

Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum

16

David Halperin

# The Faces of the Chariot



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Martin Hengel und Peter Schäfer

16



# The Faces of the Chariot

Early Jewish Responses to  
Ezekiel's Vision

by

David J. Halperin



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To my Rose  
whom I love so very much



## Preface

This book has been a long time growing. The seed was first sown one spring afternoon in 1967, in a conversation I had with my teacher and undergraduate advisor at Cornell University, Isaac Rabinowitz. We had been discussing a theory advanced by an article in the campus newspaper, that a tragic recent incident of fire had been the result of a deranged arsonist's brooding on the fiery vision described in the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel. Rabinowitz pointed out that, if the writer's theory were indeed correct, the arsonist would have to have considerably misinterpreted the text of Ezekiel. I agreed, but remarked that such a false exegesis of Ezekiel, and its effect on the person who so interpreted it, would itself interest me. "Halperin," he said, "I'll study the true exegeses of Ezekiel; you study the false ones." Thus began *The Faces of the Chariot*.

I have stayed more or less faithful to this division of labor. I have not been altogether indifferent to the question of what Ezekiel meant when he described his vision of the *merkabah* ("chariot"), as the rabbis were later to call it. But Ezekiel's real intentions have interested me far less than the question of why certain rabbis, living anywhere from seven to eleven centuries afterward, reacted to it with a peculiar mixture of excitement and fear; or why the authors of bizarre texts called the *Hekhalot* seem to have been bent on re-experiencing the *merkabah* vision, apparently in the context of a heavenly ascent. All of these people must have had their understandings of what Ezekiel was trying to say, which may or may not have been accurate in terms of the prophet's own intentions.

What these understandings were, and why they had the powerful effects they did on those who held them, seems to me a problem of the greatest interest and importance. It touches on many diverse issues relating to the history, psychology, and even philosophy of religion. These include the role of Scripture in a Scripture-following community; the roots and meaning of religious dread; the significance of ecstatic experience, or of the belief in the possibility of ecstatic experience; and, as we will see, the problem of evil and its relation to the divine.

I assume, therefore, that others beside scholars of Judaica may want to read this book; and I have tried to write it so that my arguments will be accessible to them. I do not pretend that what follows is a "popular" book. But Samuel Sandmel once distinguished "popular" writings from "non-



technical” ones [73a]<sup>1</sup>, and I think I can reasonably claim this book for the latter category. I assume no knowledge of Hebrew or any other foreign language on the reader’s part, avoid the use of terms from other languages (and technical terms in general) wherever I can, and fully explain such terms wherever I cannot avoid them. I do not assume any but the most general knowledge of Jewish or world history, or of the teachings of Judaism or any other religion. Although the body of the book presupposes a certain basic acquaintance with the rabbinic literature, readers lacking this acquaintance can make up for it by reading Appendix I, “Orientation to Rabbinic Sources.” My arguments are usually detailed and often intricate. But I have tried to write so that the non-specialist can, with a certain amount of patience, follow their intricacies.

As much as possible, I have tried to lay out my arguments fully and clearly in the body of the text, with the least possible use of footnotes and the allusive reasoning characteristic of footnotes. The footnotes I do include (marked with raised numbers, and printed at the bottom of the page) are often intended to provide bits of clarifying background for non-specialists. Otherwise, they are parenthetical remarks that I judge indispensable.

In addition to footnotes, I have made use of endnotes. These are marked with raised letters, and gathered at the end of the book. They contain technical discussions, often on matters of text and translation, which I judge useful only for specialists. (Occasionally I use them to offer suggestions which I do not want to omit altogether, but which I do not consider necessary to include on the same page as the text.) The specialist may turn to the endnotes to discover why I have preferred this or that reading of a difficult text, this or that rendering of a puzzling word. The non-specialist may ignore them without loss.

