

THE PRIESTLY NATURE OF THE MYSTICAL HERITAGE IN *HEYKALÔT LITERATURE*

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The *heykalôt* literature is an anonymous corpus of enigmatic writings, ascribed to the Tannaitic period, composed primarily in Hebrew, though including some occasional Aramaic passages. This heterogeneous collection was composed by diverse authors from within spiritually affiliated circles commencing at some period in the second or third centuries and continuing until the fifth or sixth centuries C.E.¹

This literature contains neither inherent evidence decisively attesting as to its date of origin nor does it offer an obvious unequivocal testimony relating to the historical background of its composition. With but one noticeable exception, it lacks any allusion to mundane reality therefore it possesses but few earthly or existential interests and almost no explicit social concerns.²

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¹ Since this paper was submitted a considerable amount of research has appeared. For a more up-to-date bibliography, I refer the reader to my Hebrew article: "From Earthly Temple to Heavenly Shrines: Prayer and Sacred Liturgy in the Hekhalot Literature and its relation to Temple Traditions", *Tarbiz* 64 (1995), pp. 341-380, an English version of which appeared in *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 4 (1997), pp. 217-267. On the religious uniqueness of *Heykalôt* literature and its mystical character, see G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1967, pp. 40-77; *idem*, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, New York, 1965; M. Smith, "Observations on *Heykalôt Rabbati*" in: A. Altmann (ed.), *Biblical and Other Studies*, Cambridge, 1963; I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkâbâh Mysticism. Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums*, Leiden, 1980; I. Chernus, "Visions of God in Merkabah Mysticism", *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, 13 (1982), pp. 123-146; J. Dan, "Three Types of Ancient Jewish Mysticism", *Seventh Annual Rabbi L. Feinberg Memorial Lecture in Judaic Studies*, University of Cincinnati, 1984; R. Elior, "The Concept of Angel in Hekhalot Literature" in: J. Dan (ed.), *Binah, Studies in Jewish Thought*, 2, New York, 1987, pp. 97-120; D. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision. Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum* 16. Tübingen, 1988; P. Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism*, Albany, 1992; R. Elior, "Mysticism, Magic, and Angelology: The Perception of Angels in Hekhalot Literature", *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1, (1993/94), pp. 3-53; *idem*, "From Earthly Temple to Heavenly Shrines: Prayer and Sacred Liturgy in the Hekhalot Literature and its Relation to Temple Traditions", *Tarbiz* 64 (1995), pp. 341-380.

² For differing opinions on the historical and social background of the *heykalôt* literature, see G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*; E. E. Urbach, "*Ha-masôrôt 'al tôrat*

The various traditions assembled in the *heykalôt* literature relate to the Rabbinic milieu and the Tannaitic Pseudepigrapha and are figured by the personages of Rabbi Aqîba' and Rabbi Iṣmael—Tannaim who lived in the late first century and in the first decades of the second century, that is, after the destruction of the Second Temple. The treatises which comprise the *heykalôt* literature were defined by their authors or redactors as Mišnayôt, however the content of this material is neither legal nor halakic in nature nor exegetical in reference but is rather mystical in character, ritualistic in orientation, and celestial and angelic in its concerns, elaborating precisely those subjects which the Mišnah disregards, dismisses, eliminates or distinctly prohibits.³ The *heykalôt* texts relate mytho-poetical accounts portraying the heavenly realm alongside mystical narrations describing the celestial throne and the divine chariot while imparting detailed descriptions of the angelic retinue, the celestial liturgy and the heavenly ritual. They also discuss magical adjurations, ascetic restrictions, mystical hymns and minute aspects of the angelic cult. This literature aspires to acquire and to impart hidden celestial knowledge and is preoccupied with both the heavenly realm and with the mystical and ritual acts demanded in order to approach these goals.⁴

The significance of the Mišnaic identity and of the Tannaitic historical affiliation assumed by the circles composing this literature has been debated by various scholars. Some scholars have maintained the existence of a close association between the Talmudic literature

ha-sôd be-teqîfat ha-tanna'im", in: *Melqarim be-qabbâlâh müggashûm le-G. Scholem*, Jerusalem, 1966/7, 1–28; P. Schäfer, "Tradition and Redaction in Hekhalot Literature", *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 14, (1983), pp. 172–181; Chernus, *Visions*; J. Dan, *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism*, Radio-Broadcast University, Tel Aviv, 1989 (in Hebrew), pp. 123–133; D. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*; M. Bar Ilan, *The Mysteries of Jewish Prayer and Heykalôt*, Ramat Gan, 1987 (in Hebrew); Elior "Merkâbâh Mysticism", Review of *Faces of the Chariot* by David Halperin, *Numen* 37 (1990), pp. 241–47, and *idem*, "From Early Temple".

