

THE HEKHALOT LITERATURE AND
THE ANCIENT JEWISH APOCALYPSES

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Introduction

This paper explores the relationship between the Hekhalot literature -- the pre-Kabbalistic corpus of mystical texts that give instructions on how to ascend (or "descend") to the celestial "palaces" or the "Merkavah," God's heavenly throne-chariot, and the Jewish apocalypses that survive from the early centuries C.E. and earlier. Elements of the Hekhalot literature can be shown to be as early as the fifth to seventh centuries C.E., although the surviving manuscripts were copied and extensively edited in the Middle Ages. Since the Hekhalot literature and the Jewish apocalypses share an interest in revelations from the heavenly realm, it seems worthwhile to compare them in order to learn whether and to what degree these early Jewish texts anticipate patterns of ideas in the later Hekhalot texts. This is the objective of this paper.

Important methodological issues arise in the study of both the Hekhalot texts and the Jewish apocalypses, as well as in any attempt to compare them. The Hekhalot literature is a large mass of Hebrew and Aramaic traditions about Tannaitic rabbis and the techniques they supposedly used either to "descend to the chariot" in order to experience the realm of the heavenly throne room or to summon the angelic "Prince of Torah" in order to compel him to give them instantaneous knowledge of Torah. Other angels are sometimes summoned for other purposes as well. There is still much debate about the date, provenance, social context, and purpose of the Hekhalot texts, so we must be quite clear initially about what in them we are comparing to the Jewish apocalypses. It is an important principle that, when comparing texts with other texts, it is crucial to concentrate on patterns of parallels rather than individual, unrelated parallels, so in this paper I will use the global pattern for which I argued in my book *Descenders to the Chariot*: the Hekhalot adept as a magico-religious practitioner with striking similarities to the cross-cultural practitioner known as the "shaman/healer." This pattern is supported mainly from the internal evidence of the Hekhalot texts themselves, but also some external evidence from Mesopotamian incantation bowls and incantation texts from the Cairo Geniza. It involves six elements:

- 1. A *shamanic call* in which the practitioner is normally chosen by the spirits on the basis of distinctive physiognomic traits or ancestry. Ancestry is a factor in the Hekhalot and related traditions and physiognomic criteria are hinted at. Other types of shamanic calls, such as initiatory illness and summons to shamanhood by spirits in dreams or visions, are not found in the Hekhalot literature.
- 2. The use of *shamanic ascetic techniques*, including fasting, dietary restrictions, temporary celibacy, purification rites, isolation and sensory deprivation, and songs and words of power (recitation of numinous hymns and repetition of *nomina barbara* and divine names).
- 3. *Initiatory disintegration and reintegration*: the experience of being torn apart and incinerated before the throne of God, with the apparent objective of being temporarily transformed into a fiery angel suited to survive in such an environment.
- 4. An *otherworldly journey* to the seven-tiered celestial realm of the Merkavah, which culminates in a visit to God's throne room, which is also seen to be identified with the archetypal Paradise. The journey is fraught with tests and dangers and is undertaken to gain divine revelations or dispensations and to join with the angels in the singing of the heavenly liturgy. The cosmography of the

otherworld in the Hekhalot texts corresponds well to typical shamanic cosmology, which involves travel through a multi-tiered universe whose levels include the underworld, the earth, and the heavens; a "world tree" or other cosmic axis that connects them; and the further subdivision of the heavens and the underworld, often into seven or nine levels.

- 5. The *control of the spirits*, almost always angels in human form (indeed, Metatron may even function as an ancestor spirit) for various purposes, including the wresting of knowledge of Torah from the Prince of Torah; the commandeering of angels as guides on the otherworldly journey; the gaining of raw theurgic power from the Prince of Torah; and protection from misfortune and demons.
- 6. *Service to the human community*, mainly as healers and exorcists, diviners and dream interpreters, mediators of social conflicts, and perhaps also as psychopomps (that is, those who lead the dead to their proper rest).

