

Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum

45

Annelies Kuyt

# The 'Descent' to the Chariot



Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum

herausgegeben von  
Martin Hengel und Peter Schäfer

45



# The 'Descent' to the Chariot

Towards a Description of the Terminology,  
Place, Function and Nature of the Yeridah  
in Hekhalot Literature

by

Annelies Kuyt



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## Preface

This study is a revised version of my doctoral dissertation “Heavenly Journeys in Hekhalot Literature. The *Yeridah*: Towards a Description of Its Terminology, Place, Function and Nature”, defended at the University of Amsterdam in December 1991. The main difference with the dissertation is a reduction of interest in semantics which allowed for an increase in the discussion of the context of the heavenly journeys in Hekhalot literature.

My interest in Hekhalot literature has its roots in a course of lectures, given by Professor Niek van Uchelen, at the University of Amsterdam some ten years ago. The study of Gershom Scholem’s work on the texts read in the course enhanced this interest. From Peter Schäfer’s and others’ work on the Hekhalot texts I became aware that a study of even the *yeridah*, one of the major themes in Scholem’s work, ought to be approached systematically. This study is therefore an attempt to show how the *yeridah*, as one type of heavenly journey, is far from being a homogeneous concept in the different Hekhalot texts as well as in the different redactional realisations in the manuscripts. The concept of the *yeridah* is therefore to a certain extent in a state of flux.

It is with great pleasure that I am able to thank my supervisors Professors Niek van Uchelen (Amsterdam) and Peter Schäfer (Berlin) for their advice and help. I am grateful to the members of the academic panel Professors K. A. Deurloo (Amsterdam), P. W. van der Horst (Utrecht), J. H. Hospers (Groningen) and Dr J. W. van Henten (Amsterdam) and Dr J. W. Wesselius (Amsterdam) for contributing their time to reading my rather bulky and technical manuscript. I would also like to thank Professor Ithamar Gruenwald (Tel Aviv) for spending much time with me discussing the methods, ideas and problems of the dissertation. I would also like to express my gratitude to Professor Moshe Idel (Jerusalem) for discussing the dissertation with me and helping me focus on various points while it was being revised. I am indebted to Professors Hengel and Schäfer for including this book in the series *Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum*.

I extend my thanks to the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO) for its financial support during the period of research for the dissertation and for its support with regard to the correction of the English text. For the painstaking work of the actual correction I would like to thank Sam Herman (Tibbon Translations).

Last but not least my gratitude goes to those colleagues, family and friends whom I have not been able to mention by name. I suspect that those who have not had to answer all my questions about the Hekhalot have had to exercise all their patience with my preoccupation during the research periods and my frequent lapses into thought, which they excused as my being 'stuck in some heaven or other'.

Zaandam, April 1994

Annelies Kuyt

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# Abbreviations, Signs and Transcription

## *Abbreviations*

### Hebrew Bible

Gen.	Genesis
Ex.	Exodus
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Judg.	Judges
Sam.	Samuel
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Ez.	Ezekiel
Ps.	Psalms
Prov.	Proverbs
Song	Song of Songs
Eccl.	Ecclesiastes
Dan.	Daniel
Chron.	Chronicles

### Rabbinic literature

b(T)	Talmud Babli
M	Mishnah
y	Talmud Yerushalmi
T	Tosefta
Pes.R.	Pesiqta Rabbati
PRE	Pirqe deR. Eli'ezer
Shem.R.	Exodus Rabbah
Ber.	Berakhot
Suk.	Sukah
Meg.	Megilah
Hag.	Hagiga
B.B.	Baba Batra
Sanh.	Sanhedrin
Ed.	Eduyot
Men.	Menahot

### Hekhalot literature

ABdRA	Alpha Beta deRabbi Aqiba
HdM	Harba deMoshe
HR	Hekhalot Rabbati

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## *Abbreviations, Signs and Transcription*

HZ	Hekhalot Zutrati
MH	Masekhet Hekhalot
MM	Ma'aseh Merkabah
MR	Merkabah Rabbah
Sh.Q.	Shi'ur Qomah
SRdB	Seder Rabbah deBereshit