For the purpose of citing secondary sources, and editions of primary sources, I have used neither footnotes *nor* endnotes. Instead, I have followed the practice recommended in Mary-Claire van Leunen’s *Handbook for Scholars* [860], of attaching to the end of the book a reference list (replacing, and to a great extent corresponding to, the bibliography that would normally be found in a book of this sort), its items numbered sequentially. These “items” include not only the books and articles I cite, but, where appropriate, individual pages and clusters of pages. A bracketed number in the text directs the reader to the appropriate item in the reference list. Thus, by looking up “860” in the reference list, the reader will find bibliographical information for *Handbook for Scholars*; and, by looking up “73a,” information on where to find the remarks of Sandmel cited above. I deviate from van Leunen’s method in one important particular,

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1 I will presently explain the meaning of the bracketed number.

that I find it essential to pinpoint within the text the pages of modern editions of primary sources. Thus, for example, my citation (at the beginning of chapter VII) of “*Gen. R.* 27:1” is followed by “(ed. 255–256 [188]).” This means that the passage is to be found on pages 255–256 of the standard modern edition of midrash *Genesis Rabbah*; which, as the reader will discover by looking up “188” in the reference list, is the edition of Theodor and Albeck.

As I have said, Isaac Rabinowitz first inspired me with the idea for this study in the spring of 1967. I was able to pursue various aspects of it in courses I took at Cornell with Rabinowitz (1969), and at the University of California at Berkeley with David Winston, Mordechai A. Friedman, and Hamid Algar (1971–73). Much of the material contained in chapters I–VIII originally formed part of an early draft of my Ph.D. dissertation, which I wrote in Jerusalem in 1975. I later expanded, under the guidance of Baruch M. Bokser, a portion of this draft into my actual Ph.D. dissertation, which I submitted to Berkeley in 1977 and published (under the title *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* [552]) in 1980. I wrote this book, in its present form, in 1981–84.

These last years have seen a remarkable blossoming of studies on the *merkabah* and the *Hekhalot*. Before 1980, Gershom Scholem stood practically alone, a solitary pioneer exploring these strange and alien realms [589,605]. In 1980, Ithamar Gruenwald’s *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* appeared [535]; in 1982, Ira Chernus’s *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism* [512]; in these years, a string of important articles by Yosef Dan [517,518,520,521,522] and Peter Schäfer [579,580,582a,583,586]. Schäfer’s synoptic publication of seven *Hekhalot* manuscripts under the title *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, which appeared late in 1981, made these texts fully accessible to scholars for the first time [495]. I am convinced that it is the single most important work on the *Hekhalot* ever to appear, and that future historians of the scholarship on the *Hekhalot* will speak of “pre-Synopse” and “post-Synopse” eras. Chapter IX, and many other parts of this book, could not have been written without it<sup>2</sup>.

I owe an enormous debt to all of these researchers, and particularly Schäfer. That I have been deeply influenced by Scholem’s writings, even where I disagree with them, goes almost without saying; it is hard to imagine anyone in the second part of the twentieth century writing on any subject remotely connected with Jewish mysticism without being under Scholem’s influence. But I must acknowledge another influence that does

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<sup>2</sup> I received Schäfer’s sequel to the *Synopse*, *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* [494a], too late to take account of it in this book.

not belong to the realm of Judaic studies, narrowly defined. This is the work of Sigmund Freud, and particularly his *Interpretation of Dreams*, which I read with excitement and wonder at a particularly crucial stage of the writing of this book. Only seldom have I offered suggestions that are what most of us are accustomed to think of as “Freudian”; that is, having to do with sex. But anyone who has read Freud will appreciate how much his genius has shaped my approach to the problems with which I deal.

I cannot possibly list here all those people who helped me at various stages of my eighteen-year research. My special appreciation goes to the teachers whom I have mentioned, who started me off on it; and, particularly, to Baruch Bokser, who carefully read and meticulously annotated my 1975 draft. Among those teachers who inspired and helped me in Israel were Moshe Greenberg, M. J. Kister, Yaakov Zussman, Moshe Herr, and Joseph Dan. All of these men took time from their crowded schedules to listen to my ideas and read drafts of my work, and to give me sound advice and warm encouragement. Of my fellow-students and fellow-researchers, I must single out Marc Bregman, whose conversation (mostly over coffee in the Hebrew University cafeteria) taught me much of what I know about midrash; Ithamar Gruenwald, Herbert W. Basser, Peter Schäfer, and Alan F. Segal, all of whom shared with me, in person and in writing, the results of their investigations of the *merkabah* and *Hekhalot*. Ira Chernus kindly sent me a copy of several chapters of the manuscript of his book, before it was published.

