

Beholders of Divine Secrets

Mysticism and Myth

in the Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature

[illegible]

V I T A D A P H N A A R B E L

Beholders of Divine Secrets

This page intentionally left blank.

Beholders of Divine Secrets

*Mysticism and Myth in the
Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature*

Vita Daphna Arbel

State University of New York Press

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

© 2003 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, address State University of New York Press,
90 State Street, Suite 700, Albany, NY 12207

Production by Kelli Williams
Marketing by Patrick Durocher

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Arbel, Vita Daphna.

Beholders of divine secrets : mysticism and myth in Hekhalot and merkavah
literature / Vita Daphna Arbel.
p. cm.

Based on a doctoral thesis submitted to the Hebrew University, Jerusalem in 1997.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7914-5723-0 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-7914-5724-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Mysticism—Judaism. 2. Hekhalot literature—History and criticism. 3. Merkava. 4. Mythology, Jewish. I. Title.

BM723 .A68 2003
296.7'12—dc21

2002042638

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

I dedicate this book to my grandparents Ester and Alter-Avner
and to my parents Hanna and Micha with love.

This page intentionally left blank.

Contents

Preface	ix
Abbreviations	xi
Introduction	1
1 THE HEKHALOT AND MERKAVAH LITERATURE AND ITS MYSTICAL TRADITION	7
2 HEKHALOT AND MERKAVAH MYSTICISM	21
3 MYTHICAL LANGUAGE OF HEKHALOT AND MERKAVAH MYSTICISM	51
4 MYSTICAL JOURNEYS IN MYTHOLOGICAL LANGUAGE	67
5 THE CONCEPT OF GOD: MYSTICAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS	105
6 LITERARY, PHENOMENOLOGICAL, CULTURAL, AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS	139
Notes	157
Bibliography	211
Index of Passages Discussed	237
Index of Authors	247
General Index	249

This page intentionally left blank.

Preface

This book emerged from a doctoral thesis, written in Hebrew, which I submitted to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1997. In the course of further research, revision and translation, however, the book has taken on a new form. In it I examine mystical notions present in the enigmatic Hekhalot and Merkavah literature, the manner in which these are expressed through mythological imagery, as well as the possible social-cultural and ideological affiliation of members of the Hekhalot and Merkavah mystical circle.

In Jerusalem I had the great fortune to study with Professors Rachel Elior and R. J. Zvi Werblowsky as my thesis advisers. They introduced me to the exciting field of Jewish mysticism and its research. I have greatly benefited from their profound insights and perspectives and am deeply thankful for their wisdom and scholarship. Many later conversations with Rachel Elior throughout the years have continued to be an ongoing source of encouragement and inspiration and I thank her with all my heart for an insightful and stimulating continuous dialogue. I also wish to express my most sincere gratitude to Professor Haim Tadmor who promoted my interest in the ancient Near Eastern world and its intriguing legends.

My thanks to the University of British Columbia for the Humanities Research Grants that generously supported this project. I am very grateful for encouragement and support from my friends and colleagues in the department of Classical, Near Eastern, and Religious Studies. My deep thanks to Shirley Sullivan who graciously read the manuscript throughout its stages. To her friendship, attentive reading, and skillful touch of clarity I owe much gratitude. A special word of thanks goes to Omer's intriguing observations and design eye. Sincere thanks are also due to Nancy Ellegate, Kelli Williams, and the rest of the editorial staff at SUNY Press.

Finally, I would like to mention the people who immensely enrich my life and my work in so many ways—Efrat, Omer, and Menashé. My love and thanks go far beyond words.

This page intentionally left blank.

Abbreviations

AASOR	Annual of the American School of Oriental Research
AJSR	Association for Jewish Studies Review
ANET	Ancient Near Eastern Texts. J. B. Pritchard, ed., 3d. ed. Princeton 1969.
ANEP	Ancient Near East in Pictures. J. B. Pritchard, ed., 3d ed. Princeton 1965.
AnOr	Analecta Orientalia (Rome)
AUSS	Andrews University Seminar Studies
BASOR	Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research
CAD	I. J. Gelb et al., Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (1956–)
CBA	Catholic Biblical Association of America
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
ConB OT	Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series
CTA	Corpus des tablettes en cunéiformes alphabétiques découvertes à Ras Shamra-Ugarit de 1929 à 1939. A. Herdner. Paris 1963.
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
JAOS	Journal of The American Oriental Society
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JCS	Journal of Cuneiform Studies
JJS	Journal of Jewish Studies

JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JSJ	Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSNT	Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSS	Journal of Semitic Studies
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
KTU	Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit einschliesslich der keilalphabetischen Texts ausserhalb Ugarit 1: Transkription: M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Samartin. Neukirchen-Vluyn 1976.
PEQ	Palestine Exploration Quarterly
Or	Orientalia
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
VT	Vetus Testamentum
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements

Biblical citations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). Citations of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature refer to paragraph numbers in *Synopse zur Hekhalot Literatur* published by P. Schäfer in collaboration with M. Schlüter and H. G. von Mutius (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1981). Traditional titles of texts ("macroforms") will be indicated as well. *Genizah* passages are cited from *Geniza Fragmente zur Hekhalot Literatur* published by P. Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1984). English translations of passages from the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature are my own unless otherwise stated.

Introduction

Rabbi Akiva said:

Who is able to contemplate the seven palaces
and behold the heaven of heavens
and see the chambers of chambers
and say: "I saw the chamber of YH?"

—*Ma'aseh Merkavah, Synopse, 554.*

This question is posed by Rabbi Akiva, a central figure of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature of late antiquity. In it we find mentioned several claims and aspects which distinguish the mysticism found in this literature. We hear of "contemplation," "ascent to heaven," and "vision of divine palaces." We learn that a human being can cross traditional boundaries between the phenomenological and the transcendent realms, make a contemplative ascent to heaven, behold the chambers of God in a personal manner, and communicate these experiences and visions to others. We also encounter an enigma: Who is this qualified person?

The first part of the question: "Who is able to contemplate the seven palaces?," seems to describe a spiritual introspective process, taking place on an internal level, in which a visionary reflects and meditates upon the seven palaces of God, placing them in the center of his contemplation, imagination, and thought. The second part: "and to ascend and behold the heaven of heavens, and to see the chambers of chambers," pertains to beliefs, practices, and revelations. It claims the existence of a different reality, beyond the phenomenological world, envisioned as a celestial realm of God, in which his divine palace is situated in the heaven of heavens. It also appears to introduce the possibility of divine-human encounters outside traditional norms of historical revelation. These words seem likewise to affirm a specific religious consciousness, which enables a human being to exceed parameters of traditional norms, time, and space, and to initiate a direct

encounter with the divine, in a meditative process, visualized as a personal, otherworldly voyage to heaven.

The third part of the question: “and say I saw the chamber of YH,” may refer to the manner in which contemplative experiences and their attendant, interpreted divine visions and revelations, are formulated and conveyed through verbal expressions, and sayings. Rabbi Akiva’s query also seeks to discern “Who” can take part in such quests which, in fact, offer an alternative to the traditional concept of divinely initiated communication between God and his people. It also, perhaps, indicates an attempt to distinguish the identity of the ones who are involved in these endeavors, and to situate them in an historical and cultural context.

This study concentrates on the facets of Rabbi Akiva’s question as a framework for the discussion. It explores the nature of the mystical tradition found in the enigmatic Hekhalot and Merkavah literature and the manner in which its mystical notions are molded and communicated. The social and cultural contexts of its writers will be considered as well.

The Hekhalot and Merkavah literature includes various manuscripts and literary traditions written and edited over a long period of time, arguably between the third and seventh centuries C.E., in Palestine and Babylonia. They contain overlapping mystical, cosmological, messianic, and magical traditions, presented in several literary forms. With a full awareness of the complexity of this literature and the intricacy of its traditions, this study focuses on the mystical dimensions of the literature. It examines several treatises in which these mystical notions principally find expression. These include textual units known *Hekhalot Rabbati* (The Greater Book of Hekhalot), *Hekhalot Zutarti* (The Lesser Book of Hekhalot), *Ma’aseh Merkavah* (The Works of the Chariot), *Sefer Hekhalot* (The Book of Hekhalot) also entitled the *Hebrew Book of Enoch* or *3 Enoch*, the *Shi’ur Komah* traditions (Measurements of the Divine Body), various fragments known as *Shivhei Metatron*, and several texts found in the Cairo *Genizah*.