³ *Mišnah Hagigâh* 2, 1; *Mišnah Megillâh* 4, 10.

⁴ Textual evidence for mythical and mystical accounts, magical interest and angelological perception can be amply found in different editions of *Heykalôt* literature. See M. Gaster, *The Sword of Moses*, London, 1896; M. Margoliot, *Sefer ha-Razim*, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, 1966; P. Schäfer (ed.), *Synopse zur Heykalôt-Literatur. Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum* 2, Tübingen, 1981 (hereafter *Synopsis*); *idem*, *Geniza-Fragmente zur Heykalôt-Literatur. Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum* 6, Tübingen, 1984; M. S. Cohen, *The Shiur Qomah, Texts and Recensions*, Tübingen, 1985; Elior, *Heykalôt Zûtratî*, Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, Appendix I, Jerusalem, 1982, and *idem*, "From Earthly Temple". For a description of the different compositions and textual units, see: Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic*, and P. Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God; Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism*, Albany, 1992.

and the *heykalôt* treatise as well as a mutual influence or even an actual identity of their authors.⁵ Adversely, this affiliation has been strongly contested⁶ though no convincing suggestion has been proffered as to the meaning and purpose of this Tannaïtic pseudepigraphy. The present study will argue that the literary identity of the *heykalôt*, whether authentic or pseudepigraphic, suggests both a deep affiliation with the biblical priestly-prophetic tradition relating to the First Temple as well as a particular affinity with the Mišnaic-period priestly lore relating to the Second Temple. I will attempt to further substantiate the priestly orientation of the *heykalôt* literature through a clarification of the various categories of mystical knowledge and cultic allusions which are expressed in the body of these texts.

An attentive review of the diverse passages of the *heykalôt* traditions will reveal several different expressions of mystical knowledge—all pertaining to the celestial reality and to the ritual dimension of the heavenly realm. All the various forms of mystical knowledge were attained through divine revelation, by means of celestial heralds or from esoteric tradition:

1. The knowledge and command of arcane divine names (*šemôṭ*) was perceived as a prerequisite for mystical ascent, for conjuring the angels and for gazing upon the divine chariot. Similarly, it was also considered as a precondition for ritualistic aims, magical purposes and theurgic objectives.⁷

2. Knowledge of the elaborate hierarchy of angels alongside the cosmological knowledge of the celestial realms, the placement of the firmaments and the arrangement of the heavenly beings were also obligatory prerequisites.⁸ All were perceived as the hierarchy and

⁵ See Scholem, *Major Trends*, and *idem*, *Jewish Gnosticism*, pp. 9–13, 24.

⁶ See E. E. Urbach, “*Ha-masôrôt*”, 1–28; D. Halperin, *The Merkâbâh in Rabbinic Literature*, New Haven, 1980, pp. 3 *et seq.*, 183 *et seq.*; *idem*, *The Faces of the Chariot*, ch. I, 9, pp. 360 *et seq.*, and Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, pp. 7–10.

⁷ See M. Smith, “Observations”; Elior, *Hekalôt zuṭratî*, pp. 5–7; *idem*, Concept of God, pp. 20–24; K. Grözinger, “The Name Of God and the Celestial Powers: Their Function and Meaning in the Hekhalot Literature”, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987), pp. 53–69; P. Schäfer, “Jewish Magic Literature in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages”, *JJS* 41 (1990), pp. 75–91, and Elior, “Mysticism”, pp. 10–13.

⁸ See P. Schäfer, “Engel und Menschen in der Hekhalot-Literatur”, *Kairos* 22 (1980), 201–225; *idem*, *The Hidden and Manifest God*; Ph. Alexander, “3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch”, in: J. H. Charlesworth (ed), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, New York, 1983, pp. 223–315, and J. Dan, “Anafiel, Metatron, and the Maker of Creation”, *Tarbiz* 52 (1983), pp. 447–450 (in Hebrew).

order of the *Merkâbâh*, or the Divine *mysterium tremendum* of the Chariot, and ultimately as knowledge of the awesome Celestial Temple and its cult.⁹

3. Knowledge of the angelic ritual and the celestial liturgy as the mystics observed being performed within the heavenly sanctuary inspired *imitatio angeli* and sanctioned human worship in imitation of the angelic cult.¹⁰

4. Knowledge of the various components of an esoteric ritual-magical heritage (*râzîm*), including purification rites and ascetic instructions of segregation enabled the adherents to perceive that which is hidden from the uninitiated and thus to transcend the conventional borders of time and space.¹¹