One can, of course, debate whether one or another of these points is a central component of the experience of the descenders to the chariot, but I have argued in my book that this pattern is at the very least heuristically useful for understanding the material and I adopt it here since it was developed for another purpose and cannot be accused of being created to get a particular result in the inquiry that is taken up in this paper. The question, then, is to what degree, if at all, does this pattern appear in surviving Jewish apocalypses of the early centuries C.E. and earlier?

Elsewhere I have discussed very fully the problem of isolating Jewish pseudepigrapha among Old Testament pseudepigrapha that have been transmitted primarily or only by Christians. Suffice to say here that I have defended Robert Kraft's view that in analyzing pseudepigrapha we should begin with the earliest manuscripts of a given work and try to understand it in that social and linguistic context, moving backward to earlier contexts only as required by positive evidence. On the basis of external evidence (fragments of the Aramaic or Hebrew originals from the Qumran library) I have concluded that the Book of the Watchers, the Astronomical Book, the Book of Dreams, and the Epistle of Enoch (all component parts of *1 Enoch*) are all Jewish apocalypses that existed by the first century B.C.E., some earlier. On the basis of internal evidence I have argued that *2 Baruch*, *4 Ezra*, and the Similitudes of Enoch (*1 En.* 37-71) are Jewish apocalypses, the first two being composed by the early second century C.E., and the last within the first few centuries C.E., if not a little earlier. I regard all of these texts to be Jewish compositions beyond reasonable doubt. The book of Daniel is an apocalypse that survives in its original Hebrew and Aramaic in something close to its putative original form. Internal evidence indicates that it was composed during the Maccabean revolt; very ancient fragments of it survive in the Qumran library; and it has been transmitted by Jews throughout its history. Its Jewish origin is rightly undisputed.

It is important to note that the genre apocalypse is different in fundamental ways from the Hekhalot literature. Although the Hekhalot literature does include a number of fictional episodes, its basic orientation is one of instruction. Much of the material (the exception is *3 Enoch*, which is an apocalypse) amounts to straightforward instruction manuals for achieving altered states of consciousness that allow the descender to the chariot to pursue goals in the supernatural world. These include instructions for rituals, accounts of paradigmatic otherworldly journeys, and the texts of magical spells and numinous hymns to be used by the practitioner. The ancient apocalypses under consideration here, on the contrary, consist of fictional accounts of scriptural or other events. At times they deal with matters parallel to those in the Hekhalot texts, but they present the material as stories rather than instructions. This difference in orientation leaves us less than certain in any given case whether the text is describing a real ritual that might actually have been used rather than an entirely imaginary ritual conceived by the author, as well as a vision or audition actually experienced by the author while in an altered state of consciousness (perhaps "channeling" the Old Testament visionary to whom the vision is attributed) as opposed to a vision simply imagined for a fictional Old Testament setting. It also compels us to try to infer the nature and details of the rituals from the fictional accounts of their use rather than relying on actual instructions for them. I have suggested in an article on ritual in the Old Testament pseudepigrapha that we should concentrate on rituals prescribed for the readers of the works and on accounts of ritual acts not found in biblical stories, and that we should think of ritual in terms of explicit descriptions of physical actions in a specified ritual-related social context. I follow these methodological

guidelines here as well, although none of the rituals discussed below are prescribed for the reader and the Hebrew Bible has very little to say about such rituals at all.

The Jewish apocalypses from a few centuries on either side of the Common Era present intermediary figures who have a number of traits that are untypical of earlier prophetic literature but are also characteristic of the much later quasi-shamanic magico-religious practitioners known as the descenders to the chariot. If we take the six components of the shamanic model applied to the latter, we find the following.

