

MERKABAH MYSTICISM

A Critical Review *

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The awesome celestial vision described in the opening chapter of the Book of Ezekiel is known in Jewish tradition as the 'Vision of the Heavenly Chariot' or as the 'Vision of the Merkabah'.¹ Ezekiel's detailed, first person account of the heavenly throne was the subject of extensive exegetical tradition, homilistic elaboration, and mystical speculation throughout late Jewish antiquity.

The mysteries of the throne which were alluded to in the vision of the Chariot and the manner in which they were interpreted by generations of sages and rabbis through the centuries, are the subjects of David Halperin's comprehensive study—"The Faces of the Chariot".²

Halperin explores the divergent interpretive traditions which reflect the sacred significance that was ascribed in early sources to the enigmatic Vision of the Chariot. He examines the extraordinary rabbinic position which prohibited popular study of the Merkabah and restricted detailed explanation of these traditions while attempting to decipher the underlying reasons for this attitude.³

Halperin's book is divided into nine major chapters, each subdivided methodologically into related subsections; it also contains seven appendices, and an extensive reference list arranged respectively according to subjects, and six detailed indexes.

Chapter I presents the early expositions of the Merkabah and includes the traditional Mishnaic prohibitions against the study of this material (Mish. Hagigah 2:1, Mish. Megillah 4:10). The chapter continues with the Pardes episode in both Palestinian and Babylonian versions and elaborates the manner in which the Merkabah maintains its position against Mishnaic opposition.

The beginnings of Merkabah interpretation are introduced in Chapter II and include the Biblical Ezekiel narration, the relevant Qumran Texts, and parallel Septuagint sources.

Halperin follows with a chapter on the Merkabah and its relation to various apocalyptic works including the Book of Enoch, the Book of Revelations, the Book of Daniel, and others.

Chapter IV offers an interpretation of the synagogue Merkabah tradition as inferred from the Targum to Ezekiel. He compares Genesis Rabbah 65:21, Pesiqta de-Rab Kahanah, Ba-Hodesh 22 and its parallels. He reconstructs these sources as the paradigm for the synagogue Merkabah tradition.

Chapter V deals with the different interpretive traditions concerning the Merkabah and the calf at Mount Sinai and includes an analysis of Leviticus Rabbah 27:3, Mekhilta to Exodus 14:29, Exodus Rabbah 43:8, Midrash to Psalm 5:8, and other sources.

Chapter VI refers back to the Pardes episode and to the forbidden utterance of "Water-Water". It also includes the role of heavenly waters in different traditions.

Chapter VII introduces the concept of the Rainbow as both the image and the glory of God. Halperin defines the role of the rainbow in the Merkabah.

Chapter VIII innovatively suggests a connection between the 'Shabu'ot Cycle'—the Merkabah expositions delivered on Shabu'ot at public meetings in third century Palestine and the 'Visions of Ezekiel'. It includes parallel sources such as the 'Ascension of Moses' as described in Pesikta Rabbati and the Homilies of Joshua ben Levi. The homily of Origen on Ezekiel is considered and analysed. Halperin purports that Origen probably was aware of the Jewish stories of the Ascension of Moses and their connection to Ezekiel's Merkabah—a suggestive dating point for this tradition.

Chapter IX surveys the Merkabah and the Hekhalot, introduces the Hekhalot texts and claims that 'Sar Torah' was the key text. Halperin reviews the Merkabah exegesis of the Hekhalot and compares it with the Targumic tradition. He elaborates upon the relations between the Hekhalot and the Shabu'ot cycle. Special attention is devoted to an analogy between Moses, the hero of the Shabu'ot cycle, and Metatron, the Hekhalot hero. In this chapter, Halperin introduces his solution for the riddle of the Hekhalot, utilizing psychological insight, socio-historic reconstruction and new perceptions of this literature.

Halperin has arranged all the intricacies of this variegated mate-

rial with striking methodological care, in a lucid presentation, extensively detailed and documented, and he has widened the base for future study of the Hekhalot and Merkabah traditions.

