–19, 208–11
  - function or meaning of 11, 292–93
  - contrasted with Moses' ascent to receive the Torah 22, 114–19
  - of R. Ishmael in *Heikhalot Rabbatī* 208–11
  - terminology of found in limited portions of *Heikhalot* literature 11, 208–9, 269, 277–78
- Yeshevav the Scribe 180–81, 183
- yeshivah* See study-house
- Yofi'el 119
- Yōhanan ben Dehavai 257–58
- Yom Kippur
- eschatological 145–47, 194–95
  - cultic function of High Priest on 88–91, 145–47, 150, 161–62
  - liturgy and post-talmudic martyrology 53, 88–92, 145–46, 290
  - scapegoat ritual of 89, 149, 150, 185–86, 194–97, 211–17
- Yonatan ben Uziel 257–58, 260, 262–63, 27–78, 292
- yored la-merkavah*
- compared to rabbinic martyr 14, 201, 241
  - instructions for ascent transmitted to 222–24, 248, 260–64
  - as quasi-messianic figure 241
  - R. Ishmael as model 222, 224, 287–88
  - social identity of 239–41, 251, 287–88
  - special powers of 13, 43, 239–41, 255
- Yosei ben Yosei (*payyetan*) 90, 191–92
- Zechariah (prophetic book) 73, 138
- Zechariah (murdered prophet) 166
- Zevul* 167, 169

# Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism

## Alphabetical Index

- Albani, M., J. Frey, and A. Lange* (Ed.): Studies in the Book of Jubilees. 1997. *Volume 65*.
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