The discussion treats these topics in six chapters. The first chapter of this study presents a brief overview of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature as it was composed, edited, and integrated over a substantial period of time. It introduces debated historical questions of origin and dating, as well as the complex nature of its manuscripts, literary traditions, and conceptual notions. Maintaining the view that scholarly analysis of mystical phenomena is primarily textually based, the chapter then discusses aspects of the mystical tradition found in the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature, in light of current observations and methodological premises in the study of mysticism.

The second chapter distinguishes specific mystical characteristics to be found in the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature, in light of methodological premises in the study of mysticism. Applying a literary-phenomenological approach, the discussion first classifies significant mystical aspects present in several Hekhalot and Merkavah literary units and accounts, both theoretical and practical. It then demonstrates the ways in which these notions interact as they create a distinctive mystical tradition. In particular, attention will be paid to the interplay between mystical techniques, ritualistic practices, inner perceptions, and spiritual transformation on the one hand, and the ability to decode divine visions and revelations, which these entail, on the other hand.

The second topic which this study addresses is the presence of mythology in Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism. Scholars have demonstrated connections between the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature and similar notions in priestly traditions, rabbinical writings, the Dead Sea Scrolls, apocalyptic texts, early Christian literature, Gnostic sources, and magical theurgical traditions and practices. The present investigation calls attention to additional mythological echoes which resonate in various mystical narrations of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature. This aspect has not yet been thoroughly investigated in scholarly literature. This study seeks to demonstrate its importance. It suggests that mythological patterns of expressions, as well as themes, and models rooted in Near Eastern mythological sources, are evoked in the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature, in a spiritualized fashion, as the principal way of presenting its mystical content.

Chapter 3 provides background to a close literary-phenomenological analysis of the relationship of myth and mysticism to be found in chapters 4 and 5. It distinguishes the nature of mystical discourse in Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism, suggesting that this tradition conceptualizes and conveys many of its mystical notions by evoking a variety of mythological frameworks. It then introduces dominant characteristics of the three prevalent mythological frameworks, presumed to be employed in Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism. These include mythological forms of thought and expression in general, as well as biblical, and Mesopotamian mythology in particular. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the pertinence and possible applicability of these three mythological forms in Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism. It demonstrates that this tradition employs specific patterns, often characterized as mythological, such as prose narrative style, pictorial imagery, tangible metaphors, and figurative language, in order to construct and articulate abstract, mystical concepts. The discussion further treats the apparent probability that mythological traditions

contained in the Hebrew bible have bestowed some degree of inspiration on several Hekhalot and Merkavah mystical presentations. Finally, in light of the view that traditions within a given cultural-religious group, or within neighboring cultures, interact with one another in an ongoing process of absorption, transformation and interchange, the discussion demonstrates the presence and prominence of Mesopotamian mythological traditions in the syncretistic Hellenistic Roman world of late antiquity, in which the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature was compiled. These are treated as plausible sources, which could have inspired the Hekhalot and Merkavah imagery, directly or indirectly.

The fourth and the fifth chapters demonstrate, by a close literary-phenomenological analysis, the manner in which various mystical aspects are presented in the Hekhalot and Merkavah descriptions. Chapter 4 focuses on the spiritual voyage, outlined in a dialectical way in the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature. It discusses the manner in which the spiritual-contemplative processes are described in a mythological fashion as actual corporal ascents to heaven, taking place in a mythological cosmos. The discussion examines, in particular, three main topics: (a) the image of the visionary, (b) the inner journey, and (c) the spiritual transformations at its end.

Chapter 5 concentrates on the concept of a figurative and abstract God, revealed at the height of the mystical-visionary ascent. It examines depictions which treat God's spiritual character, infinite transcendent nature, and his inconceivable qualities, and demonstrates how they are expressed by traditional themes and imagery rooted in specific mythological traditions. These include, for example, enormous physical size, exceptional beauty, exclusive kingship, and a tangible supremacy.

Both chapters 4 and 5 examine mythological patterns present in various Hekhalot and Merkavah mystical accounts from a phenomenological perspective. They also trace the possible origin of several Hekhalot and Merkavah themes to specific mythological, ancient Near Eastern sources, both biblical and Mesopotamian. They conclude with an analysis of the manner in which ancient mythological images and themes are interiorized, spiritualized, and reinterpreted in order to convey new mystical notions in the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature.