Abraham Katsh, of Dropsie University, Philadelphia, allowed me in the fall of 1974 to consult pertinent Genizah manuscripts in the university's possession. His successor, David Goldenberg, sent me a photocopy of one of these manuscripts. John Strugnell allowed me to examine photographs of the Qumran materials discussed in chapter II; Michael Sokoloff discussed with me linguistic aspects of the *Visions of Ezekiel*; Thorkild Jacobsen answered my query about the “Bull of Heaven” (chapter V); and Daniel Sheerin sent me valuable material on the development of Christian exegesis of Psalm 24. In the spring of 1982, Eric Ormsby, then curator of Near East Collections at the Princeton University Library, took time to guide me through Princeton's Arabic holdings, and patiently answered my subsequent queries. My friend and colleague Gordon D. Newby (North Carolina State University, Raleigh) put his private Arabic library at my disposal; and, with great patience, helped me make my way to what I needed. Edmund Meltzer helped me locate translations of the Egyptian tales of Setne Khamwas, and discussed with me the significance of these documents.

“The mind,” George Orwell wrote, “will not work to any purpose when it is quite alone” [848a]. I cannot begin to state my debt to my colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina,

Chapel Hill, for having provided me with rich intellectual companionship over the past ten years. In general, they have given and continue to give me a post-doctoral education; in particular, they have listened to two presentations of ideas contained in this book, and given me valuable responses. I am proud to belong, also, to the "Society for the Culture and Religion of the Ancient Mediterranean," a society of Southeastern scholars which heard a presentation of, and helped me think through, many of the ideas I present in chapter IX. Robert C. Gregg, of Duke University, has been particularly helpful. My friendship with Gordon Newby has given me access, not only to his Arabic learning, but to the wealth of his lively and creative mind.

At one stage or another of the research and writing of this book, I have received financial assistance from the American Schools of Oriental Research, the Marsden Foundation (New York City), the National Foundation for Jewish Culture (New York City), the Mabelle McLeod Lewis Memorial Fund (Stanford, California), the University Research Council (University of North Carolina), and the Arts and Sciences Foundation (UNC). The University Research Council, the Duke-UNC Cooperative Program in Judaic Studies, the UNC College of Arts and Sciences Endowment Committee for Scholarly Publications, Artistic Exhibitions, and Performances, and the UNC Department of Religious Studies, all contributed to the cost of publication. John Van Seters, chairman of the Department of Religious Studies, has given the work sympathetic attention, and has provided me with funds for research assistance. I was fortunate to have been able to engage in this capacity my student and friend Robert B. Spencer, a talented and conscientious scholar- and teacher-to-be whose fine and diligent work lightened the load of preparing the manuscript.

To the good offices of William H. Friedman and Julie Daniel, and to the latter's skill with a word processor, I owe the manuscript itself. June Williams, Teresa Weaver, and Yuming Hu helped me check the proofs. Ms. Weaver, Carol Selkin, and my students Darcy Baird, Samuel Kaplan, Mary Pat Karmel, and Janelle Mason helped me prepare the index.

Most important of all have been the dear friends and family who cheered my life through the years of research and writing. My father, Elias W. Halperin (whose departure I now mourn), and my aunt, Sara Garb, have sustained me with encouragement and love. My father's wife, Klida McLaughlin-Halperin, has been a good friend through easy times and through hard. The Mazar family (Esther, Talli, Eilat, and Adi) made a home for me in Israel. My wife's parents, Sol and Dora Shalom, her sister Rebeca, and her brother Ralph, have given me their friendship. And I have found joy, delight, and comfort with my wife, my beloved bride Rose Shalom; who, like the *merkabah* in the time of Johanan b. Zakkai, has filled my days with rainbows.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina  
February, 1988