II

The diverse interpretations for the Vision of the Merkabah, the inner significance of the esotericism involved in its study, and the link with the mystical tradition as well as the great apprehension surrounding these sources, were all extensively elaborated by the late G. Scholem in his pioneering studies—"Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism" and in "Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition".⁴ These subjects were further discussed by E.E. Urbach, M. Smith, I. Gruenwald, J. Dan, I. Chernus, and other.⁵

Scholem contended that the singular position occupied by the study of the Merkabah—expounding the Chariot—must indicate mystical experience well exceeding mere interpretation of the Book of Ezekiel. He maintained that the grave rabbinic restrictions concerning the Merkabah relate to actual mystical practice which involved contemplative ascent to the divine realm and reflection upon the celestial chariot and its attendant beings. The experience of these mystics has been preserved in those related texts which have become known as the 'Hekhalot' (heavenly halls or celestial palaces) Literature and the Merkabah tradition.⁶

The Hekhalot is an anonymous corpus of enigmatic writings composed largely in Hebrew, with some few Aramaic units. These heterogeneous writings are attributed to a period covering the 2nd until the 5th-6th centuries A.D. and have been preserved in certain medieval manuscripts as well as in some fragments found in the Cairo Genizah. The Hekhalot literature does not contain any inherent evidence distinctly fixing its date of origin; likewise it does not offer an obvious testimony relating to the socio-historical background of those concepts and the ideas expressed in it. Consequently, the chronological and historical sources as well as the religious orientation of the circles which generated the Hekhalot traditions remain undefined and indistinct.⁷

Scholem inferred that while the Hekhalot literature has preserved

the mystic account of the heavenly ascension, the rabbinic representation as found in Mishna Hagigah 2:1, its different recensions and related traditions in both the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmudim, has preserved the parallel prohibitory restrictions to this practice while suppressing its content.

Scholem followed the line of thought first suggested in the 11th century Gaonic Responsa, connecting the Merkabah, the Mishna, and the Hekhalot.⁸ Scholem disagreed with accepted 19th century scholarship which dated these texts to the post-Talmudic period, and offered an early dating for the Hekhalot, placing it firmly in the late Mishnaic period. He founded this opinion upon intertextual connections suggested by the apocalyptic ascensions, the rabbinic allusions, the Vision of Ezekiel as found in the Hekhalot and Merkabah traditions, as well as parallel Christian sources such as Paul's account in II Corinthians 12:2-4 and Origen's testimony.⁹

Scholem was inclined to perceive these sources as a homogeneous expression of Merkabah mysticism and as the continuation of a singular mystic tradition. Halperin disagrees with Scholem's homogeneous perception and assumes instead that there existed not one view of Merkabah mysticism but that there were contending positions from different sources and various times and separate places. He plays down the mystical character of the Merkabah and instead discerns different dimensions which include exegetical tradition and homiletic speculation on Ezekiel's vision.

The author questions Scholem's interpretation of the esoteric nature of the Merkabah exposition as alluding to mystical experience, and attempts to refute the importance Scholem ascribed to the mystical context of Ezekiel's vision in its various expressions¹⁰ claiming that the texts seldom refer to ecstatic journeys.¹¹ "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". (p. 7).

In order to support his arguments the author draws upon a wide range of sources which elaborate different aspects of Ezekiel's vision: these sources include excerpts from the apocalyptic literature, the Septuagint, the angelic liturgy of Qumran, the Mishna, the Targum, the writings of Origen, the early Midrashim,

and the Hekhalot treatises. These sources are all lucidly introduced and carefully considered in an attempt to unravel the hidden dimensions of the Merkabah and to decipher its concealed context.

Halperin offers three major courses of inquiry in order to elucidate the arcane faces of the chariot. These include:

- 1). The new context in which the Merkabah material was expounded.
- 2). The ambiguous nature and threatening elements which are to be found in the Merkabah.
- 3). The social background that initiated the Hekhalot tradition and the new socio-psychological connotations which could be extrapolated from the Hekhalot literature.

The two first courses which are devoted to the traditional lines of Merkabah exegesis and to the background of its interpretation are presented in commonly accepted methods of study applied to rabbinic exegesis and Midrashic literature, stretched, however, to their very limits. Halperin's previous book—*The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (The American Oriental Society, 1980) introduced these basic contentions in detail and his work has been reviewed and discussed previously,¹² Therefore, this article will touch only briefly on the first two aspects and will concentrate upon the author's new treatment of the Merkabah and the Hekhalot.

I. The first inquiry delves into the presentation of the alternative context in which the interpreters of the Merkabah understood the vision of the chariot. One of the earliest, best documented and attested features of Merkabah tradition, according to Halperin, is its coupling of the vision of Ezekiel I with the book of Exodus account of the Sinai revelation (Ex. 19). The traditional practice of the public reading of these two passages together on the festival of Shabu'ot, the Sinai revelation being the Tora portion and Ezekiel's Merkabah vision being the Haftara for Shabu'ot, firmly established and expressed the perception that they are related to each other, and that each must be understood in the light of the other. The scriptural base for this coupling is to be found in Psalm 68:18 which combines the chariot with Sinai, thereby placing the Merkabah and the Sinai revelation into the same contextual framework. Moreover, the opening of the following verse, Ps. 68:19, introduces the element of a heavenly ascension.