5. Knowledge of the mysteries of God (*Ši'ûr qômâh*), which include the calibration of the infinite divine measures and the expanse of the heavenly glory, the secret names of the divine stature and the details of divine mythology pertaining to the heavenly throne, as well as a description of the myriad divine beings serving the deity was extensively elaborated.¹²

These different forms of knowledge—venerable and preserved in the form of a mystical heritage and an esoteric tradition—all pertain to the particular languages and acts which were exclusive to the Temple—the language of holy names, the language of liturgy, the language of ritual and the numinos knowledge of God. All these forms of knowledge were conceived as a bequest, imparted by the heavenly

⁹ See R. Elijor, "Mysticism, Magic, and Angelology; The Perception of Angels in Heykalôt Literature", *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1 (1993/94), pp. 43–53.

¹⁰ On the angelic liturgy in *heykalôt* literature, see A. Altmann, "Kedushah Hymns in the Earliest Heykalôth Literature (From an Oxford Manuscript)", *Melilah* 2 (1946), pp. 1–24 (in Hebrew), and I. Gruenwald, *širat ha-mal'akîm, ha-qedûšsâh û-be'ayat hûbbûrah šel sifrut ha-heykalôt*, in: A. Oppenheimer, U. Rappaport, M. Stern (eds.), *Perâqîm be-tôledôt Yerušalayîm bi-yemay Bayit šeni*, Jerusalem, 1981, pp. 459–481. On the imitation of the angelic worship, see; R. Elijor, "Mysticism, Magic, and Angelology; The Perception of Angels in Hekhalot Literature", *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1, (1993/94), pp. 3–53; *idem*, "From Earthly Temple to Heavenly Shrines: Prayer and Sacred Liturgy in the Hekhalot Literature and its Relation to Temple Traditions", *Tarbiz* 64 (1995), pp. 341–380.

¹¹ See Synopsis sect. 82–93.

¹² On *Ši'ûr Qômâh*, see G. Scholem, *Major Trends*, and *idem*, "*Ši'ûr Qômâh, ha-demût ha-mišṭûl šel ha-'Elohût*", in: *Pirqey yesôd be-habânat ha-Qabbâlâh u-semaleyha*, Mosad Bialik, Jerusalem 1976, pp. 153–186; M. S. Cohen, *The Shiur Qomah. Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Qabbalistic Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1983, and A. Farber-Ginat, "Shiur Qomah", in: M. Oron and A. Goldreich (eds.), *Masuoṭ, Memorial Book for E. Gottlieb*, Jerusalem 1994, pp. 361–394.

beings to the Descenders of the *Merkâbâh*.¹³ No passage of this wisdom was thought to have been achieved by human effort, by mere observation, or by theoretical speculation. The divine origin likewise precluded independent apprehension or empirical analysis of the texts or of the rites aforementioned but rather allowed only committal to memory, ecstatic recitation, and ritual imitation through the means of arcane spells, ineffable conjurations, celestial liturgy and mysterious, incomprehensible formulae. Therefore, all of this authoritative celestial knowledge imparted by angelic revelation could be comprehended as a mystical mytho-poetic transformation of cultic myth. That is to say, the priestly cult that ceased to exist with the destruction of the Second Temple was transformed into an all encompassing mystical world-view that perpetuated the lost Temple cult within the heavenly chariot of the celestial Temple and was transcended into angelic worship within the celestial sanctuary.¹⁴

The world revealed through the aforementioned types of knowledge is an eternal world of ever more magnificent heavenly sanctuaries, inhabited and defended by ever greater divine beings shaped in the form of angelic priests serving, extolling, and praying, within the heavenly Temple.¹⁵ These angelic-priestly beings administering the heavenly rites and the celestial liturgy are placed in a hierarchical order which inspires both tremendous reverence and great awe. Entrance into these holy shrines and the exalted celestial sanctuaries as well as the secure passage through them is granted by the angelic sentinels by means of the proper application of the incantations, conjurations, seals and spells with which the initiate must be provided.¹⁶ This esoteric knowledge, drawing upon a tradition of divine revelation and conditioned by severe ascetic regulation was restricted to within close circles and further limited to only the worthy few.¹⁷ The esoteric use of holy names, the centrality of the divine liturgy, the importance of the celestial secrets of the inner sanctuaries

¹³ See *Synopsis*, sects. 106, 152, 337, 376, 348, 550, 587, 623-625, 630-633.

¹⁴ See Elior, "Mysticism".