David J. Halperin



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## Abbreviations

- °A.Z. = °Abodah Zarah  
b. = ben; bar; ibn (“son of,” in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic, respectively)  
B.B. = Baba Batra  
Ber. = Berakhot  
B.M. = Baba Meši°a  
B.Q. = Baba Qamma  
BT = Babylonian Talmud  
°Ed. = °Eduyot  
°Er. = °Erubin  
*Gen. R., Ex. R., Lev. R., etc.*  
= *Genesis Rabbah, Exodus Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, etc.*  
Gitt. = Giṭṭin  
Hag. = Ḥagigah  
Ket. = Ketubbot  
LXX = Septuagint  
M. = Mishnah  
Meg. = Megillah  
Midd. = Middot  
M.Q. = Mo°ed Qa°an  
MT = Masoretic Text  
Naz. = Nazir  
Pes. = Pesahim  
*Pes. R. = Pesiqta Rabbati*  
PT = Palestinian Talmud  
Qidd. = Qiddushin  
R. = Rabbi  
R.H. = Rosh Hashanah  
RSV = Revised Standard Version  
Sanh. = Sanhedrin  
Shabb. = Shabbat  
Sheb. = Shebu°ot  
Sheq. = Sheqalim  
Sot. = Soṭah  
Sukk. = Sukkah  
T. = Tosefta  
Tem. = Temurah

I do not abbreviate titles of books or journals.



## Introduction

This book is about *merkabah* midrash. That is, it is about the ways in which Jews in antiquity interpreted the cryptic and bizarre vision described at the beginning of the Book of Ezekiel, which came early to be designated as the vision of the *merkabah*. (The Hebrew word means “chariot”; in this case, the chariot of God.)

Most moderns know about the *merkabah* vision only that

Ezekiel saw the wheel, 'way in the middle of the air

...

And the little wheel run by faith,

And the big wheel run by the grace of God ... [852a]

But the pertinent passages of Ezekiel describe much more than “the wheel.” Beginning with a stormy wind and a fiery cloud which approach from the north, the vision unfolds as a description of four fantastic beings, each with four different faces. Four wheels, each one like “a wheel within a wheel,” accompany these beings. A platform, like crystal, is over their heads. A human-like manifestation of the Deity sits above the platform, on a lapis-lazuli throne. All of this is set forth in the first chapter of Ezekiel. Chapter 10 repeats it, with important variations. Ezekiel 43:1–4 refers back to it.

It is not easy to make sense of these details, and still less easy to determine what the totality of the vision is supposed to convey. Generations of Bible-readers, from the ancient Jewish interpreters whose expositions we shall examine, down to space-age fantasists like Erich von Däniken [846, 848, 859], have applied themselves to the *merkabah*'s riddles.

I do not propose here to join their company. I cannot, to be sure, entirely ignore the question of what Ezekiel was talking about; and, from time to time, I will touch on the problem of the original meaning of the *merkabah* vision. But my real concern is with the Jewish interpretations themselves, and with the light they can shed, not on the text they purport to interpret, but on the religious perceptions of the culture that created them.

For early Judaism, like its sister Christianity, was a Scripture religion, and thus lived in symbiosis with the library of ancient texts that its adherents



accepted as the word of God [729c]. Within this collection the diligent inquirer could, at least in theory, discover all knowledge worth having.

“Turn it this way, turn it that way,” said one rabbi of the Torah, “everything is in it” (M. Abot 5:22, in Goldin’s translation [244a])<sup>1</sup>. Early in the third century, a Jew told the Christian scholar Origen<sup>2</sup> that the Scriptures are like a great house whose rooms are all closed, with a key beside each locked door. Only, the key does not fit the door it is placed beside, and the inquirer must know how to find the right key for the door he wants to open [668a]. The ancient Jewish study of Scripture was less a matter of interpreting a text, as we are apt to conceive this process, than of exploring a vast storehouse of sacred treasure. These explorations could vary tremendously in their sophistication. The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.–40 A.D.) made elaborate efforts to find the truths of Platonism hiding behind the stories and laws of the Pentateuch [729d]; while one rabbinic midrash pressed the language of Genesis 3:14 for details on the gestation period of snakes (*Gen. R.* 20:4; ed. 185–186 [188])<sup>3</sup>.

Normally, the explorer found in the storehouse of Scripture what he had himself brought into it, whether Platonic philosophy or (to choose an example from rabbinic Judaism) the detailed rules of Sabbath observance that had become traditional in second-century A.D. Palestine. If he interpreted two Scriptural passages in the light of each other, and thus discovered a new meaning which neither passage had in its own context – in Origen’s image, if he fit the key into the lock and opened the door – this was because he already had a predisposition to correlate precisely those two texts. And yet the interpreter’s ideas were transformed in the process of reading them into Scripture and then out again. The shape of the Bible’s language modified and redirected his intentions, at the same time that his intentions reshaped his perception of the Bible and its message. Jews in antiquity came to Scripture to learn its wisdom; they in fact recreated it in their own image. Yet this image was itself born of Scripture, and refashioned under the influence of Scripture.