### Journals/Series

<i>AGJU</i>	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
<i>AJSreview</i>	Association for Jewish Studies review
<i>AOS</i>	American Oriental Series
<i>BBB</i>	Bonner Biblische Beiträge
<i>BZ</i>	Biblische Zeitschrift
<i>FJB</i>	Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge
<i>HTR</i>	Harvard Theological Review
<i>HUCA</i>	Hebrew Union College Annual
<i>JAOS</i>	Journal of the American Oriental Society
<i>JJS</i>	Journal of Jewish Studies
<i>JQR</i>	Jewish Quarterly Review
<i>JSJ</i>	Journal for the Study of Judaism
<i>JSS</i>	Journal of Semitic Studies
<i>KS</i>	Kiryat Sefer
<i>MGWJ</i>	Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums
<i>PAAJR</i>	Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research
<i>REJ</i>	Revue des Études Juives
<i>RHR</i>	Revue de l'Histoire des Religions
<i>TSAJ</i>	Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum
<i>WUNT</i>	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZAW</i>	Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>ZRGG</i>	Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte

### Other abbreviations

CA	componential analysis
MS	manuscript
MSS	manuscripts

The articles and books mentioned in this study are given in full the first time they are cited. Afterwards they are referred to according to the abbreviations to be found in the bibliography (in brackets).

### *Signs*

#### In the componential analysis

[ ]	The components in these brackets belong together. These brackets are used when the term under consideration consists of more than one lexeme.
-----	---

( )	The components in these brackets are subordinated to a component outside the brackets.
{ }	Optional component
:	The component following this sign is a specification of the component preceding this sign.
-	The opposite of the component mentioned here applies.
±	The term is neutral as to this component.

**In the translation**

[ ]	Addition when something is missing from the Hebrew text.
( )	Addition needed for the translation.
(?)	Uncertain whether the preceding text is correct.

*Transcription*

It was decided to use a broad transcription of the Hebrew. Except in some names כ and נ are transcribed by ' and ' , respectively, ב by b, כ by k and kh, פ by p and ph, צ by z and צ by sh. Diacritical signs have not been used.



## Chapter 1

# Introduction

### 1. General introduction

Early Jewish mysticism, also called Merkabah mysticism after the throne-vision of Ezekiel as described in Ez. 1,<sup>1</sup> has been the object of study since the nineteenth century. In the early days Merkabah mysticism was viewed in a very negative light, because its ideas were not in line with the rationalistic ideas of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. This negative perspective gave way to the more positive views of Gershom Scholem in the 1940s, whose work still forms the cornerstone for contemporary research.

#### 1.1 Texts

The literary basis for the study of Merkabah mysticism is the so-called Hekhalot literature. This body of literature, written in Hebrew and Aramaic, derives its name from the heavenly palaces (*hekhalot*), through which the traveller has to pass before he is able to reach the goal of his journey to heaven, the *merkabah* (God's throne and its environment) which is found in the seventh palace. It is still an open question which texts belong to Hekhalot literature in the narrow sense and which only to its periphery. In any case the following texts are usually considered part of Hekhalot literature proper: Hekhalot Rabbati, Hekhalot Zutrat, Ma'aseh Merkabah, Merkabah Rabbah, 3 Enoch or Sefer Hekhalot, and the material found in Genizah fragment T.-S. K 21.95.C.<sup>2</sup> Gershom Scholem still considered Re'uyot Yehezqel to belong to Hekhalot literature proper, but it is generally accepted now that this is not so.<sup>3</sup> More difficult cases are Masekhet

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<sup>1</sup> The term *merkabah* does not occur in the vision of Ezekiel itself, but the term (*ma'aseh merkabah*) has been used in rabbinic literature to denote Ez. 1. The speculation on Ez. 1 is restricted. Compare e.g. MHag. 2:1.

<sup>2</sup> Hekhalot Rabbati (HR), Hekhalot Zutrat (HZ), Ma'aseh Merkabah (MM), Merkabah Rabbah (MR) and 3 Enoch are to be found in the edition of P. Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen 1981). For earlier editions see *Synopse*, pp. vii. The fragment from the Genizah is edited by I. Gruenwald, "New Passages from Hekhalot Literature", in: *Tarbiz* 38 (1969), pp. 354–372. It is also found in Schäfer's *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen 1984), pp. 97–111.