This conceptual perception is reflected in the Septuagint's rendering of Ezekiel 43:2. It is again presupposed in the 'Apocalypse of Abraham' and in the rabbinic traditions of the Merkabah expositions of R. Johanan b. Zakai's disciples. This perception achieves its fullest development in a cycle of third century rabbinic homilies for Shabu'ot ascribed to R. Joshua b. Levi.¹³

Halperin argues that the reading of Exodus 19 and Ezekiel I as two segments of the same event, provides a starting point for the visualization with the 'eyes of the heart' of the full glory of the Sinai revelation, and for the true appreciation of the splendor and the power of the authority that stood behind the Tora.

Halperin maintains that the Hekhalot tradition drew upon the Merkabah exegesis of the synagogue and was inspired, above all, by the Ascension Haggadot of the Shabu'ot cycle and by those parallel elements found in the Targum. He states that it is within the Shabu'ot cycle that may be seen for the first time the combination between the themes of Ezekiel's Merkabah, the heavenly ascension, and the Sinaitic revelation. The Shabu'ot cycle identifies Psalm 68:18-19 as the scriptural inspiration for this linkage. This naturally suggests, says Halperin, that the clue to the genesis of the Hekhalot lies within the Shabu'ot cycle and that the Hekhalot literature reflects the synagogue Merkabah tradition carried to its extreme. The author's treatment of the Hekhalot literature and its relation to the Merkabah is based upon these arguments. This complex perception reflects an interesting development within the exegetic tradition, but does not relate to the Hekhalot tradition since the Hekhalot literature never mentions it and is not linked to any particular Tora lection or to the interpretation of a particular verse. Likewise, it is chronologically autonomous, never connected to a specific time, festival or event.

Underlying Halperin's arguments lies a basic preconception which denies any and all significance to mystical experience as an inspiration for the Hekhalot literature.¹⁴ He apparently perceives these texts as a mere continuation of the exegetic tradition and as a succession in the homiletic speculation which relates to Ezekiel's chariot. However intriguing, this explanation ignores the unique religious qualities, the enigmatic poetic style, the magical invocations and adjurations, and the manifest mystical character so very

prominent in the Hekhalot treatises.¹⁵ These qualities far exceed simple homiletic exposition and defy exegetic tradition. Halperin's considerations can explain neither the grave rabbinic prohibitions nor the sacred distinction and heavenly origin attributed to the Hekhalot literature and the Merkabah hymns.

The second inquiry discusses the ambiguous and intimidating nature of the divine chariot and its fearful aspects which presumably motivated the rabbinic endeavor to suppress popular exposition of the vision of the Merkabah and to remove all vestiges of it from the synagogue.¹⁶

At the crux of the matter lies the appearance of the face of an ox and the foot of a calf within the elements of the divine chariot: Ezekiel saw the *Hayyot* with "an ox's face on the left for all four of them" (Ez. I:10) and with feet "like the sole of a calf" (I:7). The Biblical narrative of Exodus 32 describes the Israelite worship of the golden calf and Psalm 106:20 refers back to this episode, of which the rabbis said that 'they exchanged their glory for the likeness of an ox'. Due to the appearance in Ezekiel's vision of the ox's face and the calf's foot, the Merkabah vision could be and was drawn into the circle of ideas that surrounded the Exodus calf episode. Several chapters in the Midrashic tradition appear to suggest that the golden calf apostasy in the desert was the ox of the Merkabah.¹⁷

The Midrashic tradition sheds light upon the background of the calf apostasy by alluding to the paradoxical connection between the ox's face and the calf's foot appearing in Ezekiel's chariot and the divine revelation of the chariots at the Red Sea (Ex. 14).

The author emphasizes the complex association between the revelation of the divine chariot at the Red Sea, the making of the golden calf at Sinai, the face of the ox in Ezekiel's chariot, and the worship of the celestial ox as the fundamental cause for the fearful aspects of the chariot and the reason for its suppression.¹⁸

The contention which emerges from this exposition is that the "calf event" at Sinai was inspired by the sight of the heavenly ox, which was revealed to the Israelites at the crossing of the Red Sea, and in turn, was revealed to Ezekiel. In other words, the Israelites turned to worship the golden calf not *in spite* of the divine revelation, but *because* of it.