This complex and paradoxical process, which I have in mind when I speak of a symbiosis of Jews (and Christians) with their Bible, will be exemplified many times in the following pages. It is near the heart of Jewish

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1 For an explanation of this reference, see Appendix I, section 1.

2 Origen was by all odds the most profound scholar and extraordinary thinker of the early church. He was born about 185, and lived and worked in Alexandria until about 232. Driven out by his bishop’s hostility, he settled in the Palestinian coastal city of Caesarea, where he remained until his death between 251 and 255 [686,700,708]. Caesarea was at that time a major center of rabbinic Judaism, and there is ample evidence that Origen had extensive contact with the local Jewish scholars – a topic to which we will return, at length, in chapter VIII [421,664].

3 See Appendix I, section 6.

religious development in antiquity. If we want to grasp the essence of any one of the multiple forms of early Judaism, we cannot avoid asking how it understood the substance of its sacred writings, and what it did with that understanding.

A community founded on Scripture may regard all parts of its Bible as equally inspired. It is unlikely to regard them all as equally interesting. A Bible-belt fundamentalist will have an interest in the prophecies of the Book of Revelation that most Catholics or Episcopalians are not likely to share. Orthodox Jews, whose sacred history finds its point of central importance in the Sinai revelation, will not be apt to share the passionate concern with the opening chapters of Genesis that has made the truth of the Creation story a political issue of the 1980's.

So in antiquity. Let us use the number of times the literature of a community quotes a passage of Scripture as a rough indicator of the importance that the community attaches to it. We find that the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah occupies a disproportionately large place in the *Biblia Patristica* (an index of Biblical quotations or allusions in the Christian literature of the first three centuries [800]), because the church saw in this chapter a particularly important prophecy of the sacrificial death of its Messiah. In the counterpart to the *Biblia Patristica* that deals with the rabbinic literature [804], the place occupied by Isaiah 53 is remarkably small, presumably for the same reason. Early Judaism, like Christianity, reshaped Scripture not only by interpreting it. It reshaped it by deciding what portions of it were worth interpreting.

This brings us back to the *merkabah*. Christians, though they might sometimes pay homage to the awesome obscurity of this vision (for example, Jerome's *Epistle 53*, to Paulinus [621]), do not seem on the whole to have found it of outstanding interest [695]. We are not well enough informed about the varieties of Judaism that flourished before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D. [729a] to judge the role it played in their perceptions. But, when we turn to the form of Judaism that became dominant after 70, the Judaism that is usually called "rabbinic" after the title ("rabbi") given to the men who shaped and directed it, we find explicit evidence that the *merkabah* aroused not only excitement, but also a nervous suspicion that often seems to cross the border into fear. Both responses are strangely, and perhaps uniquely, intense.

Consider, for example, the anonymous regulation preserved in the Mishnah, Hagigah 2:1<sup>4</sup>:

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4 See Appendix I, section 1.

The laws of forbidden sexual relations [Leviticus 18 and 20] may not be expounded by three persons, nor the account of creation [Genesis 1:1–2:3] by two, nor the *merkabah* by one, unless he is a scholar and has understood on his own. He who contemplates four things – what is above and what below, what is before and what after – would have been better off if he had never been born. He who has no concern for the honor of his creator would be better off if he had never been born.

Several details of this passage are obscure, but its thrust is unmistakable. The *merkabah* is to be treated as the most arcane of the Scriptures. Expounding it brings one dangerously close to those studies whose prosecution is an affront to the glory of God, whose devotee would be better off if he had not been born.

