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### The Concept of God in Hekhalot Literature

*Great advances have been made during the last decade in the study of one of the most important, and least known, chapters in the history of Jewish mysticism—the earliest mysticism of the talmudic period, known as hekhalot and merkabah mysticism. The two dozen texts which were preserved from this anonymous group of Jewish mystics in late antiquity have been published and studied in detail. The following article presents a comprehensive view of this school of mystics, who were the first to ask basic questions and present mystical answers regarding the nature and characteristics of the celestial worlds and of God Himself.*

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#### BACKGROUND

The trend of Jewish mystical writing known as *Hekhalot* literature incorporates a variety of traditions originating in Eretz Israel and Babylonia in the second through sixth centuries. Recent scholarly interest in this field has centered on the attempt to clarify textual problems. However, the need

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to establish the relationship between various traditions and redactions, and to determine historical strata and thematic development, does not outweigh the obligation to examine the content and peculiar characteristics of this literature. Despite a lack of agreement and clarity regarding problems of historical background and the redaction of the texts, *hekhlot* literature is clearly not a random collection of sources and traditions, but rather a literary corpus bearing a distinct religious-spiritual stamp.<sup>1</sup>

The historical-literary approach to this material is, however, limited by the difficulty of the texts, which does not permit facile determination of the various strata and of the evolutionary development of the central ideas. It is, therefore, expedient to concentrate on the peculiar literary and thematic phenomena of the *hekhlot* writings whose uniqueness is not expressed in unity of style or redaction. Rather, despite their derivation from a variety of circles and traditions, these texts reflect a new way of approaching essential religious questions and new realms of spiritual activity. *Hekhalot* literature as a whole reflects the development of a new relationship to the concept of God, and sheds light upon the distinctive features of early Jewish mysticism.

#### RELIGIOUS FEATURES OF HEKHALOT MYSTICISM

*Hekhalot* mysticism is an elitist phenomenon, confined to the initiated. It marks the inception of theosophic speculation as the focal point of mystic longing, and perhaps the beginning of the process of separation of the religious impulse from its historical or real context. Its rituals remain restricted to the esoteric realm, and its traditions are far removed from daily religious life. Terminology, even if derived from traditional sources, acquires specialized meanings.<sup>2</sup> The outstanding religious feature of *hekhlot* literature is the shift in focus from the terrestrial-historical realm to the celestial-metahistorical realm, with the theocentric orientation placing the nexus of religious experience in heaven and the heavenly regions.<sup>3</sup> A dual assumption underlies the interest in the celestial regions, the heavenly hierarchy, and the 'body of God': (a) the Deity is assumed to possess a corporal-visual form open to human perception and (b) the human ability to reach a spiritual level enabling man to ascend to the heavens, to behold God and His throne-chariot, and to return to testify to his experiences, is postulated.

Four axioms underline this new religious approach:

1. Intensive study of the concept of God, and knowledge of the celestial realms are seen as religious imperatives.<sup>4</sup>
2. The possibility of human ascent to the celestial realm and return to earth is postulated.<sup>5</sup>
3. Religious significance is ascribed to the vision of God and the celestial retinue, which are accessible to human perception.

4. Mystical and theurgical means are employed for the fulfillment of the new religious imperative.

The mystic longing for knowledge of the heavens, and the possibility of ascent, are based on the assumptions that under specific circumstances the celestial realms are accessible to human perception, and that the mystical experience can be transmitted. The human ability to perceive presumes that God and the heavenly retinue have physical form and image, an observable essence composed of visually discernible dimensions and characteristics. However, knowledge of God is not acquired through rational speculation, but is based on direct mystical experience (a vision or revelation) or on testimony regarding the ascent to heaven. Such knowledge, although mystical, must be considered within human grasp and is at least partially definable in human language.

The new concept of God found in *hekhlot* literature diverges from biblical tradition and its offshoots.<sup>6</sup> Its key innovation pertains to the concept of *revelation*, which is no longer the divinely initiated communication of the absolute will of the Deity (or its consolidation into Torah and commandments, as at Mount Sinai), but is the humanly initiated achievement of a vision of God and the celestial realms. This theophany has no revelatory content but unfolds as a silent vision in which the observer almost entirely relinquishes his interest in the divine word. Instead, the mystic focuses upon beholding God and the heavenly regions, thereby legitimizing the study of the divine form and essence, the angels, the heavenly palaces, and the divine names and their magical applications. This mode of divine service is not confined to the rational, nor to Torah and *mitzvot*; its practice involves ascetic preparations, theurgy, and mystical contemplative experiences that emerge as a mimetic ritual imitating heavenly ceremonies.<sup>7</sup>

In post-biblical literature man assumes the initiative, and the descriptions of the theophany are based on the testimony of those individuals achieving a mystical vision.<sup>8</sup> *Hekhalot* literature reports the experiences of the ascenders to heaven, rather than the divine influence on the terrestrial-historical world. The divine form and the structure of the celestial realms, rather than God's will and commandments vis-a-vis mankind, interest the mystic. The interrelationships between God and man and God and the celestial retinue, which have various manifestations in *hekhlot* tradition, underlie the mystic effort to 'behold God'.

If we accept that the rabbinic God is supramythological and supranatural, with no representational form in heaven or on earth, the revolutionary character of *hekhlot* literature becomes apparent.<sup>9</sup> If the biblical and rabbinic views are represented by "To whom, then, can you liken God, what form compare to Him?" (Isaiah 40:18)—that is, God as beyond human perception—then the new concept found in *hekhlot* literature is represented by R. Akiva's dictum: "He is like us as it were, but greater than everything;

and that is his glory which is hidden from us. . . ."<sup>10</sup> *Hekhalot* literature unhesitatingly ascribes measurements, form, images, light, and anthropomorphic structures to celestial phenomena, deviating far from the strictures of "To whom, then, can you liken God?"

Although biblical and rabbinic thought regarding the Deity have been analyzed,<sup>11</sup> little attention has been paid to the revolutionary attitude toward God in *hekhalot* literature which continues the biblical anthropomorphic tradition, but radically changes the boundaries of human perception. The entire concept of heaven is expanded to encompass a Deity at the apex of a fixed hierarchy of firmaments, *hekhalot* (palaces), angels, *ofanim* (wheels), bridges, chariots, guards, streams of fire, and composers of names, all of which have fixed degrees of closeness to, or distance from, God, and are accessible at different levels of human perception. The ascription of corporeal dimensions to God and the transformation in His image are carried over to the heavenly retinue, thereby moderating somewhat the problematic nature of such ascription.

The divine image emerging from *hekhalot* literature is a multifaceted figure approached by the interplay between the theophany and its accompanying ritual aspects. The source of knowledge of the divine essence is in the mystical experience, either in the ascent to heaven, the 'descent to the chariot',<sup>12</sup> or the entrance to the *pardes* (paradise—see JT, *Hagigah* 2,1). At the same time, a new ritual, often bearing magical-theurgical elements, parallels the new dimensions discovered in God and in the celestial regions.

In *hekhalot* mysticism the heavenly experience in general, and the essence of God in particular, are related to in terms of five major dimensions—name, bodily measurements, cosmic beauty, esoteric knowledge, and glory. A brief definition of each of these concepts, as well as their ritual aspects as practiced by the 'descenders to the chariot' (*yordei merkabah*), follows. (The latter part of this article presents a detailed treatment of each of these aspects, as well as the concept of perception as associated with each.)