This understanding of the Merkabah and the calf is found mainly

in late midrashim, but many earlier dated sources, perhaps even going back to the interpolated Ezekiel 10:14 and the Septuagint translation of Ezekiel 1:7, can be held to presuppose it, if only because these sources evidently attempt to suppress it. The author of Ezekiel 10:14 replaced the ox's face with the face of a cherub in this second account of the Merkabah, and the Qumran Ezekiel fragment of verse 1:10 replaces the ox with a calf's face¹⁹—these would account for the controversial nature of the presence of the ox and the calf in the chariot. Halperin argues that these passages from Ezekiel reinforced the suggestion of Exodus 32:24, that the calf possessed an inherent, eerie, and compelling power of its own. Likewise, they gave a base for the interpretation of the clue needed to trace this power back to the divinity.²⁰

Similar ambiguities are attached to the "terrible ice" of Ezekiel I:22. Apocalyptic sources associated this feature of the vision with the heavenly waters, with the Red Sea, with the primordial monster-begetting waters, or with some combination of all three. It should be noted that an interesting parallel association may be found in the book of Revelations.²¹ Halperin claims that the Babylonian rabbinic tradition echoed these conceptions in its warning against uttering "water-water" in the divine realm (Hagigah 2). Halperin further argues that underlying all these images is the ancient conception of water as an embodiment of chaos which engulfs God even as He masters it. The Merkabah water theme runs parallel to the Merkabah calf theme. Some Midrashic sources aptly underline this analogy by rooting the Israelite calf worship in the experience at the Red Sea. The Hekhalot too imply that those who perceive water in God's presence must therefore be descended from those who worshipped the calf.

Halperin's interesting and intriguing alternative solution to the riddle of the calf and to the prohibition of the Merkabah exposition, follows a basic postulate stating that religious culture may be studied through both its repressed impulses as through an analysis of the reasons that led to a sense of obligation to repress them. Halperin's apparent aim is to proffer an alternative understanding of an interpretive character for the rabbinic prohibition concerning the exposition of the Merkabah. He ascribes a tremendous power to exegetical traditions and homiletic associations capable of pro-

hibiting and repressing the exposition and study of the Merkabah and associated biblical texts.

In lieu of the traditional mystic understanding propounded by Hai Gaon and the mystical experience reflected in these sources, Halperin perceives suppressed exegetical tradition depleted of all mystical connotation. He focuses upon certain specific lines and fragments of verses, often removed from their proper context, and thereby fails to perceive the overwhelming esoteric content and spiritual experience with which these texts are imbued.

III

Halperin's third inquiry questions the threefold relationship between the traditional ones of Merkabah exegesis, the rabbinic esoteric perception of Ma'aseh Merkabah, and the Hekhalot conception of the heavenly ascension. His new approach to the Hekhalot literature, contests all hitherto accepted views.

In the last decade, the Hekhalot Literature has attracted widespread attention and renewed scholarly interest. These studies have concentrated upon the inherent methodological problems of this material and focused upon their resultant historical and phenomenological ramifications. Modern scholarship has redefined the problem of the position of the Hekhalot literature in the development of ancient Judaism by attempting to trace the intricate and complex historical and philological connections with Talmudic literature, the Judean Desert writings, the literature of Early Christianity, and various gnostic trends.²² As a result, it has also begun to elucidate the obscurity regarding the emergence of this literature, to question the historical background, and to explore the ambiguities involved in the textual and redactional problems. Although the most diverse opinions have been expressed on all these subjects, the fundamentally mystical character of the texts, their magical worldview, and their numinous reverence directed towards the divine realm, have never been challenged or disputed.

The Hekhalot literature is marked by a dramatic shift in focus from terrestrial matters and mundane concerns to celestial realms and mystic concerns. This literature abandons exegetic and homiletic tradition in favour of a unique style founded on heavenly

testimonies, magical incantations, and mystical experience.²³ In fact, the Hekhalot treatises are composed of angelic hymns of exaltation, magical incantations and mystical invocations, lists of obscure divine names, terrifying descriptions of ecstatic conversions, testimonies concerning the heavenly throne of glory, cryptic occult procedures, and awesome accounts of the splendor of an anthropomorphic deity.²⁴ This literature vividly portrays the mystic ascent to heaven, paradoxically known as the 'Descent to the Chariot' (*Yeridah la Merkabah*). It explains the ascetic practices and magic formulae without which the elect few cannot utter the adjurations and attempt the *Himmelsreise der Seele*. It discusses the magnificence of the heavenly realm and describes the rapturous experiences of the visionaries with detailed and picturesque accounts of the heavenly beings, celestial princes, and the awesome angelic retinue.²⁵

Heavenly ascents are ubiquitous in the literature of late antiquity and magical texts expressing cognate ideas and practices may be found throughout the Greek magical and theurgical literature. The general conceptual apparatus of the Hekhalot literature may thus be easily placed within the context of Late Antiquity. In certain areas, the Hekhalot and pagan magic theurgical literature (e.g. talmudic or apocalyptic) have a common denominator which the Hekhalot does not share with other Jewish writings, with the possible exception of *Sefer hā Razim*.