Embracing the approach that mystical literature and cultural social realities are bound together, chapter 6 concludes the discussion by considering possible cultural and ideological implications of the previous literary and phenomenological observations regarding the context of Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism and its authors. Based on distinct similarity in self-perception and ideological interests, the chap-

ter proposes that the enigmatic Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism could be considered a product of Jewish intellectuals of late antiquity, possibly scribes and sages associated with classes of priests and with temple traditions, who, in keeping with Near Eastern scribal traditions of “the wise,” reapply several of their principles and concepts to mystical teachings.

This page intentionally left blank.

1

The Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature and Its Mystical Tradition

Those who define mysticism in terms of a certain type of experience of God often seem to forget that there can be no direct access to evidence for the historian. Experience as such is not a part of the historical record. The only thing directly available to the historian or historical theologian is the evidence, largely in the form of written records . . .

—McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xiv.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this chapter associates mysticism with the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature, suggesting that this literature includes records of a mystical tradition. Before attempting an examination of this proposal, it is important to clarify the following. What is the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature? What is meant when applying the debated and ambiguous term mysticism in this context? Which parts of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature exhibit notions and outlooks which could be characterized as mystical? These topics will be addressed in this chapter. Its first section will present an overview of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature, its nature, origins, traditions, themes, and the development of its research. The second section will introduce principle issues and methodological approaches to the study of mysticism, relevant to the present investigation. It will then discuss broad characteristic features of Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism present primarily in several literary sources. None of these writings reveal a coherent mystical doctrine conveyed in a methodical fashion. Yet, despite some inconsistency, parallel accounts complement each other, disclosing interconnected experimental and theoretical aspects of one

tradition, which endured over a long period of time, despite its noncanonical status. Its goals, religio-spiritual attitudes, practices, revelations, and exegetical perceptions demonstrate specific traits which, from a phenomenological perspective, can be characterized as mystical.

THE HEKHALOT AND MERKAVAH LITERATURE

The anonymous corpus known as the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature derives its name from two of its principal themes. The first theme involves descriptions of visionary heavenly ascents through the seven divine palaces (Hebrew: Hekhalot **הֵיכָלוֹת**). The second theme features meditations and interpretations of the chariot vision (Hebrew: Merkavah **מֵרֻכָּבָה**).¹ The collective title, "Hekhalot and Merkavah literature," may give the impression of a cohesive corpus of writings with a specific homogeneous tradition or a consistent religious outlook. This literature, however, is not a unified body of work having one spiritual approach. On the contrary, the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature consists of several anonymous and enigmatic manuscripts, each of which includes various literary genres and diverse traditions.²

The Hekhalot and Merkavah manuscripts are written in Hebrew and Aramaic with several borrowings from Greek.³ They came into existence over an extensive period of time. According to several scholars, they took shape in Palestine and Babylonia during the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods of the second and fifth centuries. Others date this literature to the sixth and the eighth centuries, C.E., the late phase of the Geonic period.⁴ These texts involved a long process of writing, editing, and redacting. They have not been preserved in their original and complete form but are found instead as fragmented manuscripts and literary units in later sources. A major body of the manuscripts has been found in medieval Europe, among the writings of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* movement. These manuscripts were edited by members of this school at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century C.E.⁵ Hekhalot and Merkavah material has been preserved as well in the work of early Jewish philosophers from the tenth century and in polemic *Karaite* literature.⁶ Additional fragments, the authorship of which is attributed to the ninth century, have been found in the Cairo *Genizah*.⁷ Short segments of the Hekhalot and Merkavah texts were also included in various *Midrashim* and in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds.⁸

The Hekhalot and Merkavah literature is distinctively multifaceted, presenting complex and sometimes contradictory notions of God, angels, and human beings.⁹ Each manuscript, in fact, may be seen as an anthology of different traditions and subject matters. Cosmological

concepts, magical and theurgical traditions, accounts of visionary ascensions to the celestial world, descriptions of the angelic realm, rituals of adjurations, messianic contemplation, theosophical speculations concerning the nature of God, his appearance and the dimensions of his divine figure (*shi'ur komah*, שיעור קומה), are several of the central topics which the Hekhalot and Merkavah treatises introduce simultaneously.¹⁰