#### Names(s) of God (*shemot*)<sup>13</sup>

The hidden and revealed names of God contain His divine essence. Knowledge of the name equals knowledge of God, and its power extends to all aspects of the heavenly entity. The name, in its configuration letters, is accessible to human perception. Acquisition of knowledge of names occurs at the height of the mystical experience, and the names serve as the magical means for repetition of the ascent.<sup>14</sup>

#### Measurement of God (*shiur*)

The infinite size of God is measured in terms of supermagnified earthly dimensions. The measurements, anthropomorphic in pattern and seemingly

related to human comprehension of size, that is, apparently physical, are in actuality metaphysical. All the celestial hosts and heavens are proportionally related in size to the divine dimensions—parasangs, years, the earth from end to end, height, distance, etc. (*Synopse*, paragraphs 797–800). As with divine names, the recitation of measurements, even without comprehension, has a place in the ritual of the descenders to the chariot. The recitation itself may have a theurgical element, as reflected in the formula "he who knows the *shiur* of our Creator."

#### Cosmic Beauty (*yofi*)

God and the celestial retinue are described in terms of a supersensory cosmic beauty. Often the extraordinary beauty of the heavenly beings or angels is merely a foil for the incomprehensible beauty of God. The essential point is that God and His throne-chariot have a visual aspect, even if it is beyond normal sensory perception.<sup>15</sup> The goal of the mystic is to attain a vision of the King in His beauty (*lir'ot melekh bi-yofyo*); God's awesomeness is expressed as the *mysterium tremendum*.<sup>16</sup> The vision is real, not illusory, requiring ascetic preparations and the willingness to forego individual interpretation of the vision of the throne-chariot.

#### Esoteric Knowledge (*raz*)

*Raz* is the dynamic principle of the Deity—the secret of creation, and the power that creates all being. It comprises metaphysical knowledge of the physical world as taught to the mystic by heavenly beings in the form of names and letters. Through the ascent to heaven, the mystic attains the magical aspect of the *raz* as possessed by the angels guarding the palaces and holding the seals, rather than esoteric knowledge of God himself.

#### Glory (*kavod*)<sup>17</sup>

*Kavod* refers to the awesome heavenly hierarchy, the structure of the throne-chariot, and the enthroned image of God, as well as to the fixed relationships within the heavenly hierarchy that are observable and definable. There is directional influence within the heavenly retinue, with God's influence emanating downward according to one mystic method, or with each aspect acquiring added strength in ascending order according to another. The differences are quantitative rather than qualitative. Knowledge of the hierarchy is apparently a means of further elevating God in His infinite supersensory dimensions.

Each of these five concepts has an external dimension and an internal interpretation; or an informative stratum based on testimony and crystallization in ritual, and an interpretative level beyond human perception that

is expressed in the combinations of letters, infinite dimensions, and so on. At all times the knowledge remains mystic and esoteric.

The Book of Enoch provides an excellent example of a mystical transformation involving all five dimensions—*shemot*, *shiur*, *yofi*, *raz*, and *kavod*—as the essential divinely derived characteristics of a celestial being.

*Shemot*: God grants Metatron (Enoch in his angelic form) seventy names.<sup>18</sup> "I named him in my name, small YHWH . . . seventy names I took from my names and named him with them" (*Synopse*, paragraphs 73,74,76).

*Shiur*: Enoch acquires heavenly dimensions—70,000 parasangs, or the length and breadth of the world.

*Yofi*: Enoch undergoes transformation by fire, and is given majestic garments and a crown. "Forthwith my flesh was changed into flames, my sinews into flaming fire, my bones into coals of burning juniper, my eyeballs into firebrands, the hair of my head into hot flames, all my limbs into wings of burning fire, and the whole of my body into glowing fire" (Odeberg, chapter 15, p. 20).

*Raz*: The process of glorification is sealed by revelation of divine esoteric secrets. "I lovingly revealed every *raz*, and made known to him [Metatron] all my secrets" (*Synopse*, paragraph 73).

*Kavod*: Metatron is assigned his place in the celestial hierarchy, given power and authority, and the order of his subordinates is set. Moreover, he is assigned the task of guarding one of the highest *hekhalot*. (See 3 Enoch, chapter 10).

Thus, Enoch's transformation from terrestrial to celestial being involves changes in the five dimensions characterizing the Deity and His heavenly chariot. The attempt to achieve these dimensions through direct experience or study delineates the ritual of the descender to the chariot, whose goal is to become a celestial creature, like Metatron, if only for an instant.

#### THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN HEKHALOT LITERATURE

The five dimensions of the mystical apprehension of God require broader treatment in order to illustrate the novelty of this approach and its inherent complexities. The most innovative aspect involves the definition of human perception of the Divine and the new significance assigned to the body of God, the celestial realms, and the creation of rituals imitating the angels. *Hekhalot* mystics are confronted with intrinsic paradoxes in their desire to see God, to understand heavenly ceremonies and the need for angelic mediation, and their practice of seeing His throne and providing anthropomorphic descriptions of the intangible transcendent nature of God. The limitations of human perception and language are a central problem in *hekhalot* literature. Moreover, due to the limitations of human senses and understanding, the mystical experience is confined by use of fixed patterns and predetermined explanations. These and other points are discussed be-

low within the context of an expanded treatment of the basic concept of God in *hekhalot* literature.

#### Shemot

A major portion of *hekhalot* tradition, in all its trends, assigns primary importance to the names of God. Names are grasped as the essential substance of God, the foremost dimension of the divine image as embodied in a system of names possessing independent being. R. Ishmael's statement (in the name of R. Nehunya ben ha-Kanah) aptly sums up the theological metamorphosis involved in the new conception of the Divine Name as equated with divine substance. "He is His Name, and His Name is He. He is (in) Himself, and His Name is (in) His Name." God's name is not a designation, title, or form of liturgical address—rather, it embodies His essence, substance, power, and being.<sup>19</sup>

Four essential motives underlie the religious impulse to acquire knowledge of names—of the Divine, the angels, or parts of the throne-chariot—by the descenders to the chariot.

1. The name embodies an essential aspect of the Divine Being.
2. The name is the focal point of the celestial ritual and the angelic devotions that the mystic wants to imitate.<sup>20</sup>
3. The name serves as a mystical ladder for the descent to the chariot.
4. The name possesses magical and theurgical properties.<sup>21</sup>

The theological significance of names as independent entities is not confined to God alone in *hekhalot* literature; rather, concomitant with the ascription of substantive being to God's name, a process occurs whereby *the* Name becomes names. Just as no one name embodies the Divine Substance, the divine names are not restricted to God, but extend to the larger celestial realm. Names as substantive entities serve as a source of power and creativity, and are the power behind creation and the forces sustaining earthly and heavenly existence.<sup>22</sup> The creative role of letters, divine pronouncements, and God's Name in upholding reality is expanded in *hekhalot* literature, and the magical nature of names is stressed.

