

THE BOOK OF REVELATION AND THE HEKHALOT LITERATURE

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Introduction

The Book of Revelation and the strange collection of revelatory texts known as the Hekhalot literature share a striking number of features centered around visionary travel to heaven to gain revelations before a celestial throne room modeled after the vision of the heavenly realm in the Book of Ezekiel. Revelation is a late first century C.E. Christian work and the Hekhalot literature was composed from late antiquity to the Geonic era, with editing continuing into the Middle Ages, so anything like a direct connection between them seems on the face of it unlikely. Nevertheless, there is considerable evidence that the Hekhalot texts drew at times on much earlier material, even going back to Second Temple times. The parallels between the Book of Revelation and the Hekhalot literature have never been thoroughly collected and explored. This paper briefly catalogues some of these parallels and offers some very preliminary reflections on their possible significance.

1. John and the Merkavah Mystics

Although John gives us a protracted account of his visionary experiences, unlike the Hekhalot literature and some of the other ancient Jewish apocalypses, he gives us almost no information about the process he underwent to achieve the visionary state and whether it involved the use of any ritual techniques. But he does give us two important hints when in Rev 1:10a he reports that these experiences commenced while "I was in the Spirit (ἐν πνεύματι) on the Lord's day." Within the Book of Revelation, John tells us three more times that he was "in the Spirit" at the beginning of a new vision (4:2; 17:3; 21:10). Elsewhere the phrase can have various meanings, but the one that best fits this context is to be in a state of prophetic inspiration, such as David was in the writing of Psalm 110 according to Matt 22:43 and Moses when, after fasting on Mount Sinai for forty days, he received the Law according to *Barn.* 14:2. The wording of Rev 1:10b also consciously imitates that of Ezek 3:12 (where while being lifted up by the Spirit Ezekiel hears a loud voice behind him), implicitly identifying John's experience with Ezekiel's Spirit-inspired vision.

The phrase "on the Lord's day" is generally understood to refer to Sunday, commemorated by the early Jesus movement as the day of Jesus' resurrection. So Rev 1:10 tells us that John entered a state of visionary prophetic inspiration at a time explicitly flagged as of cultic significance. The state of being "in the Spirit" is also tied in *Barnabas* to ascetic ritual practice (prolonged fasting) in the case of Moses, as noted above. There are thus at least hints that John may have engaged in ritual preparation for his vision, as did the Hekhalot practitioners in the Hekhalot texts and the biblical prophets in the fictional narratives of the ancient Jewish apocalypses.

John's experience also has a number of specific parallels to the experiences of the Hekhalot practitioners. His book opens by asserting that it is a revelation from God, mediated by an angel "to show His slaves the things that must happen soon," things to which John bears witness (Rev 1:1-2), as he was commanded by the Lord (Rev 1:11). Likewise, at

the beginning of the throne vision of chapter 4, he is told that he will be shown "the things that must happen after these (present) things" (Rev 4:1). The *Hekhalot Rabbati* opens by introducing the songs by which the practitioner may bind himself to God so as to descend and ascend safely and to stand near the throne of God "to see whatever is done before His throne of glory and to know whatever shall happen in the future of the world" (*HR* §81). At the beginning of the account of the ten martyrs, an edict of Rome against certain Jewish sages leads R. Nehuniah ben HaQanah to order his disciple, R. Ishmael, to descend to the chariot, where the angel Suriah, the Prince of the Presence, grants him a vision of the heavenly deliberations and negotiations with the hostile angel Sammael behind the scenes of the persecution (*HR* §§107-110). R. Ishmael then returns "and made known this testimony from before the throne of glory" (§111). Likewise, later in the work, the practitioners are sternly warned, "The decree of heaven is against you, descenders to the chariot, unless you say what you have heard and unless you testify to what you have seen" in their visionary experiences (*HR* §169). And in a paradigmatic instructional account of the descent to the chariot we are told, "And all the descenders to the chariot ascend and are not harmed; rather they see all this violence and descend safely and they come back and stand and testify to the fearsome and confounding sight, the like of which is not in all the palaces of kings of flesh and blood" (*HR* §216). Indeed, God longs for the practitioners to make the descent. He asks, "When will the descender descend to the chariot? When will he feast his eyes on the majesties on high? When will he hear the end of salvation? When will he see *what eye has not seen* (Isa 64:4) and ascend and report to the seed of Abraham His beloved?" (*HR* §218). Like the descenders to the chariot, John undertakes a perilous visionary journey, guided by angels, in which he learns heavenly secrets about the current persecution by and imminent fall of Rome, and he returns to testify to these secrets to his community.