<sup>3</sup> In his *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York 1965<sup>2</sup>), p. 5, but compare I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden, Köln 1980), p. 134: "it (Re'uyot Yehezqel, A.K.) is not a *Hekhalot* text in the strict sense of the term ... In fact

Hekhalot, of which it is hard to say whether it can be considered part of or only related to Hekhalot literature<sup>4</sup> and Shi'ur Qomah, a tradition which seems to be even more fluid than the rest of Hekhalot literature.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 Contents

Hekhalot literature is broadly speaking made up of various subject matters. There are journeys to heaven ostensibly made by R. Yishmael and R. Aqiba during their lifetime, which are sometimes called a *yeridah*, literally 'descent'.<sup>6</sup> After having travelled through six heavenly palaces the travellers reach the seventh palace in which the goal of the journey is found, namely the *merkabah* where God is seated upon his throne. Sometimes they have a vision at this stage and they praise God. Then they return to earth where they are able to inform people of their experience. Not all heavenly journeys in Hekhalot literature are called a *yeridah*, however. Neither do all instances of heavenly journeys contain details concerning the journey itself. This is for instance the case with the journey of Moses, which does not lead to a vision, but to the acquisition, among other things of the Torah. A special case is the heavenly journey made by Enoch. He is taken up to heaven where he is transformed into the angel Metatron. Unlike the other human beings travelling to heaven, Enoch does not return to earth, but he stays in heaven where, in his capacity as a high-ranking angel, he is able to offer help to human beings when they arrive in heaven.

Apart from material dealing with heavenly journeys there is also an anthropomorphic description of various parts of God's body (*qomah*). The measurements (*shi'ur*) and the secret names of those parts are provided as well.

Another subject matter in Hekhalot literature that deserves mention here is the idea of a mortal able to adjure the Prince of the Torah (Sar ha-Torah) to make him reveal the knowledge of the written and oral Torah. In this way the adjurer

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*Re'uyot Yehezkel* is a mystical midrash on the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel." The text is not found in the *Synopse*, but it is edited by I. Gruenwald, "Visions of Ezekiel", in: *Temirin* 1 (1972), pp. 101–139.

<sup>4</sup> P. Schäfer, *Der verborgene und offenbare Gott* (Tübingen 1991), p. 7. Masekhet Hekhalot (MH) is not edited in the *Synopse*. It is found in A. Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash. Sammlung kleiner Midraschim ...* (Jerusalem 1967<sup>3</sup>), vol. 2, pp. 40–47 and in S.A. Wertheimer, *Batei Midrashot. Twenty Five Midrashim Published for the First Time ...* (Jerusalem 1968<sup>2</sup>), vol. 1, pp. 55–62. A new edition of MH, prepared by K. Herrmann, is forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> Compare the remarks made in *Synopse*, p. vii. The material is found in the *Synopse*, but it is also edited by M.S. Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions* (Tübingen 1985), who even proposes an 'Urtext' of Shi'ur Qomah. See, however, the reaction of P. Schäfer, "Shi'ur Qomah: Rezensionen und Urtext", in his *Hekhalot-Studien* (Tübingen 1988), pp. 75–83 and of K. Herrmann, "Text und Fiktion. Zur Textüberlieferung des Shi'ur Qomah", in: *FJB* 16 (1988), pp. 89–142.

<sup>6</sup> The term *yeridah* in its narrow sense is used for the outward journey, but it has been extended in meaning to the journey as a whole.

gains an instantaneous and lasting knowledge of the Torah without having to work for it.

### 1.3 Dating and provenance

The dating of the texts of Hekhalot literature, not to mention the literature as a whole, is of little use because of the fluidity of the texts.<sup>7</sup> It would be more useful to shift the problem of dating to the traditions contained in the texts. Scholem took the central ideas to be at least as early as the third century C.E., if not earlier,<sup>8</sup> but the evidence for this is scanty. The first real evidence for the existence of Hekhalot texts stems from the fragments found in the Genizah of the synagogue of Cairo, the earliest of which may date from before the ninth century.<sup>9</sup> In any case a little later, in the tenth century, Hekhalot material was known, since it is mentioned by some Karaites and by Sa'adya, Sherira and Hai Gaon.<sup>10</sup>

As to the localisation of Hekhalot material, the earliest real evidence is from Egypt (Genizah fragment), although the magical parts in Hekhalot literature seem rather to point to Babylonia. Palestine is often mentioned as the cradle of Hekhalot material, but there is little evidence in favour of this localisation.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. *The yeridah*

The *yeridah* has been discussed many times. The following is a summary of the most important views concerning this component of Hekhalot literature.