The power of names apparently descends in hierarchical order, with proximity to God ensuring possession of a greater portion of God's names. However, there is a lack of clarity concerning the precise relationship between the divine names and their celestial objects, and the different types of names—'names', 'titles', 'exoteric', and 'esoteric' names.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, a dialectical tension exists between the name and its interpretation, or between its apparent communicative value and its unfathomable hidden essence. The religious world view of *hekhalot* literature is nourished by this

dialectic in the essence and scope of divine names, as well as by the tension between the revealed names and their hidden aspect, or by their existence as divine substance and their role as mediators between the celestial and the human.

The identification of God with His Name changes knowledge of names into knowledge of one of the aspects of Divine Essence. The extension of names to the larger celestial sphere enhances the possibilities for human observation of the heavenly pageant, and widens the ritual use of names beyond the area restricted by the prohibition against 'beholding God' or using His Name (for magical purposes).<sup>24</sup>

It is important to stress that the secret, infinite, eternal nature of the 'name' comes within human grasp in the form of letters, through figurative rather than rational knowledge. The names are *revealed* knowledge, and their hidden meaning is understood by only a chosen few. The remaining descenders to the chariot use the names as esoteric ritual formulas to facilitate achievement of the 'descent'.

The name as the focal point of celestial devotions is attested to in many places in *hekhalot* literature. The angelic hosts pronounce the names of God in their daily recitation of hymns and praises, and the pronouncement of The Name seems to be a central aspect of their devotions.<sup>25</sup> "The youth Metatron brings fire and places it in the ears of the *hayot* so they will not hear God's voice or the Tetragrammaton as pronounced then (presently) by the youth Metatron in seven voices, in his holy, awesome, pure voice" (*Synopse*, paragraph 390). The ritual recitation of names almost certainly has a theurgical purpose—since the fixed repetition of a name to which unlimited creative powers are attributed cannot be a meaningless act. The descender to the chariot aspires to imitate heavenly ritual by reconstructing the praises of the angels that express the awesome splendor of the vision of the chariot. However, divine names appear in various aspects—as *raz*, seals, oaths, and the like. The new ritual created by the descenders to the chariot, consisting of purification rituals, ascent to heaven, participation in angelic recitation of the *kedushah* (sanctification), pronouncement of The Name, and the singing of angelic hymns, is of celestial origin.<sup>26</sup>

R. Akiva's experiences in *pardes*, as the archetypical ascent in *hekhalot* literature, embody the aspects of heavenly experience that become the mystical-theurgical starting point for the remaining descenders to the chariot. The ritual is based on divine names and heavenly ceremonial revealed to the initiated; achievement of the goal of 'beholding God in His Glory' and His throne-chariot is conditioned by the imitation of celestial patterns and use of heavenly names (*imitatio dei*). Perhaps we can go so far as to assume that the descender to the chariot wishes to achieve heavenly perspective by being transformed (at least temporarily) into a heavenly being.

The theophany as revealed to the worthy individual and recorded in *hekhalot* literature becomes the basis for the magical-mystical ladder of de-

scend. By virtue of the hidden power embodied in the name, the mystic can use the letters comprising the names and adjurations as a means of ascent, even without understanding their esoteric aspects.<sup>27</sup> Expressions like "the name by which we swear," "I summon you in the name of Your greatest name," or "I adjure You by Your names" are used to rise to heaven or to summon heavenly powers; but comprehension of the name is not seen as a necessary condition for its use. God's Name as known by the mystic is the bridge between esoteric revealed secrets regarding the divine essence, and theurgical practices using the name as an incomprehensible formula possessing magical powers.

In summation, the unique world view of the *hekhalot* mystics, as represented by their relationship to the Divine Name, has a tripartite nature—the Divine Name acquires primary religious significance, the name expands to include other celestial beings, and it becomes the basis for the ritual of the descenders to the chariot.

#### Shiur Komah

The doctrine of *shiur komah* has attracted extensive scholarly attention and debate.<sup>28</sup> Its connection with a new exegesis of Canticles emerging from the school of R. Akiva has been discussed, but scholars remain divided regarding the significance, object, and exegetical origins of this unusual doctrine.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, *shiur komah* is clearly an attempt to discover the nature of the object of mystic speculation—God Himself (YHWH, the God of Israel as found in the new interpretation of Canticles), not His secondary celestial reflections or the traditional patterns of the biblical God. *Shiur komah* embodies a dialectical tension between the attempt to ascribe corporeal form to the Divine Being, and the effort to express His awesome nature, far removed from human perception.

Three dimensions are ascribed to the divine figure: (a) *komah*: The attribution of anthropomorphic qualities to God in the shape of the human physique but supermagnified in dimension. (b) *shiur*: The relative measurement of God's size and structure in terms of parasangs—but with an essentially infinite result. (c) *shemot*: The use of secret names, composed of known, fixed combinations of letters, for each of the organs of the divine 'body'.<sup>30</sup>

The three elements of *komah*, *shiur*, and name, as related to the figurative aspect of a 'corporeal' God, appear in various combinations in extant *shiur komah* literature,<sup>31</sup> but whether or not all are represented, these elements always refer to the most exalted level of divine existence, and not to some other divine manifestation such as angels, the *Shekhinah*, or the demiurge.<sup>32</sup>

Knowledge of *shiur komah* is not acquired through direct observation (since the dimensions far exceed the limits of human perception, spiritual or physical),<sup>33</sup> but rather is based on hearsay—revelations to the mystic by Metatron

or by the Prince of the Torah. The heavenly being mediates between God's infinite nature and the limitations of human perception, describing the enthroned figure of God as possessing cosmic magnitude, and his 'body' as comprised of luminous elements (fire, sparks, lightning, torches), but always with a human model as a base for the description. The tension between the apparently anthropomorphic image of the Deity and its incomprehensible dimensions, or between the infinite measurements and their expression in human terms, is one of the focal paradoxes of this unique religious doctrine.<sup>34</sup>

The transformation of the direct biblical vision of God, "I saw the Lord" (I Kings 22:19), into the indirect, figurative, abstract vision of God in *shiur komah* mysticism requires the mediation of angelic vision. In *hekhhalot* literature, a distinction is made between human ability to see God and the inability to understand the vision without an intermediary. In the traditions of both R. Akiva and R. Ishmael the 'measurements of God' are taught by supernatural beings. The testimony reported in *hekhhalot* literature is several degrees removed from the phenomenon; it is the angel and not the mystic who describes the theophany and provides an explanation. The vision itself (*re'iyah*) is defined in biblical terms, whereas the new interest in the 'body of God' has distinctive linguistic coloration, referring to *limud* (study) and *shiur* (dimension) in relation to the heavenly theophany. R. Ishmael states that he beheld the Divine King on His throne, then turned to the Prince of the Torah with the request to be taught the measurement of the 'body of God' (see *Synopse*, paragraph 688).

Surprisingly, the risk of personification of God did not deter the *shiur komah* mystics from describing God's 'physical' being and actions. Clearly they did not understand the anthropomorphic descriptions as reducing God to human level; if anything, their intent was to glorify Him, to transcend Him, and to create endless distance between man and God. *Shiur komah* does not exemplify a direct relationship between man and God;<sup>35</sup> rather, it illustrates the unbridgeable gap between them as measured in cosmic dimensions by awesome mythic images. The use of apparently recognizable descriptions of organs, measurements, and names as provided by the angels is actually beyond human comprehension and serves to illustrate the infiniteness of God.