Halperin attempts to refute the conception of the Hekhalot Literature as a religious document centered around the heavenly ascent, and offers a different course of interpretation. He rejects the interpretation of the Hekhalot literature as the literary record of genuine spiritual experience or religious practice, as an esoteric testimony to true mystical insight. Instead, he perceives the Hekhalot Literature as a social manifesto containing revolutionary trends, conceived in the terms of the synagogue tradition and bound in a social struggle for power. In his opinion, this literature utilizes elements of the heavenly ascension and other fragments of the Merkabah ideology, in an attack upon established rabbinic authority, attempting to institute a new religious prerogative and to create a new Torah.²⁶

The arguments for this astounding re-interpretation can be summarised as follows:

1). "We are not to look for the originators of the Hekhalot in any esoteric clique but among the Jewish masses" (p. 385) "The Hekhalot are the work of people who had every reason to detest the rabbis and indeed are directed in large measure against the rabbi's status" (p. 442)

2). "The Hekhalot are rooted in the Sinai Ascension haggadot which are connected with the popular synagogue tradition of Merkabah interpretation. It is clear that the aspect of the synagogue Merkabah tradition that most caught its audience's imagination was the tale of Moses' ascent to heaven and struggle with the angels over the Torah. These stories inspired a body of literature which we may regard as an offshoot of the synagogue Merkabah exegesis: the Hekhalot", (p. 450). "Certain people nurtured on the stories of how Moses climbed to heaven and seized the Torah from the angels used these images to express and to satisfy their own yearning to have Torah made accessible to them" (p. 385)

3). "The authors of the Hekhalot did more than borrow the ascension theme from the synagogue tradition. They made it into a paradigm of their own struggle with the rabbinic elite for a place of honor within Jewish society—an unequal and frustrating struggle which they waged with magic as their chief weapon. In doing so...they brought out certain aspects of the ascension theme which had always been there, in potential, for the ascension myth is inherently and essentially revolutionary. It is very nearly a mirror image of the ancient myth of Lucifer, the rebellious deity who tries to set his throne above the stars and is therefore hurled down to hell. More exactly, it is the Lucifer myth told from the rebel's point of view with the rebel victorious".

"Both I suspect are rooted in the psychological reality of the younger generation challenging the old. The difference lies in the sympathies of the narrator." (p. 450-51). Halperin considers the link between the exaltation of the human being and the degradation of the heavenly beings as the core of the revolutionary significance of the ascension myth underlying a myth which expresses a "human invasion of heaven." (p. 453). He further suggests that this myth and its significance are rooted in the endlessly repeated conflict of generations.

4). "The theme of struggle between angels and humans is a reflection of a real issue between different groups of humans. The angels appear as spokesmen for a privileged group whose claim to privilege rests on mastery of the Torah." (p. 437) "The struggle over the Torah masks a struggle over the power and status that Torah confers and symbolizes" (p. 444). "Heavenly ascension then, is both a precondition as a metaphor for the acquisition of Torah and with the status and power that the believer craves." (p. 441) "The Hekhalot writers transformed the ascension stories into a revolutionary manifesto." (p. 443)

The author postulates that the sharp social conflict occurring in the attempt to wrest power from established religious authority, influenced the Hekhalot writers and is disguised within the Merkabah mythology portraying humans struggling upwards against a hostile celestial hierarchy.

This far-reaching innovative socio-historical reconstruction combines daring psychological insight and social motivation in an attempt to decipher these cryptic texts. Conflict between competing social classes is combined with psychological complexities between generations. But the attempt raises a cardinal issue regarding the approach of modern research to ancient literature. The responsibility and hermeneutic limitation of modern research has never been sufficiently defined, especially as regards the spirit in which a text was originally composed, its explicit expression and inherent self-perception and world view, as well as its subsequent traditional perception throughout history, its sacred significance and its socio-religious context within a religious culture.