Scholem was the first to deal extensively with the *yeridah*. Scattered throughout his lecture on Merkabah mysticism and Jewish gnosticism in his *Major Trends*<sup>12</sup> he describes his views on this heavenly journey. He considers Hekhalot literature to be a reflection of a supposed mystical movement which had started in Palestine<sup>13</sup> around the turn of the first century C.E. with a group of pupils of R. Yohanan ben Zakkai. The ideas expressed by this mystically-oriented esoteric circle continued to arouse interest for some time. Hekhalot literature, according to Scholem, contains remnants from the time the mystical group was still active – when they still had their mystic experiences – moreover we also encounter elements from when this mysticism was no longer practised and had degenerated

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<sup>7</sup> See for this problem chapter 2, pp. 24f.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance his *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala* (Berlin 1962), p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Fragment T.-S. K 21.95.S. See *Geniza-Fragmente*, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> For details concerning the evidence to be used for dating see P. Schäfer, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur*, vol. II, §§ 81–334 (Tübingen 1987), pp. xxff.

<sup>11</sup> For details concerning the problems of localisation see Schäfer's *Übersetzung II*, pp. xxiiif.

<sup>12</sup> *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York 1961<sup>3</sup>), lecture 2, pp. 40–79.

<sup>13</sup> Although he also recognized Babylonian influences in Hekhalot literature.



into a mere literary phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> Scholem assumes the existence of a mystical group with a select character within mainstream orthodox Judaism, accepting both written and oral Torah. In rabbinic literature he identifies references to the existence of an esoteric doctrine, as well as indications of the practices of this mystical group. To be admitted to the group a candidate needed to prove a certain proficiency in knowledge as well as the attainment of certain moral requisites; physical criteria of a physiognomic and chiromantic nature were also deemed important. These requisites were essential for a person to be worthy for the journey. Having become a member of the group the mystic would have to perform various ascetic preparations for the journey. During the journey "...the soul requires a pass in order to be able to continue its journey without danger: a magic seal made of a secret name which puts the demons and hostile angels to flight."<sup>15</sup> For every stage of the journey a different seal must be shown to the doorkeepers of the palaces. According to Scholem these seals have a twin function, serving as a magic weapon and as protective armour. If the mystic is worthy he can overcome the ever-increasing dangers of the journey. Scholem cites as an example of these dangers the story of the four who enter *pardes* (paradise) and arrive at marble stones which they may mistake for water. The traveller is punished if he makes this mistake. The dangers reach their climax in the final stages of the journey, the passage through the sixth and seventh gates. For Scholem the end of the journey is when the mystic finally arrives at the throne to witness God enthroned, as described by Ezekiel. For a moment he is transformed into a fiery angel, like Enoch, who was taken up to heaven and was (permanently) transformed into the angel Metatron. Scholem considers this transformation to be dangerous, as the mystic may be devoured by fire. Having arrived at the throne, the mystic would be able to see and hear, but "the infinite gulf between the soul and God the King on His throne is not even bridged at the climax of mystical ecstasy."<sup>16</sup> After having glimpsed God's majesty the mystic would burst into hymns of praise for God, in an ecstatic attempt to express the magnificence of the vision.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Therefore the references to the mystics mentioned in Hekhalot literature, mostly R. Yishmael and R. Aqiba, have to be considered as pseudepigraphic. See *Major Trends*, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> *Major Trends*, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> *Major Trends*, p. 55.

<sup>17</sup> Compare the remarks Bloch made on the character of these hymns. "Die *ורדֵי מרכבה*, die Mystiker der Gaonenzeit, und ihr Einfluss auf die Liturgie", in: *MGWJ* 37 (New Series 1), (1893), p. 259: "Die Verherrlichung Gottes geschieht nicht etwa nach Art des Psalmisten, der entweder die Wunderwerke der Schöpfung schildert, um aus ihnen die Grösse und Ehre des Schöpfers erkennen zu lassen, oder die Gnadenführungen in der Stammesgeschichte Israëls hervorhebt, um die Güte und Weisheit der Vorsehung in ein helles Licht zu stellen, sondern durch *directe Lobesworte*, welche in einer Weise gehäuft werden, als wolle man sich davor hüten einen der gebührenden Ehrentitel zu vergessen."