¹⁵ See *Synopsis*, sect. 30-34, 52-58, 384, 389, 390.

¹⁶ On particular angels and on groups of angels, see for instance *Synopsis*, 10-20, 241-247, 353-355, 384-390. Cf. Alexander, "Historical Setting"; Dan, "Anafiel", *idem*, *Ancient Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 81-102; Schäfer, "The Hidden and Manifest God", and Elior, "Mysticism".

¹⁷ On esoteric restrictions and ascetic regulations, see *Synopsis*, sect. 180, 299, 424, 560, 572, 623.

and the mysteries of the divine chariot, as well as the hierarchical order and the particular concern regarding purity as a precondition for approaching the sacred—all pertain equally to the priests, to the angels and to the mystics, those *Descenders of the Chariot* in the *heykalôt* literature.¹⁸ These elements all seem to reflect the realistic or imaginary spiritual status of circles that maintained an exclusive possession of divine wisdom and cultic tradition. Those who possessed this particular sort of ritual knowledge were probably associated with certain circles of the priestly caste, those who had utilized this knowledge in the Temple worship. Due to the lack of conclusive historical evidence, it cannot be positively ascertained whether this inspiration was affected through indirect oral or written traditions or by means of direct social and religious influences. However, the priestly circles, those who had maintained the ritual connection between heaven and earth through praise and prayer, ritual sacrifice and daily offerings, through daily sacred liturgy, through the use of holy names, purity rites, blessings and esoteric divine knowledge, when the Temple existed¹⁹ would probably be those most desirous of preserving the

¹⁸ See Elior, "Concept of God".

¹⁹ The Temple cult was conducted according to the biblical prescriptions referring to the Tabernacle service. Though preparatives involved the assistance of Levites, the cult, which included daily animal sacrifice, incense offering, bestowing various blessings, arranging the Shew-bread and attending to various ritual objects, was exclusively reserved for the priests. Cf. II Chr. 31, 3. Cf. Ex. 29, 38–44; Num. 8, 1 and *passim*; Ex. 30, 7–8, 34–38; II Chr. 13, 11; I Chron. 23, 28–29; I Chr. 9, 1–34; *Mišnah Tamûd* 5, 1, and *TB Berâkôt* 11, 2. The service also included daily liturgy, praying, praising, chanting, and playing of musical instruments by the Levites and singers, which are reflected in many Psalms. Cf. I Chr. 23, 30, II Chr. 29, 25, I Chr. 25, 1; *Mišnah Tamûd* 7, 4; *Rôš ha-šanâh* 4,4. The Levites were also responsible for accompanying the worship of the High priest with song and for the security of the various Temple gates. Cf. *Tamûd* 7, 3; II Chr. 29, 26–28; Ben Sira 50, 1–21; I Chr. 9, 17, 24–27; *ibid.*, 26, 12–29. Uttering of the ineffable name and the use of Holy Names is mentioned as part of the priestly service in *Mišnah Sôta* 7, 6; *TB Qiddûšîn* 71a, *Sifre, Nassô*, sec. 39. On the nature of the priestly cult in biblical sources and on the central and controversial position of the priesthood in Second Temple period, see A. Büchler, *ha-Kôhanîm we-'abôdatam be-Miqdaš Yerûšalayim be-'asôr ha-šanîm ha-'aḥarôn še-li-fney ḥurban Bayit šeni*, Jerusalem, 1966; J. Liver, Chapters in the History of the Priests and Levites, (Hebrew), Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1987; M. Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel*, Oxford, 1978; M. Herr, "The Continuity of the Succession in the Transition of the Torah", *Zion* 44 (1979), pp. 43–56; I. Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence; A Study of the Priestly Strata in the Pentateuch*, Jerusalem 1992, and extensive bibliography there, and D. Schwartz, "Midbar û-Miqdaš; 'al dat û-medinâh be-Yehûdâh be-yemay Bayit šeni"; in: Y. Gafni and G. Mozkin (eds.), *Priesthood and Monarchy*, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 61–78. On the priestly heritage in Qumran, see B. Gärtner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament*, Cambridge, 1965, and C. Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice: A Critical Edition*, Atlanta, 1985.

memory and significance of the holy cult with the loss of the very foundation of their ancient tradition. The members of the priestly circles would be those most likely to transform their now defunct earthly lore into eternal, heavenly ritual and ineffable, celestial knowledge after the destruction of the Temple, the central edifice for Divine worship and the center of Jewish life in all its respects. Prior to the destruction of the Temple, the priests had functioned as Israel's ritual emissaries by maintaining the communion between heaven and earth. Now they became the mystical emissaries who ascended unto the heavenly sanctuary and descended into the *Merkâbâh* through the power of celestial liturgy, holy names, divine knowledge, and sacred rituals, and by the strict observance of hierarchical order and rules of purity, thereby transforming their obsolete ritual heritage into an eternal, mystical lore.