Halperin's interpretation of the Hekhalot resolutely ignores the literal meaning of this literature and the spirit that imbues it. He repeatedly denies all significance and validity of religious inspiration, he ignores the factuality of mystical ecstasy in a manner that seems to cast doubt upon the authenticity of human yearning towards heaven. This is a characteristic reductionist stance which is unable to accept either genuine religious experience or the potent reality of an autonomous human spiritual urge. Taking this view, it is obviously impossible for any of these factors to generate a literature of genuine religious testimony.

This view, then, recognizes religious phenomena as a mere disguise for alleged stronger and more fundamental human

pressures and social forces. In this perspective, the Hekhalot are a revolutionary manifesto, desiring social innovation and the overthrow of the established order and of accepted authority.

This interpretation overlooks all the inherent characteristics of the Hekhalot Literature and the abiding spirit reflected in its pages. Methodologically, the enigmatic nature of the Hekhalot's chronology, its still obscure historical background, and the anonymous character of its authorship, all rule out its use as a historiographic record or as a testimony of social conflict. Halperin's socio-historic reconstruction may be challenged from many points.

The Hekhalot Literature singularly lacks any allusion to mundane reality. In general, it does not offer genuine or reliable historical data, biographic information, or social facts. The few paragraphs that do allude to earthly concerns or historical reality may well be of an imaginary nature, reflecting a-historical or supra-historical reality. The scenarios described appear to be a pseudo-epigraphic narration founded upon metahistoric perception.²⁷ The anachronistic nature of the texts is best expressed by the coupling of R. Akiva and R. Ishmael with events occurring around and in connection with the Temple. These talmudic figures lived and died in the second century A.D., 50-100 years after the date of the destruction of the Second Temple. They could not possibly have related events occurring on the Temple Mount and or retain memories of the actions of the High Priest as told in the Hekhalot. The a-historic nature of these texts casts severe doubt on alleged historical deductions and on the extrapolation of reliable social data. The author wishes to extract socio-historical realities from a collection of texts which include mythical accounts of the heavenly realm, mystical narrations of the celestial throne and the angelic retinue, as well as magic incantations and detailed adjurations. This literature is concerned with the spiritual realities of the heavenly realm and with the mystical and magical ways to approach it. The alleged historical information and social realities thus "deduced" are at best questionable; in fact, they are highly improbable.

Also the underlying claim for the existence of a power struggle and of social conflict in the substratum of the Hekhalot Literature must be challenged. For contrary to Halperin's claims, the Hekhalot Literature in fact affirms the rabbinic ethos and strictly

adheres to the Halakha.²⁸ There is no explicit criticism of the rabbinic world or of its law. On the contrary, all the chief protagonists come from the rabbinic milieu. The Hekhalot texts express no opposition whatever to this world; to find "implicit" allusions to earthly social conflict requires feats of imagination beyond the power of most readers of these texts.

No doubt parallel sources such as the Qumran scrolls, Early Christian Literature, and the Gnostic corpus do exhibit straightforward and undeniable expressions of social criticism and undisguised struggles for social power alongside the explicit desire for spiritual innovation and religious change. These subjects, then, were not out of bounds and there was no conceivable need to disguise revolutionary views behind a mystical mask of heavenly ascensions or in terms of angelic rivalry. There is not one specific passage clearly linking the social conflict which Halperin perceives with the mythological world inhabited by the celestial retinue and those ecstatic mystics who braved the dangers of the ascent to the Chariot. The suggestion that the social stratum from which this manifesto emerged was the *Am Ha-Aretz* stratum cannot be seriously entertained since it is highly unlikely that the unlettered masses would compose exalted poetry and inspiring mystical accounts, though it must be admitted that the historical and cultural circumstances of these people has so far not been sufficiently studied.

Halperin founds his social introspection upon the text known as *Sar Torah* ("Prince of the Torah") (Halperin pp. 376-383, Schäfer nos. 297-306). He rejects accepted opinion which considers this text to be a sub-genre of the Hekhalot or indeed to be a later addition.²⁹ This section is considerably different in style and in structure, in theme and in protagonists, from all other Hekhalot texts. These are factors which Halperin has not taken sufficiently into account; according to him, "the motivation and concerns of writers and readers, usually so inscrutable in the Hekhalot Literature are here (i.e. in *Sar Torah*) transparent" (p. 376) This is to assume an unsubstantiated homogeneous picture of the Hekhalot Literature and to ascribe a nonexistent uniformity to these heterogeneous sources by simply viewing the entire corpus in the perspective of *Sar Torah*. The use of this singularly dubious text as the key for the

interpretation of the manifold traditions incorporated in the Hekhalot is questionable, to say the least.