The *merkabah* is physically dangerous, too. Rabbi Judah the Patriarch (early third century A.D.), “had a distinguished student who expounded a segment of *ma’aseh merkabah*<sup>5</sup>. Rabbi [Judah] did not agree, and [the student] became a leper.” So, at least, the Palestinian Talmud (Hagigah 2:1, 77a). The Babylonian Talmud (Hagigah 13a)<sup>6</sup> tells an even more frightening story. “It once happened that a certain child was reading the Book of Ezekiel in his teacher’s house, and he contemplated *hashmal* [or, perhaps, “he understood what *hashmal* was”]<sup>7</sup>. Fire came forth from *hashmal* and burned him up.”

But, if expounded well, the *merkabah* could bring dramatic tokens of divine favor to the lucky expositor. A cycle of stories about the *merkabah* expositions of R. Johanan b. Zakkai’s disciples (late first century A.D.) well conveys this point. When R. Eleazar b. Arakh, for example, expounded *ma’aseh merkabah* in R. Johanan’s presence, “fire descended from heaven and surrounded them. Angels came leaping before them, like a wedding party rejoicing before a bridegroom. An angel spoke from the midst of the fire: ‘As you have expounded, Eleazar b. Arakh, thus is *ma’aseh merkabah*’ ” (PT Hagigah 2:1, 77a).

Evidently, the rabbis saw something in Ezekiel’s vision that was vitally important, yet so fearful that the ordinary person must be warned away from it. I know of no other case where the very act of studying a Biblical

5 Rabbinic sources sometimes use the phrase *ma’aseh merkabah* in place of *merkabah*, when it is treated, as here, as an object of exposition, study, or teaching. It is not clear how we are to translate the expression. The customary “work of the chariot” is vague, the alternative “account of the chariot” unlikely; “structure of the chariot” (so Ezekiel 1:16 uses the word *ma’aseh*) is possible. There seems to be some slight difference in nuance between *merkabah* and *ma’aseh merkabah*, but it is hard to say just what it is [552].

6 See Appendix I, section 3.

7 *Hashmal* is the mysterious Hebrew word, translated “gleaming bronze” in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSV), which Ezekiel uses to describe the fiery manifestation at the beginning of the *merkabah* vision (1:4), and the luminous splendor at its climax (1:27, cf. 8:3). In modern Hebrew, the word is used for electricity. No one is yet quite sure what Ezekiel meant by it [1a,6,19].

text is the object of extensive discussion, prescription, and restriction – as we find with the *merkabah*.

What was the *merkabah*'s power and danger? Its power, no doubt, had something to do with the obscurity of the *merkabah* vision. In the more intelligible parts of Scripture, the rabbis may have sensed, the divine mysteries hidden behind the veil of the Bible's simple language were kept so far back that the veil hung smoothly before them. Here they thrust themselves forward, their bulges distorting the veil's contours. Otherwise, how explain the difficulties of the prophet's language? The pious expositor could hardly suppose, like the modern interpreter, corruption of the text; still less, some confusion in Ezekiel's own mind. The difficulties, he might well reason, must point to the shape of the secrets behind them. Resolve those difficulties, and the secrets will become plain.

But the fear the vision aroused is still mysterious. We understand it no better when we are told that contemplation of the divine is inherently dangerous, because we do not grasp why this should be so. We may, indeed, look to Rudolf Otto's conception of the *mysterium tremendum* as an essential element of religious experience [849], and infer that the mixture of excitement and nervousness with which the rabbis approached the *merkabah* is far from being an isolated phenomenon. But this still does not give us an answer clear and definite enough to satisfy us. We must ask precisely what there was about the act of interpreting this Scriptural text, that called forth these responses from the rabbis. Otherwise, we miss our chance to understand an important if unconventional aspect of rabbinic Judaism, and perhaps of the phenomenon of the *tremendum* in general.

In his monumental books on Jewish mysticism, the late Gershom G. Scholem has proposed what might be at least a partial solution to our problem [589, 605].

Scholem's position – to simplify to the verge of distortion – is that the rabbis' discussions and restrictions on the *merkabah* point to something well beyond the interpretation of the Book of Ezekiel. They allude to a mystical practice which involved ascent to the divine realms and direct contemplation of the *merkabah* and its attendant beings. A group of strange and at times barely intelligible texts called the *Hekhalot* ("palaces," referring to the heavenly structures) preserve, sometimes in overlaid or distorted form, the experiences of these mystics. M. Hag. 2:1, and the anecdotes that the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds gather around it, view this ecstatic mysticism from the outside. To see it from the inside, we must make use of the *Hekhalot*.