*Shiur komah* mysticism embodies the transcendental aspect of the vision of the celestial regions. It is a religious viewpoint, aimed at emphasizing the incomprehensible nature of the Deity within a conception that, by utilizing human terms, bridges the gap with the heavenly chariot and places the heavens within human grasp.

#### Yofi

The ascription of beauty to God and His throne-chariot in *hekhhalot* literature is based on the assumption that they possess a visual aspect, definable in semantic terms despite their supersensory essence.

The language of *hekhhalot* mystics reflects the intertwining of religious and esthetic modes. Biblical concepts like firmament, *ofan* (wheel), wing, angel, and chariot acquire specific visual form and dimension in *hekhhalot* literature and are delineated in human sensory terms. As noted with regard to divine names and *shiur komah*, the mystical experience is directed to the celestial regions in their entirety, and the creation of new creatures and levels meets the need to give form to the invisible. (Perhaps the attribution of size, beauty, shape, and proportion to the entire celestial region tempered the revolutionary nature of this new conception of divine beauty.) The descriptions of heavenly splendor are based on the prophecies of Ezekiel (chapters 1-10), but the general terms used in Ezekiel undergo a process of expansion, acquiring detail, as well as specific relative proportions and places within the celestial hierarchy.

*Hekhalot* books are permeated by a religious awe of beauty and splendor, and ascribe religious and mystical significance to the ability to describe them. Two terms are often used to denote the mystical experience—*yofi* and *re'iyah bi-yofi* (beholding the beauty of God). The goal of the descent to the chariot is often described as "beholding the King in His beauty," a formula combining human observation with divine beauty. The expression is derived from Isaiah 33:17, "Thine eyes shall see a king in his beauty." In the midrash this verse is interpreted as a vision of the *Shekhinah*.<sup>36</sup> In *hekhhalot* literature, "beholding the King in His beauty" expresses both the mystic longing and the goal, and the transformation of sensory observation to supersensory vision. The descender to the chariot does not seek a nonfigurative, invisible God; rather, he views a heavenly pageant of visible forms and otherworldly splendor.

The ascription of form and beauty to God are apparently daring; nonetheless, a careful analysis of the concept of beauty in *hekhhalot* literature reveals that the descriptions are based on cosmic beauty, on the majesty of the universe, and on the power of universal natural forces. Cosmic beauty does not add an esthetic dimension to abstract conceptions, attempting to make them more readily perceivable; on the contrary, its intent is to express the awesomeness of the *mysterium tremendum*, its awfulness, infinity, and inaccessibility to human perception.<sup>37</sup> The blinding lights, the blazing fire, the infinite dimensions, the multitudes of angels, the cacophony of sounds—in short, the observation of the unfathomable heavenly panorama—combine to arouse fear and trembling; they require either a supersensory transformation, or remain impossible. "No creature can behold Him . . . he who sees God is consumed by fire" (*Synopse*, paragraph 102).

In *hekhhalot* literature, celestial beauty assumes new proportions of size, symmetry, and power. The description of Metatron in the Book of Enoch is an excellent example of this new concept of beauty comprised of supersensory dimensions, mythic proportions, and powers analogous to universal physical forces. "God put His hand on me and blessed me . . . I was

raised the height and breadth of the world and given 72 wings . . . each wing the size of the world, and on each wing there were 365,000 eyes, each eye the size of the sun. No luminescence or brightness was omitted" (*Synopse*, paragraph 12).

This extravagant description of one angel, Metatron, is only a foil for the divine glory. It embodies the paradoxical basis of *yofi*. On the one hand, apparently anthropomorphic typology is used; on the other, this cosmic splendor, even in its figurative form, relates to dimensions far exceeding the bounds of human sensory perception. (This is similar to the dichotomy between personification versus elevation of God, as discussed with regard to *shiur komah* above.) Human vision is incapable of absorbing the sight of an angel whose height is 2,500 'years', or who is composed of fire, lightning, and endless cosmic splendor.

The attempt to describe the exalted attributes of God fills a large part of *hekhhalot* literature. However, these descriptions are not based on evidence provided by human observers, but on the transmission of angelic reports or on data imparted by chosen individuals who have undergone a supernatural conversion. The virtually indescribable nature of the awesome heavenly pageant in the context of visual images is embodied in the formula "not every eye can look (is capable of seeing), nor is every mouth capable of speaking" (*Synopse*, paragraph 39). Therefore, the mystic longing to "see the King in His beauty" is often relinquished in *hekhhalot* literature, since the divine splendor can be grasped only through superhuman agencies. Essentially, the descenders to the chariot describe what they themselves have not seen.<sup>38</sup> Divine beauty and splendor become objects of praise rather than of observation, the subjects of an indirect description based on hearsay evidence rather than of direct testimony. R. Ishmael *hears* the description of the cosmic beauty of the *hekhhalot*—shrines, firmaments, bridges, and hosts of angels—and transmits it to his disciples; never does he claim to have *seen* the heavenly glory. Similarly, the descriptions of the *merkabah* are transmitted to him by R. Akiva or R. Nehunya. The individual experiences of the chosen few are transformed into 'objective descriptions' of the metaphysical reality.

A built-in distinction is made between the supersensory figurative essence of God, and His infinite awesomeness, between the detailed descriptions of cosmic beauty and the inability of man to perceive celestial splendor. The use of terminology from the realm of human sensory perception is only a screen for the fact that all the aspects of beauty as described in *hekhhalot* literature are supersensory.<sup>39</sup>

#### Re'iyat Ha-El (Beholding the Deity)

Analogous to the dichotomies mentioned above, *hekhhalot* literature incorporates the tension between the attribution of 'corporeal' form to the Deity

and the prohibition against seeing God. These two conflicting tendencies are already found in biblical and midrashic traditions.<sup>40</sup> *Hekhalot* literature contains various notions, some using biblical language for visions of God, others expressing the impossibility of such vision, and intermediate notions allowing for the possibility of a theophany—but forbidding or restricting it. Nonetheless, the starting point for all these positions lies in the doctrine that the Deity has figurative visible dimensions, whether or not they are within the range of human vision. This is an expression of a religious consciousness legitimizing a sort of sensory vision of supersensory entities.

The tradition asserting the impossibility of beholding God is supported by the rabbinic view that even the bearers of the throne (*hayot*) cannot see His beauty. However, traditions elevating man above the angels are also known.<sup>41</sup> The same is true of the relationship between human and angelic perception of the *merkabah*; at times the human perception of the descenders to the chariot is held to be superior. The introduction of an angelic intermediary who both sees and interprets is one of the solutions to the tension between the goal of 'beholding God' and the inability to comprehend the vision.

The detailed discussion in *hekhhalot* literature of those who cannot behold God leads to the supposition that a conflicting opinion allowing for a vision of God exists. However, attention is focused on the dangers of exceeding the limitations of the prohibition, and the transcendental nature of God is stressed. "No eye, angelic or human, can perceive Him, and he who gazes upon God . . . his eyes expel fire and consume him . . ." (*Synopse*, paragraph 102). The descriptions of the metamorphosis by fire are reminiscent of the transformation of Enoch into Metatron, and may hint at a mystic conversion as well as describe a terrible punishment. "His beauty is beyond the beauty of *gevurot* (Might), His magnificence is beyond the beauty of bridegrooms, he who looks at Him is immediately dismembered, he who glimpses His beauty is spilled out like the contents of a jug" (*Synopse*, paragraph 159).