John's visionary experiences also find parallels in the *Hekhalot Zutarti*. The visions of the Book of Revelation may broadly be set aside a description of the Hekhalot practitioners presented as a series of rhetorical questions in *HZ* §349(//361//G7) which begin "And what mortal is able ..." Like the practitioner, John is able to "ascend on high." He can also "search out the inhabited world" in his world-encompassing visions that range from Asia Minor to Jerusalem to Rome to the river Euphrates and beyond. He can "walk on the dry land" when he measures the Temple of God in chapter 11. He can "gaze at His splendor" and "know the lightning" in the throne vision of chapter 4. He has "a vision of what is above" in chapters 4-5 and elsewhere and although he may not strictly speaking "descend below" he does have "a vision of what is below" in his glimpses of the abyss in 9:1-2 and 20:1-3. He is able "to know the explanation of the living," for example, in the risen Christ's admonitions to the seven churches in chapters 2-3, "and to see the vision of the dead" in the episode with the righteous souls under the altar in 6:9-11 and in the scene of the final judgment in chapter 20. He is not explicitly "transformed by His glory" so as "to walk in rivers of fire," although his apparently near proximity to the dangerously splendid and fiery celestial realm (e.g., in chapter 4) may imply some manner of temporary transformation into an angelic state. He does not "ride on wheels" (in a fiery chariot?), "recite praise," "combine letters" in theurgic recitations, or "recite names," although he does witness the angels and glorified saints reciting praise (e.g., 4:8-11; 7:9-12; 14:2-3) and he is aware of the power of names, especially divine ones (2:17; 3:12; 19:16). Likewise, in *HZ* §366(//§496), R. Akiva reports that, like John, he "had a vision and observed the whole inhabited world and ... saw it as it is." Like John, he "ascended," although explicitly "in a wagon of fire," while John's means of ascent is not specified. R. Akiva "gazed on the palaces of hail" and John saw "heavy hail" in

the celestial temple (Rev 11:19). R. Akiva also saw something unintelligible "that sits on the burning sea," while John saw a mountain of fire cast into the sea (Rev 8:8).

2. *Jesus, the Youth, and Metatron*

The presentation of the exalted Christ in the book of Revelation has some striking parallels with two exalted angels in the Hekhalot literature. The Youth is the celestial high priest who serves in the heavenly tabernacle and the angel Metatron is the deified patriarch Enoch, who was taken into heaven and transformed into an enthroned archangel so exalted that he could be mistaken for a second god. These two angels are identified in some traditions, but there is good reason to believe that they were originally separate.

The Youth is described in a passage in a Hekhalot Geniza fragment (G8) and in some *Shi 'ur Qomah* manuscripts. The theophany in G8 describes him in terms similar to Jesus in Revelation. The Youth's "eyes kindle like torches and his eyeballs kindle like lamps" and "the sun is poured from the belt in front of him." John's "one like a son of man" has "eyes like a flame of fire" and "his face shines like the sun" (Rev 1:14, 16). The Youth is crowned, and the "one like a son of man" in Rev 14:14 (who may be Christ, at least in the final form of the text) wears a crown of gold. The Youth wears a shirt that "is like the shirt of his King," meaning, apparently, that like God's shirt, it is written all over with the Tetragrammaton (cf. *HR* §102). In Revelation 19:16, Jesus wears a robe on which is inscribed the name "King of kings and Lord of lords." The splendor and adornment of the Youth are like those of God and – like the Ancient of Days in Dan 7:9 – John's "one like a son of man" has head and hair that "is white as white wool, like snow" (Rev 1:14). The visionary is told that the Youth "takes [you] by the hand and seats you on his lap" as he has others before. Likewise, Jesus tells his followers "The one who conquers, I will grant it to him to sit with me on my throne" (Rev 3:21). The visionary is also warned "Do not worship him," just as John is admonished twice not to fall down before an angel (Rev 19:10; 22:8-9), although he does fall at the feet of the risen Christ (1:17). Apparently the glorious appearance of the Youth could lead to him being mistaken for a divine being, but he was actually no more than an exalted angel.