The authors of the *Heykalôt* literature made frequent allusion to various affiliations between the ruined, earthly Temple and the eternal, heavenly sanctuaries that perpetuated its glory. The daily, sacred liturgy, the musical tradition of singing in unison, the priestly blessings, the repetitive, ritual command of the secret knowledge of the holy names, as well as the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton, the observance of strict purification and ascetic preparation, pertain to those serving both the heavenly shrines and the earthly Temple.²⁰ The angels of the celestial sanctuaries are akin to the priests of the earthly Temple and everyday angelic ritual in heaven is described in terms which were related or paralleled in the priestly ritual as had occurred within the Temple or as was perceived in mystical terms by the Descenders of the Chariot. Moreover, the latter, according to their own testimony, adapted those rituals by imitating the angels that serve in the heavenly sanctuaries in priestly manner.²¹

The aforementioned arguments can be substantiated by drawing attention to a few noticeable examples of the priestly orientation of *Merkâbâh* mysticism. The two principal concepts that define and designate this corpus, that is *heykalôt* and *Merkâbâh* as well as the choice and nomination of its two primary earthly and heavenly protagonists, Rabbi Išmael ha-Kôhen and Metatron, Prince of the Countenance, all reflect not only the Tannaitic pseudepigrapha but also an obvious cultic influence inspired by the Temple lore, a fact which

²⁰ See Elijor, "Mysticism".

²¹ See Elijor, "The Concept of God", pp. 49–50.

might well suggest a continuation of priestly tradition upon the composers of the *heykalôt* treatise.

In Biblical Hebrew *heykal* is defined as a sanctuary, further, as a place reserved for the priests and their worship. The Bible mentions the word *heykal* as temple and sanctuary nearly one hundred times, noticeably in priestly orientated texts such as Ezekiel and Psalms or in those sections of the books of Kings and Chronicles describing the Jerusalem Temple. The interior of the Temple was divided into three chambers: a vestibule *'ûlâm*, a sanctuary *heykal* and an inner sanctum or "holy of holies" *dehâr*. Divine worship transpired within the *heykal* where entry was prohibited to all others except the priests. *heykalôt*, the plural form of *heykal*, is mentioned in the *heykalôt* literature several hundred times,²² expressing the world view which perceives heaven as a Temple, enclosing within itself seven holy sanctuaries. The heavenly *heykalôt*, and the earthly *heykal* alike possessed magnificent gates and awesome guards, splendourous cultic utensils, priestly servants and choirs singing songs of praise utilizing the liturgic heritage, ritual order and cultic tradition. In both sanctuaries the highest religious act was associated with the actual pronouncement of the Ineffable Name of God.²³ Contrastingly, within the earthly sanctuary the ritual sacrifice accompanied by the sacred liturgy had been the focus of the cultic tradition, while in the celestial sanctuary it was the rituals pertaining to the Holy Names and to the celestial liturgy which maintained pre-eminent importance.²⁴

The other recognized title of this literature, *Merkâbâh*, meaning Chariot,²⁵ possesses a close affinity to the Temple heritage as well:

In relation to the most sacred cultic object of the earthly sanctuary it is written: "And for the altar of incense refined gold by weight; and gold for the pattern of the chariot [of] the cherubim, that spread out their wings and covered the ark of the covenant of the Lord"

²² See these concepts in P. Schäfer (ed), *Konkordanz zur Heykalôt-Literatur*, vol. I, Tübingen 1986, vol. II, Tübingen, 1988.

²³ Cf. *TB Yoma* 65b. See also *Synopsis*, sec. 384-400.

²⁴ On the Temple cult, see J. Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience*, Leiden, 1976; M. Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel*, Oxford, 1978, and I. Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence; A Study of the Priestly Strata in the Pentateuch*, Jerusalem 1992. On the centrality of names and angelic liturgy in *heykalôt* literature, see sources mentioned *supra*, n. 7.

²⁵ Usually associated with Ezekiel's vision, known as Ezekiel's Chariot. See Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*.