The contradiction between 'no creature can look' and 'he who looks' demonstrates that the prohibition and punishment do not negate the possibility of seeing God. Rather, they show that God has a visual aspect and that, despite the prohibition, there are those who do look.<sup>42</sup> The discussion of the possibility of seeing God continues with the identification of those who 'behold the Glory', and reflects the conflict between the prohibition and the act of looking described in the concepts *tzfiyah*, *hatzatzah*, and *yeridah lamerkavah*. The angelic hosts see "the semblance of lightning"; prophets have a dream-vision. Perhaps the description of "beholding God" in a "night-vision," "in the semblance of lightning," "in a glimpse," or "running back and forth," is an attempt to accommodate the prohibition against looking to the mystical vision that is recounted (*Synopse*, paragraph 351–352). The vision described is not human vision, which is forbidden, but

rather a momentary glimpse of enlightenment through supersensory perception. The object of the vision is distanced and unclear, and the viewer has undergone an ecstatic supersensory transformation to a trancelike dream state. These conditions naturally override the prohibition against, or the impossibility of, looking at God.

The normative trend within *hekhhalot* circles seems to be the one that allows God to be seen. Nevertheless, the rank and file of descenders to the chariot see only the chariot, not God. Only the chosen elite achieve the highest level of vision of the Deity, and among the chosen individuals only R. Akiva reports a unique experience extending beyond biblical formulas.<sup>43</sup>

In *Hekhalot Zutrat* (*The Small Book of the Celestial Palaces*), R. Akiva describes the divine image as revealed to him in his descent to the chariot. The descriptions reflect the tension between the awesome splendor of the vision and the inability to achieve an adequate verbal delineation. The involved description encompasses the *hayot* and the heavenly hierarchy, using language evocative of the complexity of the experience. God is described as "sitting in His palace, His feet surrounded by clouds of fire . . . like the sun, like the moon, like the stars, like the face of a man, the face of an eagle, the talons of a lion, the horns of an ox. His countenance is compared to that of a spirit, to the form of the soul that no creature can recognize; His body is like chrysolite, filling the entire world. Neither the near nor the far can look upon Him. Blessed be His name forever" (*Synopse*, paragraph 356).

The religious consciousness of the *hekhhalot* mystic is shaped by this attempt to grasp the essence of God through observation without relying on earlier biblical traditions, and naturally reflects the change in the concept of revelation. R. Akiva's well-known dictum, "He is like us, as it were, but greater than everything, and that is His glory which is hidden from us," reflects the dialectic between the visual, anthropomorphic aspect of God and the difficulty of expressing God's glory adequately.<sup>44</sup> The limited range of human perception leads to a lack of identity between human vision and heavenly reality.

### Kavod

The term *kavod* has various meanings in *hekhhalot* literature,<sup>45</sup> but with regard to the characteristics of the Divine, *kavod* is the general name for the celestial worlds unparalleled in the terrestrial realm, for the fixed relationship of God and the celestial retinue, of the enthroned to the throne. As in its biblical sense, *kavod* in *hekhhalot* mysticism is defined as an aspect of God with a visual dimension, the figurative hierarchy of the heavens accessible to observation by *hekhhalot* mystics. (In order to peer into the divine sphere, R. Akiva uses the formula *le-histakel bi-koodi*.) If in rabbinic language *kavod* refers to God as He is revealed on His throne in biblical theophanies,<sup>46</sup> for the *merkabah* mystics *kavod* reflects a religious concept embodying the mys-

tic's relationship to God in the form of knowledge, even if only schematic, of the structure of the heavens and the 'structure' of God. *Kavod* is the hierarchical grouping of a supernal array of beings of massive proportions, each one possessing a visual image—like the *hashmal* (electrum), like the terrible ice, clouds of flame, and so on.

In *hekhhalot* literature in general, *kavod* refers to the entire exalted heavenly hierarchy, the structure of the *merkabah*, and the permanent relationship between its component parts; in other words, to the structural and ceremonial aspects of heavenly existence that can be observed and studied. The entire concept of heaven undergoes a transformation from an undefined, abstract, natural heaven with God in isolation in space, to a heavenly pageant filled with events and actors, in which the pageant, rather than the King, seems to attract greater interest. The glory of the King is reflected against the foil of the infinite, glorious, awesome character of the heavens and their hosts. The concept of God expands from that of a unique, hidden, incomprehensible being to a God and a celestial retinue with graspable dimensions, holy names,<sup>47</sup> infinite size, awesome powers, cosmic beauty—in other words, a concrete, visually accessible image that reflects the new direction of *hekhhalot* thought.<sup>48</sup>

### Raz

In *hekhhalot* literature, *raz* (esoteric knowledge) is the dynamic element of divine existence, the moving force behind reality, its hidden dimension. Despite its configuration in names, *raz* represents abstract forces: the *raz* of creation, the laws of nature, or the hidden divine law of revealed existence. "For it is a strange and wonderful secret (*raz*) by which heaven and earth were created, in which all primal forces are contained" (*Synopse*, paragraph 166).

Similar to the concepts already discussed, *raz* has a dual nature: It is both the hidden dynamic force behind existence, and the knowledge of esoteric secrets regarding the world, names, history, or the Torah. It is also possible to define *raz* as God's all-encompassing knowledge of the underlying order of His sovereignty, or as the metaphysical knowledge of physical existence. Despite the transcendent, esoteric nature of the *raz*, chosen individuals among the *hekhhalot* mystics are granted revelation of heavenly secrets under special conditions involving a transformation preparing the observer to absorb the secret, and causing a significant change in his soul. "R. Ishmael said, when my ears heard the great secret the world was charged with purity; my heart was as if newborn, and my soul daily relives standing before the divine throne" (*Synopse*, paragraph 680). The mystic experience is grasped as having a stronger reality than normal existential experience, bringing about a marked change in the consciousness of the participant. When R. Ishmael learns from R. Akiva the *raz* of Sandalfon (his names),



his heart is filled with light of the magnitude of lightning that flashes from one end of the earth to the other.<sup>49</sup>

Acquisition of the celestial perspective of existence enables the mystic to unravel the secrets of heavenly and earthly forces, and to use the various forms of the *raz* itself. The direct revelation of *raz* to the descender to the chariot gradually becomes the basis for a secret tradition of names or hymns. The divine secrets become magical names, mystical adjurations, speculative subjects. The terrestrial transmission of the names comprising the 'secret' in *hekhlot* literature reflects the conversion of the direct revelatory-mystical experience into a magical-theurgical tradition. The terminology employed with regard to *raz* reflects both its divine source and its theurgical uses (*yode'a*—he who knows, *shoneh*—he who learns, *mishtamesh*—he who practices). At times, the magical-theurgical element outweighs the divine essence of the *raz* as one of the essential aspects of God; nevertheless, on balance, the *raz* is perceived as intimately bound up with the divine essence. (God Himself is addressed in a blessing as *hakham ha-razim*—Sage of the secrets.)