- The apocalyptic visionaries are usually not presented as experiencing a *shamanic call*, although Enoch, the paradigmatic apocalyptic practitioner, can perhaps be interpreted to be acting as an ancestral shamanic mentor to Methuselah and Noah.
- The relative lack of *ritual and ascetic techniques* in the biblical prophetic literature can be contrasted with its comparative abundance in the apocalypses. We find incubation rites used by Enoch, Ezra, and Baruch. Ezra and Baruch engage in seven-day vision-quest rituals that involve fasting (or consuming unusual foodstuffs), self-isolation, and prayer. Daniel's rites of prolonged fasting and prayer in Daniel chapters 9 and 10 look to be variants of the vision-quest ritual genre. Shorter periods of prayer and/or fasting are also used to generate revelations.
- The shamanic process of *initiatory disintegration and reintegration* does not appear as such in the apocalypses, but there are some suggestive features that may be connected, even ancestral, to it. First, most of the apocalyptic visionaries (Enoch, Ezra, and Baruch) are translated directly to heaven without experiencing death. For Enoch in the Similitudes, this is explicitly a transformation into an angelic being in the fiery realm of the divine throne room (1 *En.* 71:1-14). Daniel does not undergo such a translation, although he is by implication included among the wise who shall shine like stars in the eschaton (Dan 12:3, 13). It looks very much as though Daniel's three friends are understood to undergo a temporary assumption into this state when they are joined by an angel in the fiery furnace and rendered impervious to its flames. The experience of intermediation described by the descenders to the chariot seems to have included an (also temporary) proleptic spiritual transformation into a fiery divine being as part of the process of reaching the divine throne and joining the angelic choir. It is tempting to posit some connection between the translation of the ancient apocalyptic visionaries and the experience of the later mystics, although its nature is debatable. It may be that the stories in the apocalypses objectified an otherwise unmentioned personal spiritual experience of the apocalyptic visionaries -- one known also to the later descenders to the chariot, but it is also possible that the descenders to the chariot interpreted their own initiatory experience in terms borrowed from the physical translations reported of the legendary ancient visionaries.
- *Otherworldly journeys* are undertaken by Enoch, Daniel, and (according to 2 *Baruch* 59) Moses. These journeys do not present a shamanic cosmology *per se*, but they do present the experience as an ascent to the fiery throne room of God where the deity sits surrounded by angels. This pattern is adopted and developed in terms of the shamanic cosmology by the descenders to the chariot.
- Some level of *control of spirits* (angels) is found in the Book of the Watchers, the Similitudes, Daniel, and 4 *Ezra*. Angels are required to lead Enoch on tours of the universe and to answer his questions. They also provide interpretations of visions for Daniel and Ezra and one engages in a series of dialogues about theodicy with Ezra. Presumably the angels are required, often in the context of ritual summonses, to cooperate with the visionaries, at least to the point of dialoguing with them. Nevertheless, the picture in the Hekhalot texts is quantitatively if not qualitatively rather different, with highly detailed rituals being prescribed to control angels during the descent to the chariot, to compel the Prince of Torah to reveal knowledge of the Torah, and to gain open-ended theurgic power over the Prince of the Presence.
- The apocalyptic visionaries provide a number of *services to their community*. Dream interpretation is included and some revelations may serve as background to exorcistic and psychopompic concerns. The visionaries help solve conflicts in their own communities, such as when Daniel interprets the writing on the wall; Ezra is granted the ability to reconstruct all lost scriptures; and Baruch instructs the people of Jerusalem in various ways. The revelations promoted in the apocalypses also aim to

minister to their actual readers, for example by providing them with instruction on the proper calendar to use and how to respond to the persecutions of Antiochus during the Maccabean revolt.