In fact the validity of this kind of socio-psychological approach should be questioned as well. An analysis of an entire society is attempted on the basis of a text which furnishes no chronological or historical clues. Far-reaching conclusions are presented while in fact we know nothing about the individuals involved and very little about the cultural background. An analysis attempted from a distance of at least one and a half millenia and having nothing to go on but fragmentary anonymous mystic accounts and obscure religious testimonies does not inspire much confidence.

In conclusion, Halperin's study no doubt offers new vistas for discussing certain dimensions of the Ezekiel exegesis and sheds light on divergent courses of homiletic and interpretive developments in the Merkabah tradition. However, its reductionist attitude to the Hekhalot ("a social manifesto") which postulates that the enthusiastic religious expression and the exalted spirit, so characteristic of this literature, are but a disguise for class conflict seems unacceptable. The attempted reconstruction of a socio-historic framework, drawn from a corpus noted for its a-historic or metahistoric character, needs better methodological justification than the one adduced. The use of psychological insight for deciphering the hidden face of a text and for elucidating angelic figures as human projection may be a worthy undertaking, but it requires more convincing proof.

The intriguing questions relating to the both socio-historical and spiritual sources which generated the Hekhalot and Merkabah Literature remain unsolved also after Halperin's massive study.

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* See n. 2.

¹ "Ezekiel saw a vision and told about varieties of a chariot" (zene merkabah). Ben Sira 49:6-10, (M.H. Segal, *Sefer Ben Sira Ha Shalem*, Jerusalem 1958, pp. 336-9.) compare the Septuagint to Ezekiel 43:3.

² D.J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot, Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision*, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) Tübingen 1988, *Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum* 16, 610 pp.

³ Mishna Hagigah 2:1; Megillah 4:10; see Halperin, *ibid*, pp. 11-31.

* G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1954³ chap. 2; *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, New York, 1960.

⁵ See Halperin, *ibid.*, reference list, Section 10, pp. 569-73; E.E. Urbach, "The Traditions about Merkabah Mysticism in the Tannaitic Period" in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to G. Scholem*, Jerusalem 1967, in Hebrew; M. Smith, "Observations on Hekhalot Rabbati", in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altmann, pp. 142-160, Harvard 1963; I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkabah Mysticism*, Leiden 1980; I. Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism*, Berlin and New York, 1982; J. Dan, *Three Types of Ancient Jewish Mysticism*-7th Annual Feinberg memorial Lecture in Judaic Studies, University of Cincinnati 1984; *idem.*, "The Chambers of the Chariot", *Tarbiz* XLVII (1977), pp. 49-55.

⁶ See Note 4 above.

⁷ Major portions of the Hekhalot corpus may be found in P. Schäfer, (ed), *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, Tübingen 1981; *idem.* (ed.) *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, Tübingen 1984. See, R. Elijior, *Hekhalot Zutarti-Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, Supplement I, Jerusalem, 1982; *idem.*, "Schäfer's Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur", in *Jewish Quarterly Review* LXXVII, no's. 2-3 (Oct. 1986-Jan 1987) pp. 213-217; *idem.*, "Schäfer's Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur", in *Jewish Quarterly Review* (forthcoming).

⁸ See B. Levin, *Otzar Ha-Geonim*: Thesaurus of the Gaonic Responsa. vol. IV Hagigah, Jerusalem 1931, pp. 13-15.

⁹ See H. Grätz, "Die Mystische Literatur in der gaonischen Epoche" in *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 1859. G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism...* (note 4 above) pp. 1-30; *idem.*, *Major Trends...* (note 4 above) p. 43f. *idem.*, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbale*, Berlin 1962, *Studia Judaica*: Forschungen zur Wissenschaft des Judentums, vol. 3.

¹⁰ See Halperin, pp. 5-7; compare J. Dan, "Ma'aseh Merkabah Be Sifrut Hazal-on D. Halperin, the Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature", *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 2, 2 (1983), pp. 307-16.

¹¹ For differing opinions on this subject see: I. Chernus, "Visions of God in Merkabah Mysticism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* XIII (1-2) pp. 123-146, 1982. R. Elijior, "The Concept of God in Hekhalot Mysticism", in J. Dan, (ed.), *The Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism*, Jerusalem 1987 pp. 13-64.

¹² H.E. Gaylord, "Speculations, Visions, or Sermons," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 13, 1/2(82) pp. 187-194. J. Dan (note 10 above). P. Schäfer, "Merkabah Mysticism and Rabbinic Judaism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104, 3(1984). Y. Liebes, *The Sin of Elisha, The Four who Entered Paradise*, Jerusalem 1986, p. 12-13.