The diversity of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature as well as the complexity of its texts make difficult any attempt to reach clear, solid conclusions regarding the scope of the corpus, the relationships among its various parts, the time and social climate of its composition, and its dominant characteristics. Questions concerning the literature have therefore been disputed in the scholarly literature and many speculations have not been definitively proven.¹¹ The following is a brief overview of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature; its origins, literary traditions, and prevalent themes.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

The first attempts to anchor the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature in a specific Jewish tradition and to set the historical and chronological date of its compilation were made in the nineteenth century. Several scholars of that period considered texts of this literature as obscure late manuscripts which stand outside the normative Judaism of late antiquity and early Middle Ages. The historian H. H. Graetz, for example, attributed the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature to the post-Talmudic and Midrashic periods. In Graetz's opinion the literature's exceptional and irrational themes, such as descriptions of angels, magical formulas, ascents to heaven, and descriptions of the body of the divine, could not correctly be seen as the product of legalistic rabbinical Judaism, but rather reflect the presence of Islamic influence from sources of the eighth and ninth centuries.¹² Other scholars, in contrast, viewed the Hekhalot and Merkavah texts as authentic Jewish writings from a much earlier date. M. Gaster, considered the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature as a remnant of an ancient school of thought dating from the Second Temple period. A. Jellinek regarded the manuscripts as late homilies, which had not been included in the classical collections. He issued several of the treatises in his edition *Bet ha-Midrash*. S. A. Wertheimer shared a similar attitude and included several Hekhalot and Merkavah texts in his collection, *Batei Midrashot*, as did S. Musajoff, who included Hekhalot and Merkavah texts in his edition, *Merkavah Shelema*.¹³ In the twenties, H. Odeberg published a critical edition of *Sefer Hekhalot*, also labeled by him as *The Hebrew Book of Enoch* or *3 Enoch*. As the title reflects, Odeberg considered the text

to be a part of the ancient apocalyptic Enochic literature from the first centuries B.C.E. and the first century C.E.¹⁴

G. Scholem's writings mark the beginning of contemporary academic study of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature. Scholem and several other scholars dated the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature to a much earlier time than had previously been suggested.¹⁵ The literature, according to this view, was attributed to mainstream orthodox Rabbinic circles in the Tannaim period, around the turn of the first century C.E., and then developed in various ways during the following six or seven centuries.¹⁶ These conclusions have been challenged by several scholars. E. E. Urbach and D. J. Halperin have shown differences between the Hekhalot and Merkavah tradition and that of Rabbinic Judaism, in which they have not found any trace of mystical activity but rather that of a homilistical midrashic study of Ezekiel's chariot.¹⁷ M. S. Cohen, P. S. Alexander, and M. D. Swartz have argued that different Hekhalot and Merkavah texts and literary units cannot be dated to the first centuries C.E. Instead, they contend these texts took shape over several centuries in Palestine between the early Amoraic period and the post-Talmudic time in Babylonia.¹⁸

Not only the chronological dating of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature remains unclear, but also the identity and the social-historical background of its authors or compilers. No clear answers can be deduced from the literature itself.¹⁹ Well-known Tannaitic figures such as Rabbi Ishmael, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Nehunia ben Ha-Kanah are presented in the various narratives as main speakers, yet the information they communicate often conflicts with documented historical data. Their descriptions relate primarily to an imaginary reality, and their views frequently contradict the accepted traditional norms of the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods of the second and fifth centuries C.E.²⁰

Diverse theories have been suggested to determine the writers' identities. Members of a mystical school, originating in Palestine in Tannaitic and Talmudic times, were considered by Scholem to be the early authors of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature, which later extended to Babylonia and subsequently to Europe. P. Schäfer sees this literature as an expression of an elite post-rabbinic group of scholars, originating in Babylonia. "People of the land," including uneducated lower class rebels from a younger generation, were the writers of this literature, according to Halperin. This group challenged the old rabbinic authorities, making theurgic use of the *Sar Torah* traditions of the Hekhalot and Merkavah in order to gain a higher social status and authority. Associating the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature with magical literature J. R. Davila considered professional scribes as the composers of the literature. Lacking formal rabbinic training and venerable social status, they challenged the Rabbis with magic. In a recent

study he has identified the people behind the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature as practitioners of ritual power, compared to shamans and shamans/healers. Swartz sees the authors as educated groups who lacked formal rabbinic training. These groups, placed between the elite and the common lower classes, were found in circles of synagogue functionaries, liturgical poets and professional scribes. R. Elior situates the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature in the context of priestly-angelic lore. She attributes it to members of priestly circles, whose concern was to preserve and reconstruct Temple traditions after its destruction as well as to transform the imperceptible divinity into a perceivable order.²¹