### Perception

The five dimensions of God, as the objects of mystic longing, are multifaceted and overlapping. Each represents simultaneously an aspect of God and His divine chariot, and a dimension of the religious aspirations of the mystic. The new conception of God in terms of *shemot*, *shiur*, *yofi*, *kavod*, and *raz* is characterized by a duality of mystical meaning and theurgical practice, of transcendent divinity and anthropomorphic description. Our discussion is not complete without an attempt to define the religious consciousness that shaped these aspects.

The idea of perception in *hekhlot* literature is based on a tripartite assumption: (1) God can be known directly, (2) human perception extends beyond the bounds of sensory experiences and rational consciousness, and (3) various levels of heavenly perspective are accessible, under certain conditions, to human perception. The spiritual endeavor of the mystic extends beyond the realm of human sensory perception to experiential areas requiring occlusion of the senses and suspension of rational thought.

Talmudic literature contains echoes of mystical observation of the Divine; however, the details of *ma'aseh merkabah* as a means of uncovering esoteric knowledge are not provided, and the dangers of indulging in its study by the uninitiated are stressed.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast, *hekhlot* literature provides detailed blueprints for the descent to the chariot. However, it retains an esoteric elitist element by stressing the dangers to the unworthy, and by requiring an elevated spiritual level. The descriptions of the celestial pageant are based on the testimony of those who have achieved 'the descent' or 'entered *pardes*'. Nonetheless, almost

all the visions recounted as a direct result of a mystical experience, or as direct testimony by the descender to the chariot, relate not to God, but to the *merkabah*. (Of course, since the *merkabah* partakes of the emanation of God's attributes, its observation also comprehends a measure of beholding God.)

The second assumption, that human perception can extend beyond rational empirical boundaries, is grounded upon two contradictory approaches. The first expands human perception beyond the senses; that is, it develops a mystical consciousness. The second develops a normative-authoritative interpretation of the vision, its significance, and preconditions; that is, it confines the mystic impulse within a speculative tradition with defined borders.

Comparison of the biblical and the mystical concepts of perception reveals the far-reaching character of the change in views. If in the Bible man cannot initiate contact in order to explore the heavens, and God's ways are beyond human understanding (Job), *hekhlot* literature opens the heavens, the underlying principles governing existence, and the secrets of the celestial throne to human observation.<sup>51</sup>

The third premise, assuming the existence of levels between heaven and earth, illustrates the expansion of the concept of heaven, which places the heavenly retinue within human reach, and distances God from direct observation. The type of knowledge acquired through perception in *hekhlot* literature is mainly concerned with heavenly names, measurements, ceremonies, and secret laws. However, the observer must relinquish any attempt to judge the vision according to rational criteria. The opening of *Hekhalot Zutarti* reflects this duality: "If you wish to . . . acquire heavenly secrets . . . study this tract . . . do not attempt to understand more than it teaches . . . understand with your heart and be silent that you may see the beauty of the *merkabah*" (*Synopse*, paragraph 335).

The surrender of rational autonomous thought and independent exegesis is a condition for mystical comprehension of the *merkabah*. The granting of permission to uncover cosmic secrets, use names, and view the *merkabah*, that is, to fulfill mystic longings, is coupled with prohibitions governing the language of the descriptions and their exegesis. Only the powerful imagery of Ezekiel is permitted; individual expression is subordinated in the description of the theophany. Doubt regarding the possibility of autonomous comprehension is expressed in the geonic dictum establishing R. Akiva as the exemplar of the proper means of experiencing the mystical vision. "R. Akiva was more excellent than others, for he peeked *properly* and beheld *fitly*, and his mind encompassed the frightening visions, and God granted him life. . . . Everything he saw he interpreted *correctly* with honest wisdom" (*Ozar ha-Geonim*). Thus the ability to see is taken for granted, but the quality of perception is governed by 'proper' observation, appropriate interpretation, and adherence to established patterns.

*Hekhalot* literature does not deal with individual ecstatic outpourings, but rather with establishment of clear boundaries of authority, order, and ritual, limiting the ability to behold God. Granting of permission is intrinsically linked to fixed patterns of preparation and ascent, and the achievement of a certain spiritual level. The vision of the heavenly hierarchy is also strictly defined, as is the freedom to interpret the vision independently. The unity of expression and concept in *hekhalot* literature, despite the fact that its composition spreads over centuries and incorporates various traditions and streams of thought, demonstrates that *merkabah* mysticism does not allow pluralism of concept, vision, observation or interpretation. Rather, the conditions, meaning, order, and exegesis of the vision are fixed. The version of the story of the four who entered *pardes* in *Hekhalot Zutrat* reflects the dangers inherent in the attempt at individual understanding of the vision.<sup>52</sup> Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma mistook pure marble for water, while Elisha ben Avuyah was punished either because he confused an angel with God, or because he gave a gnostic interpretation of the vision.

The descender to the chariot must deny his sensory perception and accept metaphysical explanations as transmitted by celestial beings; thus, the mystics often repeat descriptions given by angels rather than recount their personal observations. R. Ishmael is described in many parts of *hekhalot* literature as one who beholds the heavenly pageant while receiving a simultaneous angelic explanation. The detailed descriptions of the *hekhalot* and the celestial hosts are apparently intended to provide the proper framework for seeing and interpreting the vision, and are based on the assumption that the descender to the chariot is imitating heavenly rituals and ceremonies. The names, hymns, secrets, measurements, and seals found in *hekhalot* literature are also of angelic origin.

At the height of the mystic descent to the chariot, at the moment of transformation from a sensory to a supersensory creature, the mystic achieves a passive vision of the heavenly pageant unmediated by the senses or critical thought. This type of vision, the ultimate goal of the *hekhalot* mystics, reveals the content and form of the heavenly spheres. However, as mentioned above, the vision is conditioned by the closing off of the senses, and the surrender of individual exegesis in favor of angelic mediation. The *merkabah* mystics accept the subjective attempt to perceive as objective fact, thereby transposing the testimony of one individual regarding his experiences into the content of the visions of the other descenders to the chariot.

*Hekhalot* mysticism represents a unique approach to the knowledge of God. The interest in the Divine acquires an otherworldly quality, and focuses upon the celestial realms. New dimensions are added to the Divine and a mystical attempt is made to imitate celestial ritual and to achieve a vision of the celestial panorama. Paradoxically, God is not brought closer to human comprehension through these attempts; rather, the essential unknowability

of the Deity is stressed. The approach of the *hekhalot* mystics demonstrates the problematic nature of the mystic attempt to know God rather than to hear His divine commandments.

## NOTES

1. *Hekhalot* literature describes the ascent of the mystic through the celestial palaces, while *merkabah* mysticism centers on the mysteries of the divine throne-chariot. (See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 10, pp. 497ff.)—Adapter's note. For a discussion of the pluralism of sources and sects, problems of dating and editing, and the unique features of *hekhalot* literature, see G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken, 1954, pp. 40–79; J. Dan, The Seventy Names of Metatron, *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division C. (Jerusalem: Magnes 1982), p. 23; Morton Smith, Observations on *Hekhalot Rabbati*, *Biblical and Other Studies*, A. Altmann (ed.), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 149; P. S. Alexander, The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 28 (1977): 172; I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980, pp. 98–123, 142–149; P. Schafer, Tradition and Redaction in *Hekhalot* Literature, *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 14, no. 2 (1984): 180–181; K. E. Grozinger, The Names of God and the Celestial Powers: Their Function and Meaning in the *Hekhalot* Literature, in *Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Ktav, 1986, pp. 53–70.