¹³ BT Shabbat 88a-89b; see Halperin, chapters 2, 3, 4 & 8.

¹⁴ See Halperin pp. 7-9, 15, 30, 34.

¹⁵ See notes 4, 7 and 11 above.

¹⁶ See Halperin, chapter 5, 6 and 7.

¹⁷ *Tanhuma* Emor 16, *Tanhuma* Buber Emor 23, *Leviticus Rabbah* 27:3, *Mekhilta* to Exodus 14:29, *Beshallah* Chapter 7, *Exodus Rabbah* 42:5.

¹⁸ See Halperin pp. 157-168, and 185-190.

¹⁹ See Halperin p. 55.

²⁰ *Ibid* pp. 185-190.

²¹ *Ibid*, Chapter 6.

²² M. Smith, *Observations on...* (See note 5 above); H. Odeberg (ed.) *3 Enoch, The Hebrew Book of Enoch*, with a Prolegomenon by J.C. Greenfield, New York

1973: P.S. Alexander, "The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch", *Journal of Jewish Studies* 28 (1977) pp. 156-180; I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and...* (see note 5 above) 1980; J. Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, New Haven 1980; J. Dan, Review of I. Gruenwald's *Apocalyptic and Merkabah Mysticism*, *Tarbiz* 51(1982) pp. 685-691; *idem.*, "Mysticism in Jewish History, Religion and Literature", in J. Dan and F. Talmage, (eds), *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, Cambridge, 1982; G. Stroumsa, "Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ," *Harvard Theological Review*, 76(3) 1983, pp. 269-288; P.S. Alexander, "Comparing Merkabah Mysticism and Gnosticism, an essay in Method," *Journal of Jewish Studies* XXXX (1984): P. Schäfer, "New Testament and Hekhalot Literature," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. XXXX (1984); pp. 19-35; R. Elijior, "The Concept of God in Hekhalot Mysticism", in J. Dan (ed.) *The Proceedings of the First International Conference on Early Jewish Mysticism*, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 13-64; I. Gruenwald, "The Impact of the Priestly Tradition on the Creation of Merkabah Mysticism," *ibid.*, pp. 64-120; P. Schäfer, "The Problem of the Redactionist Identity of Hekhalot Rabbati," *ibid.*, pp. 1-12; L. Schiffman, "Hekhalot Mysticism and the Qumran Literature", *ibid.*, pp. 121-138.

²³ See Notes 4, 5, 7 and 11 above.

²⁴ See Schäfer, *Synopse* (note 7 above) nos. 18-186, 204-5, 240, 253, 309-10, 420, 565-6, 557, 560, 623-628, 634, 680; A. Altmann, "Qedusha Hymns in the Early Hekhalot Literature" (Hebrew) *Melilah* 2(1946) also in 'Panim šel Yahadut,' Jerusalem 1983, pp. 44-67; J. Strugnell, "The Angelic Liturgy at Qumran," *Vetus Testamentum*, Supps. VII (1960), pp. 318-345; I. Gruenwald, "The Angelic Liturgy, The Qedushah, and The Problem of the Writing of the Hekhalot Literature", in *Praqim BeToldot Yerushalayim BeYamey Bayit Sheni*, Jerusalem 1981, pp. 459-481; K.E. Grözinger, "The Names of God and the Celestial Powers, Their Function and Meaning in the Hekhalot Literature," in J. Dan (ed) *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Early Jewish Mysticism*, Jerusalem, 1987, pp. 53-71; G. Scholem, "Shiur Qomah", in *Pirquei Yesod BeHavanat HaKabbalah*, Jerusalem, 1976, pp. 153-186.

²⁵ See R. Elijior, "The Concept of God," (note 11 above) [in English translation], in J. Dan (ed.) *Binah*, *Studies in Jewish Thought*-Vol. II, New York 1989; for the broader cultural context of these phenomena cf. C.R. Phillips, *The Sociology of Religious Knowledge in the Roman Empire to A.D. 284*, Berlin 1986.

²⁶ Halperin, chap. 9.

²⁷ See J. Dan, "The Concept of History in Hekhalot and Merkabah Literature" in *Binah*, vol. I (note 25 above).

²⁸ S. Lieberman, "The Knowledge of the Halakha by the Author(s) of the Hekhalot", app. 2 to I. Gruenwald, (note 5 above); G. Scholem, *J.G.M.M.* cha. II.

²⁹ I. Gruenwald, note 5 above; pp. 143, 169-173; G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (note 4 above), pp. 77f. *Idem.*, *J.G.M.M.*, p.12.