The case of Metatron, who is described in *3 Enoch* 1-20, is more complex. Like Jesus he is a mortal man exalted to heaven. He bears the name "the lesser YHWH"; he is, like Jesus, enthroned (*3 En.* 10:1-2; cf. Rev 3:21; 7:17; 22:1, 3); and the other angels prostrate themselves before him (*3 En.* 14:5). Like Jesus he wears a robe and a crown (*3 En.* 12:1, 3). And Enoch's knowledge of the secrets of the universe (*3 En.* 11) seems comparable to the knowledge of the Christ who grants revelations to John. In addition, after being misidentified by the arch-heretic Elisha ben Avuyah as a second power in heaven, Metatron was dethroned (*3 En.* 16). Elsewhere I have raised the possibility that the erased contours of a Metatron cult may be visible in the surviving text of *3 Enoch*. In any case, the Christ of Revelation shares with the Youth and Metatron many details of theophanic splendor, enthronement and other elements of deification with Metatron, and the ability to enthrone his followers with the Youth.

3. *The Celestial Throne Room*

Both the Hekhalot practitioners and John describe visions of the celestial throne room which draw heavily on the visions in Ezekiel 1 and 10, as well as Isaiah 6 and Daniel 7. God is enthroned there and the scenes draw on the rainbow, the gems, the lightning, and the fire of Ezekiel's vision. Ezekiel's "firmament like a spring of terrible ice" (1:22) becomes "something like a glass sea like crystal" in Rev 4:6 and in the *Hekhalot Zutarti* the floor of

the sixth palace, which they unwary Hekhalot practitioner might mistake for myriads of waves of water and perish (*HZ* §338[//344//671] - §339[//345//672//G7]). Ezekiel's living creatures, cherubim, and ophannim (wheels) are for the most part kept separate from one another and from Isaiah's seraphim in the Hekhalot literature, whereas they are amalgamated in Revelation 4 into a single type of being, called the four living creatures, who have features of all four (Rev 4:6b-9). Notably, the living creatures of Revelation recite the trisagion of the seraphim (Rev 4:8), as do the living creatures in *HR* §§101 and 273. The twenty-four elders are some sort of angelic figures, whether the glorified patriarchs of Israel and the twelve apostles or the angels over the twenty-four priestly courses. They are perhaps paralleled by the "princes of the peoples of the worlds" who accompany the Youth in the *Shi 'ur Qomah* throne scene. The elders wear crowns, as angels often do in the Hekhalot texts, and in their worship they remove the crowns and cast them before the throne as they sing praises to God (Rev 4:4, 10-11). In *HR* §190 the living creatures also fall down before God and remove their crowns while invoking God's mercy on Israel in song. Likewise in *3 Enoch* 18, the entire hierarchy of angels remove their crowns and fall prostrate in series.

In addition, the heavenly realm in the Hekhalot literature is populated with dangerous angels who ride fire-breathing horses, carry swords and bows, and inhabit a region of fire, blood, and hail (*HR* §§213-15). In Revelation the horsemen of the apocalypse (Rev 6:2-8), the angels of the seven trumpets (esp. Rev 8:7), the angels of the heavenly temple (Rev 11:19; 14:18-20), and the angels that accompany Christ at the apocalyptic battle (Rev 19:14) have similar features.

4. *The Fall of Wicked Rome*

Finally the Book of Revelation and an episode in the *Hekhalot Rabbati* that retells the legend of the ten martyrs both present gloating fantasies of the humiliation and destruction of Rome. Revelation tells us that the end of the dragon, or Satan, will be to be cast from heaven with his angels for persecuting the saints (Rev 12:7-9, 12). Likewise Sammael, the wicked patron angel of Rome, is to be hurled down with all the princes of the kingdoms on high for persecuting Israel (*HR* §108). In Revelation 13:1-2, 5-8, the dragon gives the beast, a Roman emperor (Rev 17:11), authority and the beast in turn is given leave to persecute the saints. In *HR* §§108-9, 112 ff., Sammael reaches an agreement with the heavenly law court which permits him to inspire Lupinus Caesar to persecute the sages of Israel. In Revelation 16 the actions of the dragon and the beast lead to heavenly punishment in the form of the seven bowls of God's wrath, commencing with the infliction of foul sores on the followers of the beast. In *HR* §110 God writes the punishments of Rome down on a blank parchment, commencing with a cloud that hovers over Rome and inflicts raw boils on its inhabitants (cf. Exod 9:10-11; Job 2:7). Nevertheless, both the followers of the beast (Rev 16:9, 11) and Lupinus Caesar (*HR* §117-18) refuse to relent (cf. Exod 9:12 etc.). In Revelation 17:16-17, in accordance with the providence of God, the beast turns on Rome (the great harlot). In *HR* §120, God miraculously replaces Lupinus Caesar with R. Nehuniah ben HaQanah, who takes on the emperor's physical appearance and proceeds to slaughter the military leadership of Rome. In Revelation 18:1, 6, 8, an angel announces the punishment of Rome including plagues and pestilence, paralleling the further plagues and pestilence inflicted on Rome by the malevolent cloud in *HR* §110. In Revelation 18:9-19, Rome is humiliated before the kings of the earth, the merchants, and shipmasters. In *HR* §110 Rome's afflictions make her accounted not worth a single coin and in *HR* §112-13 Lupinus Caesar is humiliated before