Many elements from this description of the *yeridah* later became the subject of discussion. One of them concerns the goal of the *yeridah*. A vision, of the *merkabah* or of the King in his beauty, is mentioned a number of times in this respect.<sup>18</sup> The problems of this vision are also discussed. Thus Gruenwald states:

“despite the daring modes of expression one can find in that literature about the contents of the mystical experience, the possibility of a direct visual encounter with God is generally ruled out. The mystics whose experiences are described in the *Hekhalot* literature, expect to see ‘the King in (all) His beauty’, but when it comes to a face to face meeting with God, one repeatedly hears of what is and should be done in order to avoid the experience.”<sup>19</sup>

This statement led Chernus to an examination of the possibility of seeing God in *Hekhalot* literature. He concludes that the attitude towards this possibility is ambiguous, and that this ambiguity reflects the danger involved in the vision. Thus it is after all possible to see God in *Hekhalot* literature, but one has to be very careful. Hence the stress on the avoidance of a direct vision, which is also reflected in the stress on the danger of such a vision found in rabbinic literature.<sup>20</sup> Elior remarks that the traveller has set out to see God, but what he actually sees is the *merkabah* rather than God himself.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere she remarks that the goal of the journey is to become a heavenly creature, like Metatron, if only for an instant.<sup>22</sup> It is not clear whether she perceives any relation between these two ideas. Himmelfarb notes various endings for heavenly journeys. She states:

“there is a striking difference between the goals of ascent in *Hekhalot Zutrati* and *Hekhalot Rabbati*. In *Hekhalot Zutrati*, the instructions for ascent culminate in the proper words to use in asking for what Halperin calls ‘a blank check signed with all of God’s names.’ In *Hekhalot Rabbati* there are two conclusions to the descent, probably as the result of a combination of sources. In the first, the keepers of the gate of the seventh palace lead the mystic to a place among the *cherubim*, *ofanim*, and holy creatures before the throne of glory ...

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<sup>18</sup> The idea of a vision of the King in his beauty is derived from Isa. 33:17 (your eyes will see the king in his beauty ...). The translations of the Hebrew Bible are taken from the Revised Standard Version unless this translation does not suit the specific use in *Hekhalot* literature. Compare for the visionary goal M. Himmelfarb, “Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the *Hekhalot* Literature”, in: *HUCA* 59 (1988), p. 74 (although later in the same article she differentiates between various endings of the heavenly journey); R. Elior, “The Concept of God in *Hekhalot* Mysticism”, [in Hebrew], in: J. Dan (ed.), *Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism. Early Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem 1987), p. 28. Earlier in the same article she mentions another goal of the journey. Everyone who is of the opinion that Shi’ur Qomah is the goal of the heavenly journey of course also considers a vision to be the goal. The King in his beauty is then the same one as whose *qomah* is referred to.

<sup>19</sup> *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, p. 94. However, in his “‘Knowledge’ and ‘Vision’: Towards a Clarification of Two ‘Gnostic’ Concepts in Light of their Alleged Origins”, in his *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism. Studies in Apocalypticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism* (Frankfurt am Main 1988), pp. 108ff. he does seem to consider the vision the object of the heavenly journey.

<sup>20</sup> I. Chernus, “Visions of God in Merkavah Mysticism”, in: *JSJ* 13 (1982), pp. 123–147.

<sup>21</sup> “Concept of God”, pp. 37ff.

<sup>22</sup> “Concept of God”, pp. 20, 23.

[In] the second conclusion ... the mystic is again brought before the throne of glory, and here he begins to sing the song of the throne."<sup>23</sup>

The element of a vision has often been connected with a liturgical element: after the traveller has had his vision (the contents of which are not described in Hekhalot literature) he bursts into song: he participates in the heavenly liturgy.<sup>24</sup>

The transcendence of God, so strongly stressed by Scholem, was taken up by Alexander.<sup>25</sup> Goldberg, however, points out that God is quite far away in Hekhalot literature, but that does not prevent the traveller coming near him.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, as Schäfer shows, not only is it possible for humans to reach God, but God desires their coming as well.<sup>27</sup>

The means needed for the journey to heaven are not uniform in Hekhalot literature: the traveller requires songs which function as a kind of open sesame, and magic seals, ladders and wagons are also mentioned.<sup>28</sup>

The question for whom Hekhalot literature is meant is another point on which opinions differ. Whereas Halperin is emphatic in his statement that it is intended for the masses, we find in Elior's work that it is meant for the elite.<sup>29</sup> Gruenwald takes a middle road when he says that there is not much in Hekhalot literature which can be viewed as esoteric. The passages in Hekhalot literature which form an encouragement to pass on the knowledge can be explained by not referring them to the whole of Israel, but to a select group.<sup>30</sup> Chernus comments that

<sup>23</sup> "Heavenly Ascent", p. 85.