The cultural-historical background of Hekhalot and Merkavah literature has also been studied from various angles. As scholars have demonstrated, the literature shares many characteristics with several major religious movements which flourished in the same cultural climate both within Judaism and outside of it. Similarities have been drawn on the level of the general structure of ideas and as well on the level of detailed literary motifs and themes. In addition to the connection of this literature with the Talmudic and Midrashic literature,²² interdependence between Hekhalot and Merkavah hymnology and Jewish traditional prayers has been documented, and significant impact of priestly-angelic traditions from the First and Second Temple periods on the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature has been demonstrated.²³ The Hekhalot and Merkavah literature has also been linked to several other traditions and texts from a similar cultural environment. These include apocryphal and apocalyptic literature,²⁴ the Qumran texts,²⁵ Gnostic traditions,²⁶ and early Christian literature.²⁷ Connections between several Hekhalot and Merkavah traditions and various Jewish and Greco-Roman magical traditions of late antiquity have been studied as well.²⁸

SCHOLARLY EDITIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

From the middle of the nineteenth century several Hekhalot and Merkavah manuscripts were published by Jellinek, Wertheimer, and Musajoff.²⁹ In the twenties, the first critical edition of a Hekhalot and Merkavah manuscript, *Sefer Hekhalot*, was published by H. Odeberg, who also labeled it *The Hebrew Book of Enoch* or *3 Enoch*.³⁰ Critical editions of specific manuscripts and literary units were published later by scholars such as P. S. Alexander, M. S. Cohen, R. Elior, I. Gruenwald, K. Hermann, and G. Scholem.³¹ In the late 1970's P. Schäfer suggested a different approach to the study of the manuscripts. Questioning the convention of separating the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature into fixed, defined, and independent textual units and books, Schäfer and his colleagues published a synoptic edition of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature. This edition is composed of seven manuscripts

from medieval European sources, presented in one sequence and divided into nine hundred and thirty orderly, consecutive paragraphs. A later edition of the Hekhalot and Merkavah texts, also published by Schäfer, comprises twenty-three fragments from the Cairo *Genizah*. Photographs of the texts, comments, explanations and references to other related Hekhalot and Merkavah sources are also part of this edition.³²

In several discussions, Schäfer has promoted the historical-textual approach to the study of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature. In these, he has emphasized the greater importance of clarifying questions regarding the relationships among the manuscripts and various textual units over the lesser importance of the study of their particular characteristics.³³ Other scholars, in contrast, have suggested employing an overall contextual-phenomenological perspective in order to explore the unique attributes of the literature. This second approach treats the literature as a corpus with a common spiritual outlook and a shared literary heritage, reflected in the various texts, despite obvious differences and contradictions. Scholars have appropriately adopted thematic, contextual, phenomenological, and historical approaches as fruitful methods for analyzing the manuscripts. These methods allow major conceptual themes and outlooks found in the literature to be distinguished and assessed.³⁴

Among the various conceptual themes and phenomenological features of this literature, its mystical teachings, principles, and ideas have been the topic of much discussion in significant studies. This study, as well, focuses on the Hekhalot and Merkavah mystical tradition. Recognizing mysticism as one of many notions of this multilayered literature, it seeks to explore its specific features. As an introduction, it is thus pertinent to discuss two topics, the nature of mystical literature in general, and of the Hekhalot and Merkavah mystical literature in particular.