In making his case, Scholem followed a path that had first been cut by the eleventh-century scholar Hai Gaon. Hai used the *Hekhalot* to elucidate a puzzling Talmudic account, which occupied Scholem and will presently

occupy us, of four rabbis who entered a mysterious “garden” (BT Hagigah 14b; below, chapters I and VI). Said Hai:

You may be aware that many of the sages were of the opinion that an individual possessing certain explicitly defined qualities, who wishes to look at the *merkabah* and to peer into the palaces [*hekhlot*] of the celestial angels, has ways to achieve this. He must sit fasting for a specified number of days, place his head between his knees, and whisper to the earth many prescribed songs and hymns. He thus peers into the inner rooms and chambers as if he were seeing the seven palaces with his own eyes, and he observes as if he were going from palace to palace and seeing what is in them. There are two *mishnayot* that the Tannaim have taught on this subject; they are called *Hekhalot Rabbati* and *Hekhalot Zutarti*<sup>8</sup>. This much is widely known. [241]

Scholem did not follow Hai Gaon in his uncritical belief that the *Hekhalot* were authored by Tannaim. But, against such nineteenth-century scholars as Heinrich Grätz and Philipp Bloch [528,509], he argued that their central ideas were ancient, going back to the beginning of the Christian Era. The ecstatic journey to the *merkabah* was no medieval import from Islam (so Grätz), but an essential and authentic expression of rabbinic Judaism, which had been part of it from its beginning. The rabbis had been praised as sober rationalists, or condemned as pedantic legalists. Neither stereotype had allowed them a spark of mystical passion. And now, Scholem proclaimed, the “*merkabah* mysticism” of the *Hekhalot* proved that both stereotypes were fantastically wrong.

This same “*merkabah* mysticism,” Scholem thought, yielded the key to the stories of heavenly ascension that filled the Jewish and Christian apocalypses of the last two centuries B.C. and first two centuries A.D. It explained particularly well a strange passage in Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians (12:2–4), where Paul described himself as

a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – and he heard things that cannot be taught, which man may not utter.

Paul was “caught up into Paradise.” The four rabbis whose story Hai Gaon undertook to explain had entered a “garden”; and the Hebrew word for “garden,” *pardes*, might well be understood as “Paradise”<sup>9</sup>. The parallel seemed compelling. Following Hai, Scholem had interpreted the Talmudic story as testimony to mystical ecstasy. So understood, it would now illuminate the Jewish background of Paul’s experience.

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8 Hai uses *mishnayot* to mean “Tannaitic teachings.” For a fuller explanation of this word, see Appendix I, section 1; on the “Tannaim,” see section 2. In chapter IX, I extensively discuss the *Hekhalot* in general, and the “texts” that have come to be called *Hekhalot Rabbati* and *Hekhalot Zutarti* (the “Greater Treatise on the Palaces,” the “Lesser Treatise on the Palaces”).

9 The Hebrew and English words are in fact related etymologically. Unfortunately for Scholem’s argument, rabbinic Hebrew does not seem actually to use *pardes* to mean “Paradise.” We will return to this point in chapter I.

It followed that, in whatever ways Paul had broken with his Pharisaic past, in his penchant for mystical experience (II Corinthians 12:7) he remained faithful to it. As for the rabbis, they were far from stifling apocalyptic ecstasy with their “legalism.” On the contrary, they treasured and nourished it. The *Hekhalot* texts became its manuals. And the *merkabah* remained, as it had been for centuries, its focus and its goal.

This marvellously attractive synthesis is flawed in several ways. The parallels on which Scholem rested much of his case, such as that between II Corinthians 12 and the rabbinic *pardes* story, are often equivocal [583]. Although it is hard to defend the nineteenth-century consensus that the *Hekhalot* were written after the end of the Talmudic period (that is, early in the Middle Ages), Scholem’s early dating is just as doubtful. Scholem’s stress on the reality of the *merkabah* mystics’ ecstatic experiences can be misleading. He did not, of course, mean that they “really” ascended to heaven, but that they “really” believed they had done so. But it is easy to slip from this into the illusion that we can explain the ascension materials in the apocalypses and the *Hekhalot* by pointing to the supposed reality of the experience underlying them; whereas, of course, this hallucinatory “experience” itself cries out for explanation. This fallacy seems to me to dog much of Scholem’s presentation.