the officials of his kingdom when his family and the members of his court are thrown down and torn apart by divine decree. Moreover, the bodies are left to lie desecrated and decomposing because the Abyss (which also figures in Revelation 9 and 20 as a source of malevolent power) swallows them up when someone tries to collect them for burial, then expels them again when the recovery effort is abandoned. Likewise the corpses of the defeated enemies of the Lamb are left desecrated as food for the birds in Rev 19:17-18, 21. Rev 18:12-13 lists the wares of the merchants whose business is now collapsing with the fall of Rome. The list includes gold, silver, metal objects, foodstuffs, cattle, and human beings, all items found in a parallel list of the riches of Rome ruined by the malevolent cloud in *HR* §110. Both lists may be influenced by the list of the wares of the merchants of Tyre in Ezek 27:12-24. In Rev 18:20 the saints, apostles, and prophets are directed by an angel to rejoice over God's imminent judgment of Rome, while in *HR* §111 R. Ishmael returns from his descent to the chariot with the testimony of the angel Suriah, with the result that all his companions throw a party to celebrate God's coming vengeance on Rome. Finally, in Rev 19:20 the ultimate fate of the beast is to be thrown into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. In *HR* §§119-120, in what almost reads as a horrific parody of the *Nero Redivivus* myth, Lupinus Caesar is given the physical appearance of one of the ten sages he sentenced to death, then "they threw him into the fire and he was in the asphyxiation within the burning." After this he is resurrected, given the appearance of the second sage, and burned to death again, until he has been executed as each of the ten sages. He is then consigned to a well-deserved eternal torment where he must "taste the taste of flame and fire and the glowing coals of the cherubim, the ophanim, and the holy living creatures in the midst of Gehenna" (*HR* §119).

Conclusions

The pattern of parallels between the Book of Revelation and the Hekhalot literature is notable and pervasive while at the same time curiously fragmented. They share numerous themes and motifs, but the authors make these themes and motifs entirely their own. They are bricoleurs drawing from several common heaps of material. These include trance states, perhaps induced by some ritual praxis; visionary ascent in the tradition of apocalyptic visions; a panorama of the celestial throne room inspired by much the same set of prophetic passages from the Jewish scriptures, including Ezekiel 1 and 10, Isaiah 6, and Daniel 7; mediatorial traditions about angels and deified human beings; and the fantasy of a future divine punishment of Rome, the pagan persecutor of God's people, drawing on the scriptural tradition of the plagues of Egypt. The exegesis of specific motifs in these passages is for the most part independent, although there is some evidence for the sharing of more elaborate midrashic constructions, such as the transformation of Ezekiel's "terrible ice" into a celestial floor. Scripture is clearly a shared inspiration behind many of the parallels, but for many others I can find no scriptural background.

It is impossible to rule out some genetic influence of the Book of Revelation on the much later Hekhalot literature, be it direct literary influence or, perhaps more plausibly, an influence bridged by a subterranean ancient Merkavah mystical or visionary tradition. But I am not convinced that the parallels surveyed here point to such influence. Certainly the broader agendas of these works are quite different. Revelation is an apocalypse that aims to reassure the followers of Jesus that he will soon triumph over the evil Roman persecutors and grant his followers eternal life in heavenly bliss. The Hekhalot texts are instruction manuals for achieving altered states of consciousness that allow the practitioners to translate

themselves into the celestial throne room and join in the angelic liturgy and to call down angels and compel them to grant these practitioners supernatural knowledge of Torah or other theurgic powers.

This is a brief and incomplete overview of evidence that deserves much more study. Much can be explained by positing two authors in widely separated eras and circumstances who were interested in trance states and traditions about exalted human beings and high angels; who used obvious biblical antecedents to describe the heavenly realm; and who wrote with an intense hostility toward the persecuting Roman Empire. It may be that authors sharing these basic interests could independently generate these parallels without any genetic connection between the works or the traditions they drew upon. Whether the evidence at hand points to a genetic connection, such as a line of visionary intermediaries, remains to be established.