2. Quotations from *hekhalot* literature are identified according to P. Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot Literatur*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1981, and translated by the adapter. For the book of Enoch, translations were taken from H. Odeberg, ed., *3rd Enoch or: The Hebrew Book of Enoch*, Cambridge: Harvard, 1928; New York: Ktav, 1973; whenever adaptable. The new terminology demonstrates how far removed the *hekhalot* mystics' conceptions were from daily religious life. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 44–47.

3. For a proposed analysis of the stages of this process, and its relationship to biblical, apocalyptic, and Qumran literature, see Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, pp. 29–72; J. Dan, The Concept of History in *Hekhalot* and *Merkabah* Literature, *BINAH: Studies in Jewish Thought*, (New York: Praeger, 1989).

4. The new religious imperative is reflected in the words of R. Akiva and R. Ishmael at the conclusion of the tract of *Shiur Komah*: "Whoever knows the measurements of our Creator and the glory of the Holy One, praise be to Him, which are hidden from the creatures, is certain of his share of the world to come, provided that this teaching is recited daily." (Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 64.) Terms like 'glimpse', 'behold God in His Glory', reflect the new interest in the heavens. Cf. Gruenwald, Knowledge and 'Vision,' *Israel Oriental Studies* 3 (1973): 88–105.

5. The possibility of ascent to heaven during a human lifetime is reflected in expressions like: "R. Akiva said, 'When I ascended and beheld God'," (*Synopse*, paragraph 545), or "When I ascended to heaven to look upon the *merkabah* (ibid., paragraph 1). For the influence of apocalyptic literature and gnostic thought on the ascent to heaven in *hekhalot* literature, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 43–46; *idem.*, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*, New York: Jew-

ish Theological Seminary, 1965, pp. 14–19; Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, pp. 29–72; *idem.*, Knowledge and 'Vision', pp. 92–98.

6. For a discussion of the conception of God as revealed in biblical sources, see Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*. Translated and abridged by Moshe Greenberg. New York: Schocken 1960, 1977, pp. 212–216.

7. For the ascetic practices and repetition of secrets governing the descent to the chariot, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 44, 49; Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, pp. 99–102. For the syncretistic nature of the use of magic, see Smith, *Observations on Hekhalot Rabbati*, p. 153. Cf. Gruenwald, Knowledge and 'Vision', pp. 98–100.

8. See Smith, *Hekhalot Rabbati*, pp. 155–156.

9. See E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*. Translated by I. Abrahams. Jerusalem: Magnes, 1979, p. 37.

10. *Synopse* paragraph 352. The translation is taken from Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 66.

11. The concept of abstraction is lacking in the Bible; the anthropomorphism therein is straightforward. A tendency toward allegorization occurs later. See Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, pp. 212–216; Urbach, *The Sages* pp. 37ff.; A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God Essays in Anthropomorphism*, Vol. 2. London: Oxford University Press, 1937.

12. Although the goal of the mystic is to ascend to heaven, for reasons which have become obscure the term used to describe the journey is the descent to the chariot (see Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 46–47). The mysteries of the throne-chariot, based upon Ezekiel, chapter 1, are referred to as *ma'aseh merkavah* in talmudic literature. See also J. Dan, *The Concept of History in Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature*.

13. For the significance of names in *hekhalot* literature and an analysis of their centrality, see Grözinger, "The Names of God and the Celestial Powers." For the significance of divine names in antiquity, see J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*, London: SCM Press, 1974 pp. 27ff.; E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963, pp. 283–322; Urbach, *The Sages*, pp. 124–134; H. Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy, Etudes Augustiniennes*, Paris; 1978, pp. 57, 239.

14. For the ritual use of names, see Scholem, *Gnosticism*, pp. 20–30; *idem.*, *Major Trends*, pp. 57–63, 365 n. 93. It has long been widely known that the numinous hymns, which comprise a large portion of *hekhalot* literature, have a theurgical purpose. See Scholem, *Gnosticism*, pp. 75–83; *idem.*, *Major Trends*, p. 56.

15. See the section on *yofi* below. The term 'angel' differs here from its use in later literature, meaning a higher force, prince, or divine being with a complex relationship to the Deity since it possesses essential aspects of the divine 'body'. Angels are often addressed with epithets of God, and the distinction between God and angels is not entirely clearcut. See Scholem, *Gnosticism*, p. 70. J. Dan suggests the term 'higher forces' instead of 'angels'.

16. See R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*. London: Oxford University Press, 1923, 1959.

17. *Kavod* has various meanings in *hekhalot* literature, as well as in biblical and

post-biblical literature. Its visual aspect is reflected in verses such as: "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory (*kavod*) of the Lord" (Ezekiel 1:28); "the glory of the Lord appeared in the tent of meeting" (Numbers 14:10); "and the glory of the Lord abode upon Mount Sinai" (Exodus 24:16). In *hekhalot* literature, the hierarchical-visual aspect is but one meaning of *kavod*. See below.

18. For the names of Metatron, see J. Greenfield, "Prolegomenon" to H. Odeberg, *The Hebrew Book of Enoch*, New York: 1973; Scholem, *Gnosticism*, pp. 43–55; *idem.*, *Major Trends*, p. 68; S. Lieberman, Metatron, The Meaning of His Name and His Functions, Appendix to Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, pp. 235–241; Alexander, The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch, pp. 162–165; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, Jerusalem: 1974, pp. 377–381.

19. Early kabbalistic writers like R. Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen interpreted this concept of God's name as a substantive entity in the following manner: "Heavenly names are substantive . . . the name cannot be separated from the substance, nor the substance from the name. . . ." On the names of God in *hekhalot* literature, see Scholem, *Gnosticism*, p. 75; K. E. Grözinger, *The Names of God and the Celestial Powers*, pp. 53–70; R. Elior, *Hekhalot Zutarti, Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, Supplement 1* (1982), p. 5.

20. In *hekhalot* literature, parallels exist between the descriptions of heavenly devotions and the actions of the descenders to the chariot. If the angels bathe in a river of fire, the mystics perform ritual ablutions; if the angels recite God's name, the mystics also use names during the entire ascent; and the numinous hymns of the mystics are also of angelic origin.

21. For the theurgical nature of the use of names in *hekhalot* literature and the syncretistic traditions, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 56; *idem.*, *Gnosticism*, pp. 54, 75; Alexander, The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch, pp. 170–171 and n. 24; Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, pp. 103–107; Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, pp. 56–57, 235–236.

22. For the Jewish concept that sees letters, divine pronouncements, and God's name as the force behind creation, see Scholem, *Gnosticism*, p. 79; *idem.*, *Major Trends*, p. 76. This concept is greatly expanded in *hekhalot* literature, and stress is placed on the creative and magic roles of letters and names as shown by expressions like "the seal that connects heaven and earth," "the letters by which heaven and earth were created," "it is a great secret through which heaven and earth were created." Much importance is attached to the "tying of crowns" (formation of names) by the angels. For God's name as given to the angels, and as the source of their power and obedience to God, see 3 Enoch, chapter 29 (Odeberg, pp. 102–103); Scholem, *Gnosticism*, pp. 71, 133; Urbach, *The Sages*, pp. 150, 171; Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, pp. 53–54.