<sup>24</sup> Compare A. Altmann, "Kedushah Hymns in the Earliest Hechaloth Literature (From an Oxford Manuscript)", [in Hebrew], in: *Melilah*, Vol. II (Manchester 1945/'46), p. 2; A. Goldberg, "Einige Bemerkungen zu den Quellen und den redaktionellen Einheiten der grossen Hekhalot", in: *FJB* 1 (1973), pp. 46ff.; K.-E. Grözinger, "Singen und ekstatische Sprache in der frühen jüdischen Mystik", in: *JSJ* 11 (1980), pp. 67ff.; I. Chernus, "The Pilgrimage to the Merkavah: An Interpretation of Early Jewish Mysticism", in: J. Dan (ed.), *Proceedings ...*, p. 21; P. Schäfer, "The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism", in his *Hekhalot-Studien*, p. 286. See also Schäfer's *Der verborgene und offenbare Gott*, pp. 45–48, 138.

<sup>25</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 54f.; P. S. Alexander, "The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch", in: *JJS* 28 (1977), pp. 174f.

<sup>26</sup> "Bemerkungen", pp. 47ff.

<sup>27</sup> "Early Jewish Mysticism", pp. 288f. See also his *Der verborgene und offenbare Gott*, pp. 40f. and p. 138.

<sup>28</sup> Compare Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, pp. 120f. Songs are also mentioned by Grözinger, "Singen und ekstatische Sprache", p. 74 and Altmann, "Kedushah Hymns", p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Elior: "Concept of God", p. 14; Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot. Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Tübingen 1988), pp. 385ff. Halperin comes to a view that Hekhalot literature as a whole is meant for the masses because he connects the heavenly journey to the Satorah. The latter is sometimes explicitly meant for the masses. He considers the idea of Hekhalot literature being esoteric to stem from a false connection with MHag. 2:1 ('*arayot* may not be expounded by three; nor *ma'aseh bereshit* by two, nor *merkavah* by an individual, unless he is a scholar and understands on his own). He already shows that such passages in rabbinic literature should not be connected with the material found in Hekhalot literature in his *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven 1980).

<sup>30</sup> *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, pp. 122, 157.

Gruenwald's view suits HR well, as HR stresses the idea of the select group as well as Israel as a whole (see below).

The aspect of individuality against community has been examined in detail by Chernus.<sup>31</sup> He does not answer this question for Hekhalot literature as a whole, but he distinguishes between opposing tendencies. Thus the communal aspect is most noticeable in HR, whereas in MM the individual position comes especially to the fore.<sup>32</sup> The other texts can be placed somewhere in between these two extremes.

Despite this variety in elements and conflicting tendencies within Hekhalot literature, the nature of Hekhalot literature is seen generally as consisting of technical guides, or manuals for mystics.<sup>33</sup>

### 3. The *yeridah* in the present study

Although the importance of the *yeridah* has been recognized since the very beginning of the study of the Hekhalot literature no systematic study of the *yeridah* has been undertaken before. It is this that I propose to undertake here. I will provide an inventory and an analysis of the passages dealing with the heavenly journey which will form the basis for an attempt to answer the following questions:

(1) what is the extent of the *yeridah* in Hekhalot literature? In other words, how much material does the *yeridah* encompass in comparison with Hekhalot literature as a whole?

(2) what is the function of the *yeridah* in Hekhalot literature as a whole, compared to other components such as Sar-Torah? Is the *yeridah* an autonomous subject, or is there mutual influence between the various subject matters in Hekhalot literature?

(3) what is the nature of the *yeridah*, in view of the manifold interpretations which have up to now been provided?

The examination will be as text immanent as possible, since on the one hand much comparative work has already been done,<sup>34</sup> and on the other hand I consid-

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<sup>31</sup> I. Chernus, "Individual and Community in the Redaction of the Hekhalot Literature", in: *HUCA* 52 (1981), pp. 253–274.

<sup>32</sup> One can divide between three entities: the individual, the group (*haburah*) to which the travellers belong, and the community of Israel as a whole. In HR both group and community are important.

<sup>33</sup> Compare e.g. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, p. 99; Himmelfarb, "Heavenly Ascent", p. 100.