What are the implications for the historical origins of Merkavah mysticism as presented in the Hekhalot literature? The figure of Enoch in the various books in *1 Enoch* (especially the Book of the Watchers and the Similitudes) anticipates much of the quasi-shamanic template we find much later in the Hekhalot texts. Since one of these texts, the book of *3 Enoch*, has some more or less direct relationship (whether literary or based on oral tradition) with the Similitudes, and since Metatron, the angel who in later centuries was identified with Enoch, plays an important role in the Hekhalot literature as a whole, a genetic relationship of some sort between the descenders to the chariot and the ancient Enochic traditions and practitioners seems likely. But the figures of Daniel, Ezra, and Baruch also display much of the same template, including incubations, vision quests, acquaintance with proleptic and eschatological disintegration and reintegration, otherworldly journeys, limited control of angels, and service to their own communities.

Taken as an aggregate, the visionaries described in the ancient Jewish apocalypses thus display a fairly high density of key elements associated with the much later descenders to the chariot, when we categorize the latter according to the shamanic/healer model of magico-religious practitioner. That said, there are also many important differences, although these have limited relevance for the model. The apocalypses describe fictional experiences of scriptural prophets and scribes whereas the Hekhalot literature gives ritual instructions illustrated by accounts of fictional experiences of Tannaitic rabbis. In both cases the existence of actual practitioners in the time the works were written is a matter of inference, but the inferential case is considerably stronger for the Hekhalot practitioners. A multitude of *nomina barbara* and divine names appear in the Hekhalot literature but are not found in the apocalypses, although Uriel reveals angelic names to Enoch in the Astronomical Book (*1 En.* 82:9-20). Most of the apocalypses have a strong eschatological interest, but such interest is very muted in the Hekhalot texts. And the apocalypses deal with revelations granted by God at the initiative of either God or the visionary, generally through angelic mediation, whereas the Hekhalot literature focuses on the means for human practitioners to elicit revelatory experiences and gain power to compel angels to do their will.

In addition there is a great chronological, social, and geographical distance between the apocalyptic visionaries and the descenders to the chariot. The visionaries are attested mostly in Palestinian contexts between the late Persian/early Hellenistic periods and the early centuries C.E., whereas the earliest securely established social context for the descenders to the chariot is Babylonia in the fifth to seventh centuries C.E.

Nevertheless, at least in the case of the Enochic literature, an historical link does seem plausible. It is possible that the Palestinian Jewish apocalyptic visionaries transmitted their lore and ritual techniques to a line of disciples who over time developed into the descenders to the chariot. But it is also possible that many of the parallels between the two groups can be explained not by any historical connection, but by independent developments of techniques that exploit innate human neurophysiological and psychological traits to generate altered states of consciousness, along with independent exegesis of scriptural and noncanonical traditions that showed interest in such altered states. These possibilities are not mutually exclusive.

C. R. A. Morray-Jones has argued persuasively that some of the Hekhalot traditions go back at least to the Tannaitic period and that many concepts and ideas in this material go back even to the New Testament period. I have also shown that some of these ideas and concepts can be found already as early as the Dead Sea Scrolls. All in all, there is a good case that elements of the magico-religious ritual traditions and experiences presented in the ancient Jewish apocalypses were ancestral to the ritual practices and experiences described in the Hekhalot literature. But the exact nature of the relationship between the apocalyptic visionaries and the descenders to the chariot remains to be determined, and we can only hope that someday we recover more direct evidence about such magico-religious practitioners in the intervening centuries.

This paper is an abbreviated version of an article that has just appeared in:

[Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism](#)

/April D. DeConick, editor/

A substantial introduction to the study of early Jewish and Christian mysticism, this volume examines major aspects of the mystical tradition within early Judaism and Christianity. This tradition was centered on the belief that a person directly, immediately, and before death can experience the divine, either as a rapture experience or one solicited by a particular praxis. The essays define and analyze the nature and practices of mysticism as it emerges within early Judaism and Christianity, recognizing this emergence within a variety of communal environments. Larger questions about the relationship between hermeneutics and experience, as well as the relationship between mysticism and apocalypticism are also discussed, and a substantial bibliography of the field is provided. The book is the result of ten years of work of the Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism unit of the Society of Biblical Literature.

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