23. Regarding secret versus revealed names, see Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, pp. 59, 239.

24. Regarding the prohibition against the use of the Divine Name, see Scholem, *Gnosticism*, pp. 80–81; *idem.*, *Major Trends*, p. 358 n. 17.

25. Scholarly attention has centered on the angelic recitation of *Kedushah*. See M. Weinfeld, *The Heavenly Praise in Unison, Meqor Hajjim, festschrift fur Georg Molin*, Graz: Akademische Druck, 1980, pp. 427–437. However, scholars have failed to note that according to *hekhalot* traditions, in addition to the *kedushah* and prayer,

the celestial creatures sing and take part in the ritual connected with recitation of names.

26. Regarding the celestial origin of hymns, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 57; and G.H. Box, translator and editor, *The Apocalypse of Abraham*, New York: n.p. 1918, chapter 17 and 18. For heavenly ceremonial as the archetypal ritual for the descenders to the chariot, see Urbach, *The Sages*, pp. 150–151, 181–183.

27. Regarding the theurgical nature of divine names in antiquity, and the syncretistic tradition in *hekhlot* literature, see n. 13, above; also E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, New York: Pantheon, 1953, vol. II, p. 153ff.; Scholem, *Gnosticism*, pp. 75–83.

28. M. Gaster, *The Shiur Komah*, in *Studies and Texts*, London: Maggs Bros., 1925–28, vol. II, pp. 1330–1353; Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 63–67; *idem.*, *Gnosticism*, pp. 6–7, 36–42; J. Dan, *The Concept of Knowledge in the Shiur Qomah*, in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History presented to Alexander Altmann*, Stein and Loewe (ed.) University of Alabama: 1979, pp. 67–73; M. S. Cohen, *The Shiur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism*, New York: University Press of America 1983; J. Greenfield, *Prolegomenon*, xxxiv.

29. For the relationship between *shiur komah* and Canticles, see Scholem, *Gnosticism*, pp. 37–40; Urbach, *HaMasorot al Torat HaSod*, *Studies in Mysticism and Religion*, presented to G. Scholem, Jerusalem, Magnes, 1967, pp. 1–28; Cohen, *The Shiur Qomah*, pp. 13–41.

30. See Greenfield, *Prolegomenon*; Scholem, *Major Trends*; and Dan, *The Concept of Knowledge*.

31. For textual variants, see M. S. Cohen, *The Shiur Qomah: Texts and Recensions*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1985.

32. For scholarly and medieval interpretations of the object of *shiur komah* speculation, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 65–66; *idem.*, *Gnosticism*, p. 37; Dan, *Concept of Knowledge*, p. 71. For the history of the mystical interpretation of Canticles, see A. Altmann, *Moses Narboni's Epistle on Shiur Qomah*, *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, A. Altmann (ed.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967, pp. 225–288; Cohen, *The Shiur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy*, pp. 167–186. The appearance of one or two elements only may represent various developmental levels (my thanks to A. Farber for the suggestion), or deliberate scribal omissions or redactions of the text.

33. For calculations of the measurements and their astronomic dimensions, see Cohen, *The Shiur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy*, pp. 9–10. See also section on beholding the Divine, below.

34. For a discussion of the semantic problems associated with the use of anthropomorphism to express the numinous, see R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, pp. 60–71.

35. See Cohen, *Shiur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy*, pp. 8–9; in the author's opinion, Cohen's statements regarding communion and *devekut* in *shiur komah* are completely off the mark with regard to the spiritual-historical context of the subject. Cf. Gruenwald, *Knowledge and 'Vision'*, p. 96, regarding the denial of the aspect of mystical communion in this literature.

36. See *Leviticus Rabbah*, Aḥarei Mot, 23, 13. Cf. Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 44, 52–53; *idem.*, *Gnosticism*, pp. 14–16.

37. Regarding the *mysterium tremendum* and its connection to cosmic beauty, see Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, pp. 134–144, 160–161; Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 57.

38. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 358 n. 18; cf. I. Chernus, *Visions of God in Merkabah Mysticism*, *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 13 (1982): 125–130.

39. The apparently anthropomorphic-visual patterns assume supersensory qualities since the anthropomorphic typology is the basis of a metamorphosis of fire and light. Cf. M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*. London: Harvill Press, 1960, chapter IV; *idem.*, *The Two and the One*. London: Harvill Press, 1965, chapter I.

40. See Chernus, *Visions of God in Merkabah Mysticism*, pp. 126–129; Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, pp. 93–97; Urbach, *The Sages*, pp. 49–50, 130–131. On the one hand we find in biblical tradition the prohibition against beholding God, "For man may not see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20), and on the other, direct visions of Him, "I saw the Lord seated upon His throne, with all the host of heaven standing in attendance to the right and to the left of Him" (I Kings 22:19; cf. Isaiah 6:1, 5).

41. See Urbach, *The Sages*, p. 156 for a discussion of the midrash stating that no creature, human or angelic, can behold God, as opposed to the view that angels cannot see Him but worthy men do. Cf. Chernus, *Visions*, pp. 123–129. On the *merkavah*, see *ibid.*, pp. 123–146.

42. Note that the tension between the desire to behold God and its prohibition, as illustrated by the angels covering their faces with their wings, and by various barriers between the Deity and sections of the chariot, is reflected in the ritual of the descenders to the chariot. Compare the heavenly curtain *pargod* and the barrier of fire with the barrier of fire that separates the mystic from scholars (*Synopse*, paragraph 203).

43. The figure of R. Akiva in *hekhlot* literature is patterned on the biblical and midrashic descriptions of Moses. Of Moses it is said, "And he beholds the likeness of the Lord" (Numbers 12:8); the midrash recounts his ascent to heaven (*Shabbat* 88–89). Moses serves as a model for R. Akiva with regard to beholding God, ascending to heaven, receiving esoteric lore, struggling with the angels, learning the names, and so on.

44. *Synopse*, paragraph 352; Scholem, *Gnosticism*, p. 79; *idem.*, *Major Trends*, pp. 66, 365; Chernus, *Visions of God*, p. 135.

45. See Scholem, *Gnosticism*, pp. 67–68; *idem.*, *Major Trends*, pp. 46, 66, 358 n. 16. For a discussion of the rabbinic view of the celestial realms and heavenly beings, see Urbach, *The Sages*, pp. 135–183.

46. Urbach, *The Sages*, p. 41.

47. In tannaitic literature angels remain anonymous, whereas *hekhlot* literature shows extensive interest in angelic names, characteristics, hierarchical standing, and so on. The request for knowledge is made of angels, not of the Deity.

48. Cf. Urbach, *The Sages*, pp. 37–40. For the addition of intermediate entities by Hellenistic Jewry, see also Alexander, *The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch*, p. 175.

49. *Synopse*, paragraph 656. Cf. Chernus, *Visions of God*, p. 136 and accompanying notes; Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 52, 361 nn. 41–42 regarding the transformation through light and fire.

50. See Scholem, *Gnosticism*, pp. 1–5, 9–13; Gruenwald, *Knowledge and 'Vision'*,

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avid J. Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980, introduction.

tribution of apocalyptic literature to the widening of human knowledge and the revelation of secrets, see Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah* 12.

the various versions of the four who entered *pardes*, see Halperin, *Rabbinic Literature*, pp. 86–92.