(I Chronicles 28, 18).²⁶ The Hebrew original: *we-le-tabnût ha-Merkâbâh ha-kerûbîm zahab* could also be translated as: "the pattern of the chariot [of] the golden cherubim". It is interesting to note that the word *tabnût*, pattern, archetype is mentioned in Exodus 25, 8–9 in relation to the Temple and the Tabernacle and their heavenly archetype; "And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show thee after the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it". As against "the pattern of the chariot" from the earthly sanctuary, the central cultic and mystical object of the heavenly sanctuary is the "Divine chariot", into which *yôrdey ha-Merkâbâh* are yearning to ascend and descend in order to gaze upon the heavenly ritual.

I have argued elsewhere²⁷ that the enigmatic prophetic vision of the *Merkâbâh* (Ezekiel 1:1–28; 8:2; 10:1–22) was deciphered by the Descenders of the Chariot as a priestly vision that transformed the cultic heritage of the ruined First Temple into a mystical celestial service in the heavenly temple. There can be no doubt that the underlying celestial imagery of the *Merkâbâh* literature originates in the vision of Ezekiel, the exiled priest. Ezekiel, who had witnessed in body and in spirit the destruction of the First Temple, perceived the cultic objects from the earthly Temple transformed into animated elements in his vision of the heavenly chariot.²⁸ It is apparent that a substantial portion of the concepts mentioned in Ezekiel's consecration vision are visionary abstractions of the ritual objects of the Temple of Solomon as described in detail in I Kings 7, 23–37, 8:6–9 and in II Chronicles 3, 7–14, 4, 3–5, 14–15. The brass rims and spokes of the wheels, the lions, and the cattle of bright brass, the structure of the chariot and the cherubim of gold, which were all splendid objects of the temple cult, sustained a visionary metamorphosis in the awesome figure of the Holy Creatures, *hayyôt ha-qôdeš*, with the faces of lions, oxen and Cherubim standing on the wheels in Ezekiel's vision of the *Merkâbâh*.²⁹

²⁶ According to the King James' Version. The Revised Standard Version reads: "And for the altar of incense made of refined gold, and its weight; also his *plan* for the golden chariot of the cherubim, that spread out their wings, and covered the ark of the covenant of the Lord."

²⁷ See Elior, "Mysticism".

²⁸ See W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary*, tr. Cosslett Quin, London, 1970 and M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20, Anchor Bible*, Garden City, 1983.

²⁹ The brass molten sea that stood on four triads of oxen, which faced the four

The ritual objects and the static, bright brass, four-sided utensils from Solomon's Temple, evolved into the "figure of the four *ḥayyôl*" with wings that gleam "like burnished brass," and which, as they move, emit the great roar of the vision of the chariot. In the visionary dimension, movement, sound, and fire were added to the four-sided cultic structure which appeared as a combination of the figures of the *ḥayyôl* and the wheels of the chariot, a structure which was also retained in the visionary image of the fourfold heavenly *Merkâbâh*. However, the essential dimension added to the chariot vision is mythical and mystical, thus eternalizing in heaven the glory and the beauty of the earthly temple, which has been destroyed. Ezekiel, the priest, was exiled in the reign of King Jehoiachin in 597 BCE, when Nebuchadnezzar plundered "all of the treasures in the House of the Lord and all of the treasures in the House of the King and cut in pieces all of the golden utensils which Solomon, the King of Israel, had made in the Temple of the Lord" (II Kings 24, 13). Ezekiel saw "visions of God" in "the fifth year of the exile of Jehoiachin"

directions "three facing north, three facing west, three facing south, and three facing east" and the burnished brass stands with four brass wheels with spokes, axles, and hubs" on the frames of which stood "lions, oxen, and Cherubim" (I Kings 7, 23-37) and the Cherubim which were plated with gold and spread their wings "touching each other, wingtop to wingtop" (I Kings 6, 23-28) were all transformed in the vision of the exiled priest Ezekiel into the image of a greater, glowing cloud, with brightness round about it and fire flashing forth, within which was seen "the likeness of the four *ḥayyôl* (living creatures)" with their wings sparkling "like burnished brass facing the four cardinal directions", "and their faces were in the figure of the face of a man and the face of a lion . . . and the face of an ox and the face of an eagle to all for of them"; "and their wings touched one another" (Ez. 1, 4-11). The four wheels (*'ofannîm*) of the stands in the Temple, which were described in concrete detail "and the four wheels beneath the frames . . . and the making of the wheels was like the making of the wheels of a chariot, their axletrees, and their backs and their rims and their spokes everything was molten" (I Kings 7, 32-33), becomes in Ezekiel's vision four celestial wheels: "As I beheld the *ḥayyôl*, behold one wheel upon the earth by the *ḥayyôl* with their four faces: the appearance of the wheel and their making was like unto the colour of a beryl; and the four had one likeness; and their appearance and their making was, as it were, a wheel in the middle of a wheel . . . and when the *ḥayyôl* went, the wheels went by them . . . for the spirit of the *ḥayyâh* was in the wheels" (Ez. 1, 15-21). The winged cherubim from the Temple also became, in the second version of the vision, winged cherubim with four faces standing on the four wheels, which were identified with the holy *ḥayyôl* and linked to the Temple that appeared to the prophet in the vision of the Lord" (Ez. 10, 3-8). The winged cherubim are mentioned fifteen times in various descriptions of the Temple (I Kings 6, 23, 27-29, 32, 35; 7, 29, 36; 8, 6; I Chr. 28, 18; II Chron. 3, 7, 10-14; 5, 7, 8) and are mentioned a similar number of times in Ezekiel. The *'ofannîm* (wheels), lions, cattle, brass, and the twelve creatures are all to be found in the Temple and in the vision of the chariot.