MYSTICISM IN THE HEKHALOT AND MERKAVAH LITERATURE

Recent scholarship presents two primary approaches to the study of mysticism in the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature. On the one hand, several scholars claim that this literature contains records of genuine otherworldly experiences, preparatory techniques, and revelations, all seen as its mystical core. In Scholem's opinion, for example, the soul's ascent to heaven and its attainment of God is the dominant mystical concept of this literature. It reveals evidence of ecstatic visionary experiences which later degenerated into magical writings. I. Gruenwald likewise associates mysticism in this literature exclusively with ascent traditions. J. Dan identifies three

types of mystical elements in the literature, among which the ascent to the Merkavah is the most significant. In Elion's view, the mystical aspects of this literature are represented by a new concept of divinity as well as by the practice of ascent to heaven. K. E. Grözinger highlights the mystical ascent as well as mystical preparatory techniques and stages.³⁵

On the other hand, some scholars assert that the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature includes merely literary constructions, which do not reveal authentic mystical experiences and practices. Urbach and Halperin, for instance, maintain this view, arguing that the ascent theme should not be regarded as the primary aspect of this literature, which reflects mostly literary developments. Schäfer argues that the literature does not provide any indication of how the heavenly ascent was carried out, or even if it was practiced at all. M. Himmelfarb asserts that the literature includes stories to be repeated and not descriptions of tenable experiences and rites.³⁶

This dichotomy between the experimental and the exegetical aspects of the Hekhalot and Merkavah mystical tradition has been challenged recently in several studies. Alexander discusses the interdependency of these two aspects in any study of Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism and asserts: "from early on in the movement both 'theoretical' (i.e. exegetical) and 'practical' (i.e. experimental) approaches to the Merkavah were followed."³⁷ Rejecting any distinction between the two E. R. Wolfson states: "Such a distinction is predicated on the ability to isolate phenomenologically an experience separated from its literal context—a questionable presumption, inasmuch as all such experiences occur within a literary framework."³⁸

This approach parallels a prevalent view according to which the academic access to mystical teachings, experiences, revelations, and doctrines of any mystical school is available mainly through its literary writings. Scholars have argued in support of this claim, maintaining that only the literary records give expression to mystical notions and enable students of mysticism to explore their meaning, thus, the analysis of mysticism is primarily textually based. S. T. Katz makes this observation very clearly, asserting that the key to understanding mystical phenomena in general is through analysis of its literary evidence:

There are no pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say *all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways.³⁹

Sharing this perspective, scholars such as R. M. Gimello, P. Moore, and C. A. Keller assert that mystical writings form the only data for any analysis of mysticism. The study of mysticism appears, therefore, to be primarily literary, philological, and exegetical.⁴⁰ In his investigation of mystical phenomena, B. McGinn's perception accords with this perspective: "The only thing directly available to the historian or historical theologian is the evidence, largely in the form of written records."⁴¹

This approach to the study of mysticism seems to be particularly valid in the case of the Hekhalot and Merkavah mystical tradition. In its enigmatic and fractured collection of literary texts, we do not find records of pure, unmediated mystical experiences or revelations, presented as verified, firsthand, personal testimony. Instead, the many Hekhalot and Merkavah passages provide a rich tapestry of theoretical literary descriptions and of first, second, or third hand pseudepigraphical testimonies of visionary experiences and revelations, which demonstrate certain mystical characteristics. These writings may present records of authentic experiences translated into words. They may also be bound up with accepted traditional norms, or based on literary conventions shared by a specific group.⁴² Since the literary texts, in their present form, constitute our only link to Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism of late antiquity, the pure nature of authentic mystical experiences, their validity, or the accuracy and correctness of reported mystical claims are topics which stand beyond the scope of our investigation. Instead, through a careful analysis of the written data, substantial insights into the nature of the Hekhalot and Merkavah mystical tradition and its special traits can be achieved.⁴³

WHAT IS MEANT BY MYSTICISM

As we approach Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism through a study of its literature, we need to discern the term mysticism, as well as to specify which parts of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature exhibit notions and outlooks which could be characterized as mystical. The many studies of mysticism make clear that every examination of this wide phenomenon defies any clear-cut attempt at its definition. Mysticism is a phenomenological concept, coined by Western scholars, which refers to various types of teachings, experiences, and goals of varied spiritual trends.⁴⁴ Deeply influenced by the perspectives, backgrounds, and interests of its scholars, the definitions and classifications of mysticism are numerous and diverse. Rather than distinguishing what mysticism is, this study focuses on several of its characteristic qualities, denoted from a phenomenological perspective, which are of particular interest for this investigation of the Hekhalot and Merkavah