I will develop these criticisms at several points in the chapters that follow. (It is a mark of the power of Scholem’s synthesis that I am obliged to devote so much space to criticizing it.) For now, I will stress yet another difficulty I have with Scholem’s position, which I find the crucial one; namely, that Scholem does not even try to solve the problem of the *merkabah* as I have defined it above, and as rabbinic texts like M. Hagigah 2:1 persuade me it ought to be defined. These texts, as we will see in chapter I, barely refer to ecstatic journeys. Instead, they show clearly that there was *something in the text of Ezekiel itself* that frightened the rabbis. They represent the *merkabah* as an extraordinary case – extraordinarily promising, extraordinarily dangerous – of the rabbis’ symbiosis with Scripture. Scholem does not help us understand how this was so.

Yet we cannot dismiss Scholem’s work and start from scratch. The links Scholem propounds – particularly the three-way connection of the apocalyptic ascensions, the rabbinic allusions to the *merkabah*, and the *Hekhalot* materials – seem real. If, as I believe, Scholem has not defined them properly, this will not justify our ignoring them. We must find a better way to state and to explain them. And we do best to start where the rabbinic sources suggest we ought, with the exegetical traditions on the *merkabah* visions of Ezekiel.

Sigmund Freud, in his “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis”

(better known as the case history of the “Wolf Man”), records a puzzling memory fragment of his patient’s. “He was chasing a beautiful big butterfly with yellow stripes and large wings which ended in pointed projections — a swallow-tail, in fact. Suddenly, when the butterfly had settled on a flower, he was seized with a dreadful fear of the creature, and ran away screaming” [837b].

Freud, naturally, believed he had discovered what there was about the butterfly that so terrified his “Wolf Man.” It would not be to our purpose to go into the details. What concerns us is that Freud believed, I think correctly, that the butterfly was bound into the “Wolf Man’s” mental world by an elaborate network of associations which allowed it to become a tangible emblem of what he desired and what he dreaded. The “Wolf Man” was of course disturbed. But Freud has taught us that similar processes of association operate in all of us. Any object, however harmless, may become linked with what we wish and fear, and draw into itself the force of our wish and our fear.

Midrash, like Freudian psychoanalysis, involves a process of linking. The midrashic expositor associates one Scriptural passage with another, apparently from a totally different context. To take up again Origen’s image, he fits the key that is beside one door into the lock of another. Midrash thus constructs from the Scriptures a network of conducting wires, which runs beneath the skin of the religious perception of reality. Points where particularly powerful wires intersect may take on a tremendous charge. To understand why a point is so charged, we must trace the wires that lead from it.

It is my argument in this book that ancient sources, rabbinic and other, give us the information we need to trace the associative wires that gave the *merkabah* its extraordinary charge of excitement and fear.

I do not mean to suggest by this that the rabbis feared the *merkabah* vision because it seemed to have overtones of some alien religious system (Christianity, Gnosticism, or the like). Explanations of this sort seldom appeal to me, because they do not take into account Judaism’s ability — which, I believe, it shares with all or almost all other religions — to absorb aspects of other religions which seem compatible with its basic structure [729b]. Alienness *per se*, then, is no ground for rejection, much less terror. Rather, the *merkabah* must have set the rabbis’ minds moving toward something which they found inherently thrilling or appalling. I see no reason to doubt that this “something” could have been generated within the rabbis’ Judaism itself, without any influence from the outside.

What this “something” was, we must now seek.

My plan of investigation is as follows: We shall begin by mining those rabbinic sources that describe or regulate the process of expounding the

*merkabah*, for clues as to what direction we are to look for the crucial connections (chapter I). We will then pick out the main lines of *merkabah* exegesis, in extra-rabbinic Jewish literature (chapters II–III) and rabbinic (chapters IV–VIII), and seek to discover how they relate to each other and where they lead. Along our way, we will look at the ascension materials in the apocalypses (chapter III). With our exegetical investigation behind us, we will be ready to find a place for the *Hekhalot* and its ascensions in the *merkabah* tradition (chapter IX).





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