<sup>34</sup> The relation with apocalypticism and gnosticism by Gruenwald in his *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* and his *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*; with rabbinic literature by D. J. Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature* and by I. Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism. Studies in the History of Midrash* (Berlin/New York 1982); with the Qumran material by L. H. Schiffman, "Merkavah Speculation at Qumran: The 4Q Serekh Shirot 'Olat ha-Shab-

er a systematic examination of the sources to be a prerequisite for a comparative examination. That means that I consider comparative research in itself important, but best done on the basis of the material in the sources as we know them at present. Even in the analysis of the material itself, however, I do not intend to deal with the background of the *yeridah* – not because the traditions in Hekhalot literature would have come into being in isolation, i.e. uninfluenced by their environment, but because using traditions from outside Hekhalot literature for an interpretation of the *yeridah* would involve speculation of a historical nature which would in my opinion detract from the usefulness of the analysis of the *yeridah* as a basis for further research. Therefore I will not refer to passages outside Hekhalot literature, unless a given passage does not seem to form an intrinsic part of Hekhalot literature either, while a direct source from outside Hekhalot literature suggests itself. In other words, I will only refer to a passage outside Hekhalot literature if it is likely to have formed the source of an interpolation into Hekhalot literature.

Before being able to list and analyse the passages dealing with a *yeridah* some problems of Hekhalot literature must be noted. Firstly there are redactional problems which are reflected in the fragmentary character of the Hekhalot material. Gruenwald does not consider this to be a very serious problem in the examination of the contents of Hekhalot literature, because the fragmentary character has not been caused by medieval redactors, but it

“may as well reflect the initial state of that material. It had a fragmentary character which, because of inner similarities, was likely to be broken up and rearranged already in the earlier stages of the textual transmission...In short, the *Hekhalot* literature may be viewed as possessing more documentary value than Schäfer trusts it to have.”<sup>35</sup>

Chernus on the other hand states:

“it seems essential that we understand the role of the redactors in the formation of these texts, for it is surely possible that the individual fragments took on substantially different meanings when placed in their present contexts by the redactors.”<sup>36</sup>

His conclusion concerning the individual and the community in Hekhalot literature is as follows:

“...our survey of the redaction of the Hekhalot texts suggests the likelihood that the redactors of Hekhalot Rabbati and Ma’aseh Merkavah had strikingly different views on the significance of the community in the activities of the individual mystic. Yet each could draw on fundamentally the same pool of material to express his own views. The important con-

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bat”, in: J. Reinharz and D. Swetschinski (eds.), *Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians* (Durham 1982), pp. 15–47 and his “Hekhalot Mysticism and the Qumran Literature” [in Hebrew], in: J. Dan (ed.) *Proceedings ...*, pp. 121–138.

<sup>35</sup> “Literary and Redactional Issues in the Study of the Hekhalot Literature” in his *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, pp. 180f.

<sup>36</sup> Community”, p. 254.

clusion to be drawn from this observation is that the sources available to the redactors did not in themselves dictate any particular attitude toward this problem of individual and community."<sup>37</sup>

Whereas Gruenwald stresses the inner similarities of the sources, this being the reason for their rearrangement, Chernus stresses the changes in meaning which the sources take on after they have been rearranged and placed in a new literary context. Chernus thereby touches upon a problem concerning the interpretation of a certain theme. One should distinguish between the material before and after it has been placed in its present context.

Another problem caused by the fragmentary character of Hekhalot literature<sup>38</sup> is the tendency to connect traditions where no intrinsic connection seems to exist. An example is the connection of Shi'ur Qomah and the vision at the end of the heavenly journey, which is at the most a redactional one and which is restricted to a single instance in HZ. This suggests that one should not consider it to be the goal of the heavenly journey.<sup>39</sup> Halperin discusses this problem with reference to the distinction of the heavenly ascension and the adjuration of the angels. Whereas Schäfer distinguishes between these two kinds of material and considers them originally independent, Halperin perceives a connection "that will finally explain the function and motivations of the heavenly journey".<sup>40</sup> He finds this motivation in HZ, where

"we are dealing with something considerably more (or less) than the peak of a mystical experience. The traveller's motive for wanting to sit in God's lap is far more concrete than pure yearning for the divinity. And, once we grant that the trance-journey functions as a means to an unspecified but presumably practical end ('to do such and such' really means 'fill in the blank'), we may raise the question if it is essential actually to make the journey. Can the individual use the names of the seven seals to invoke God, as he does here, without believing that he has used them actually to pass through the seven palaces? Can he speak the powerful prayer *as if* he is sitting on God's lap?"<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> "Individual and Community", p. 265.

<sup>38</sup> The fragmentary character of Hekhalot literature has a.o. been recognized by Schäfer, "Early Jewish Mysticism", in: *Hekhalot-Studien*, p. 279; by Halperin, *Faces*, p. 367, and by Gruenwald, "Literary and Redactional Issues", pp. 180f. See also J. Dan "היכלות נשויים", in: *Tarbiz* 56 (1987), pp. 433–437.