when the shattered cultic utensils of the Temple and the plundered ritual objects, with which he was well familiar, from his service as priest in the sanctuary, became eternal visionary objects within the celestial Temple.

It seems that the visionary metamorphosis of objects of the earthly Temple ritual was indeed intended to preserve the lost service within mytho-poetic memory and to maintain an echo of the historical memory within a mystical-liturgical reality. The authors of the *heykalôt*, who contemplated the *Merkâbâh* of Ezekiel after the destruction of the Second Temple, transformed the visionary beings, which were originally associated with the earthly Temple ritual, into bearers of the ritual of the celestial Temple, while describing the elements of the *Merkâbâh* in the guise of personified celestial beings, who participate in the heavenly ritual according to the pattern of the Temple service.

The *hayyôt*, the *kerûbîm*, and the *'ôfannîm*—which are all described in the vision of Ezekiel as forming an awesome and splendid revelation, are all envisioned in the *Heykalôt* tradition within the figures of the myriad host of heavenly angelic priests and Levites who play, chant, intone, and sing before the Throne of Glory:

From the sound of the playing of lutes of his *hayyôt*,
from the sound of the intoning
of the drums of his *'ôfannîm*,
and from the sound of the chants
of the cymbals of his *kerûbîm*.

(*Synopsis*, sec. 103)

For with six voices singing before Him
the bearers of his glorious Throne,
the *kerûbîm* and the *'ôfannîm*
and the Holy *hayyôt*.

(*Synopsis*, sec. 161)

Every day the Holy *hayyôt* come forth
from beneath the divine throne
Their mouth are full of melody,
their wings full of joy
Their hands play music
and their feet dance.

(*Synopsis*, sec. 189)

Upon the conclusion of your prayer pronounce the
three Names that the holy *hayyôt* are pronouncing
when they gaze upon and regard ARKS YHWH Lord of Israel;

and when you pray another prayer utter the three letters that *galgalay merkâbâh* are uttering when they chant before the throne”

(*Synopsis*, sec. 564)

“*’ofanney hôd* and *kerûbey qôdeš*

are singing comforting songs

ḥayyôt ha-qôdeš

are chanting mysterious chants

with their mouths”

(*Synopsis*, sec. 593)

The *Merkâbâh* tradition describes a multi-voiced personification in the heavenly sanctuaries, for all the figures appear as singers, musicians, and players of the instruments as utilized by the priests and Levites of the Temple. The liturgy which accompanied the sacrifice offering in the earthly sanctuary³⁰ is alluded to in the aforementioned descriptions of the heavenly liturgy. The numinous celestial ceremony is described by the merging of motives combined from both the visionary beings of Ezekiel’s chariot, which were indirectly affiliated with the ritual of the First Temple and with descriptions of the service of the priests and Levites, as depicted in Psalms and Chronicles, are all directly connected to the ritual of the First and Second Temples.

Alongside their daily participation in the liturgic ritual and the heavenly polyphony which constitute the primary concerns of the celestial sacred cult, the angels or the *ḥayyôt*, *’ofanim*, Cherubim and *galgalîm* of the *Merkâbâh* are further described as performing priestly functions in the serving of the throne, guarding the gates of the heavenly sanctuaries and maintaining the esoteric heritage, utilizing holy letters, engraving the Explicit Name, binding crowns and diadems, reciting the doxology, ritually purifying and immersing themselves in rivers of fire, prostrating themselves, writing books and scrolls, granting seals, mediating between heaven and earth, giving testimony from the heavenly inner sanctum, and pronouncing the Holy Names.³¹

Ezekiel’s vision would have been both the inspiration and the justification for the similar imageries conceived by priestly circles after the destruction of the Second Temple in their perception of

³⁰ On the chants, prayers, and musical instruments that accompanied the sacrificial cult, see M. Greenberg, *‘Al ha-Miqra we-’al ha-Yahadût*, Tel Aviv, 1985, p. 180; and *idem*, “Prayer”, in: *Biblical Encyclopedia*, vol. 8, pp. 910–917 (Hebrew).