<sup>39</sup> This connection is made by S. Leiter, "Worthiness, Acclamation, and Appointment: Some Rabbinic Terms", in: *PAAJR* 41–42 (1973, '74), p. 148 and J. Dan, "The Chambers of the Chariot" [in Hebrew], in: *Tarbiz* 47 (1978), p. 52 and in his *Three Types of Ancient Jewish Mysticism*. The Seventh Annual Rabbi Louis Feinberg Memorial Lecture in Judaic Studies, Judaic Studies Program (Cincinnati 1984), p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> See for Schäfer's position his "Engel und Menschen in der Hekhalot-Literatur", in his *Hekhalot-Studien*, p. 261. Although there are common elements between these two complexes in Hekhalot literature, they are *originally* unconnected. For Halperin's position see his *Faces*, p. 372.

<sup>41</sup> *Faces*, pp. 372ff. (he mentions more parallels). I adhere to Schäfer's view that these two traditions are originally unconnected. In my opinion the connection Halperin perceives here is redactional. The passage will be dealt with in chapter 4B, 3.18.2 below.

Halperin concludes: "heavenly ascension, then, is both a precondition and a metaphor for the acquisition of Torah, and with it the status and power that the believer craves."<sup>42</sup> He does not note, however, that we are dealing with a secondary connection of two separate sources, which is restricted to the one instance in HZ.<sup>43</sup> Another connection is sometimes perceived between the *yeridah* and the story of the four entering the *pardes*. The background of this connection is found in the versions containing a test which takes place in the sixth heavenly palace. These versions are found in bHag. 14b and in the story in HZ and MR in the MS New York JTS 8128 version (§§ 344, 345, 671, 672). Scholem considered the *pardes* story to be a heavenly journey, but it has now been established that the grounds for such a connection are based upon the secondary insertion of the test into the story. Thus one cannot exclude the possibility that the story might originally have meant something altogether different. I will not go into details here, but I would like to point to another problem in this respect, namely the use of MS N8128, which has a distinct redactional identity in which various traditions are secondarily connected.<sup>44</sup> This means that one has to be very careful with the use of this manuscript.

The problems caused by the fragmentary character of Hekhalot literature resulting from the connection of various sources can at least be partly overcome by taking as a starting point the technical terminology from which the *yeridah* derives its name, the use of the verb *yarad*, 'to descend' for ascending to heaven.<sup>45</sup> One may assume that the *yeridah* has certain characteristic elements, which can be established from those passages containing the technical terminology. By taking the technical terminology of the *yeridah* as a starting point one should also

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<sup>42</sup> *Faces*, p. 441. Halperin stresses the acquisition of the Torah, because he does not understand the reason for the vision at the end of the heavenly journey. "... the traveller wants 'to look at the king and at his beauty.' But this reply is not very satisfying, because it goes on to provoke the question of why anyone should want to do *that*. The *Hekhalot* do not represent the divine vision as inherently pleasurable or sustaining." (*Faces*, p. 370).

<sup>43</sup> The passage will be dealt with in chapter 4B, 3.18.2.

<sup>44</sup> This distinct redactional identity of N8128 has been commented upon by K. Herrmann and C. Rohrbacher-Sticker, "Magische Traditionen der New Yorker *Hekhalot*-Handschrift JTS 8128 im Kontext ihrer Gesamtedaktion", pp. 143ff. Halperin, *Faces*, p. 373, footnote 10, remarks upon the problem of taking N8128 as the basis of one's research as well, but nevertheless prefers the version of N8128 of § 410 over the version of the other manuscripts. However, N8128's version contains a clear redactional cross-reference to the *pardes* story. See *Faces*, p. 201 and endnote g on p. 533.

<sup>45</sup> The technical terminology of the *yeridah* was already commented upon in 19th-century research. I think Bloch was the first to recognize its special use. See his "Die מרכבה", pp. 22ff. Since then many suggestions concerning its provenance have been offered. For an overview of the most important suggestions see my "Once again: *yarad* in Hekhalot Literature", in: *FJB* 18 (1990), pp. 45ff. The suggestions made by E. R. Wolfson, "*Yeridah la-Merkavah*: Typology of Ecstasy and Enthronement in Ancient Jewish Mysticism", in: R. A. Herrera (ed.), *Mystics of the Book. Themes, Topics, and Typologies* (New York, 1993), pp. 13–44 are discussed in chapter 5.

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