³¹ See *Synopsis*, sections 11, 16, 31, 33, 56–58, 98, 103, 129, 168, 170–171, 180, 376, 399, 555, 590, 623, 974.

priestly worship in the upper sanctuaries. Thus the most common expressions and concepts used in describing the *heykalôt* are taken directly from Ezekiel visions. The concepts 'eš, nôgâh, zûw, zôhar, hašmal, bazaq, geḥalîm, kisse', ḥayyôt ha-qôdeš, kerûbîm and 'ofannîm—are all taken from Ezekiel's visions and are all mentioned countless times in *heykalôt* literature.³² These visionary concepts which were first seen by a priest in exiled and which were inspired by the loss of the First Temple, were utilized by the displaced priests in order to create a vivid and animated celestial temple after the destruction of the Second Temple.

The foremost protagonist of the *heykalôt* literature, R. Išmael, is portrayed as a priest or occasionally even as the High Priest. Apparently he was designated to be the hero of the *heykalôt* literature on account of the description of him, found in the *Berayta'* in *Mišnah Berâkôt*, fol. 7a as High Priest entering into the inner sanctum on the Day of Atonement on which incense is brought into the Holy of Holies:³³

Rabbi Išmael son of Eliša said: Once I entered the Holy of Holies in order to burn the incense, and so it happened to me that I saw Akhatriel Jah, the Lord of Hosts, sitting upon a high and sublime throne and he spoke to me thus: Išmael, my son, give me your blessing.

A parallel version of the above description, which also suggests that R. Išmael is a high priest, can be found in *heykalôt rabbatî* (*Synopsis*, par. 151) in which R. Išmael offers sacrifice on the altar and gazes upon the enthroned God.

R. Išmael's heavenly counterpart in the *heykalôt* literature is Enoch, son of Jared, a human being transformed into an angel, that is Metatron, who thus is depicted as an angelic priest or as the heavenly High Priest in various sources written prior to the *heykalôt* such as *Book of Watchers*, *Jubilees* 4:25, *Second Enoch* 23:41 and *Numbers Rabbâh* 2:12. Metatron, who imparts the celestial wisdom to R. Išmael and who marks his priestly origin as a source of legitimacy for his ascent to heaven, is also described in the *heykalôt* literature as the High Priest serving in the heavenly temple. The apex of the heavenly ritual is described in close association with the apex of the ritual within the earthly temple, that is, in terms of the rites of the

³² See Schäfer, *Konkordanz*.

³³ Cf. Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 356. *Mišnah Yoma* 6a. Only the High Priest was allowed into the Holy of Holies, once a year on the Day of Atonement. This occasion is commonly referred to with the expression *li-fnay we-li-fnim*.

High Priest as performed on the Day of Atonement which include the awesome pronunciation of the Explicit name:

And that youth whose name is Metatron brings silent fire and puts it in the ears of the *hayyôt* so that they shall not hear the speaking voice of the Holy One Blessed be He and the Explicit Name that the youth whose name is Metatron pronounces at that time with seven voices in His Name—Living and Pure and Venerated and Awesome, Holy and Tremendous, Beloved and Mighty.³⁴

At the explicit pronunciation of the Ineffable Name by the High Priest within both the heavenly temple and the earthly temple alike, a great response resounds—"Blessed be His Name, whose Glorious Kingdom is for ever and ever".³⁵

We have maintained that both the earthly and heavenly protagonists of the *heykalôt* are associated with the lore of the High Priesthood and with entry into the Holy of Holies. We have also maintained that within the background of *Merkâbâh* mysticism one finds allusions to the cultic heritage and descriptions that were associated with the Temple, with its priests or with their ritual knowledge. All these descriptions of the Temple, whether taken from the reality of human memory or whether preserved in the form of mytho-poetic visionary testimony or in the form of mystical abstractions of the priestly ritual tradition, demand to be taken into serious consideration in any attempt to define the cultural and spiritual origins of the circles from which the *heykalôt* literature had emanated.

³⁴ See *Synopsis*, sec. 390. Cf. *Tosefta Yoma* 2, 2 where it is mentioned that the High Priest pronounced the Explicit Name ten time during his worship on the Day of Atonement.

³⁵ See *Synopsis*, sect. 389-394; *Mishnah Yoma* 6, 2.