Introduction

This book is about *merkabah* midrash. That is, it is about the ways in which Jews in antiquity interpreted the cryptic and bizarre vision described at the beginning of the Book of Ezekiel, which came early to be designated as the vision of the *merkabah*. (The Hebrew word means "chariot"; in this case, the chariot of God.)

Most moderns know about the *merkabah* vision only that

> Ezekiel saw the wheel, 'way in the middle of the air
> ...
> And the little wheel run by faith,
> And the big wheel run by the grace of God ... [852a]

But the pertinent passages of Ezekiel describe much more than "the wheel." Beginning with a stormy wind and a fiery cloud which approach from the north, the vision unfolds as a description of four fantastic beings, each with four different faces. Four wheels, each one like "a wheel within a wheel," accompany these beings. A platform, like crystal, is over their heads. A human-like manifestation of the Deity sits above the platform, on a lapis-lazuli throne. All of this is set forth in the first chapter of Ezekiel. Chapter 10 repeats it, with important variations. Ezekiel 43:1–4 refers back to it.

It is not easy to make sense of these details, and still less easy to determine what the totality of the vision is supposed to convey. Generations of Bible-readers, from the ancient Jewish interpreters whose expositions we shall examine, down to space-age fantasists like Erich von Däniken [846, 848, 859], have applied themselves to the *merkabah*'s riddles.

I do not propose here to join their company. I cannot, to be sure, entirely ignore the question of what Ezekiel was talking about; and, from time to time, I will touch on the problem of the original meaning of the *merkabah* vision. But my real concern is with the Jewish interpretations themselves, and with the light they can shed, not on the text they purport to interpret, but on the religious perceptions of the culture that created them.

For early Judaism, like its sister Christianity, was a Scripture religion, and thus lived in symbiosis with the library of ancient texts that its adherents

accepted as the word of God [729c]. Within this collection the diligent inquirer could, at least in theory, discover all knowledge worth having.

"Turn it this way, turn it that way," said one rabbi of the Torah, "everything is in it" (M. Abot 5:22, in Goldin's translation [244a])[1]. Early in the third century, a Jew told the Christian scholar Origen[2] that the Scriptures are like a great house whose rooms are all closed, with a key beside each locked door. Only, the key does not fit the door it is placed beside, and the inquirer must know how to find the right key for the door he wants to open [668a]. The ancient Jewish study of Scripture was less a matter of interpreting a text, as we are apt to conceive this process, than of exploring a vast storehouse of sacred treasure. These explorations could vary tremendously in their sophistication. The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.–40 A.D.) made elaborate efforts to find the truths of Platonism hiding behind the stories and laws of the Pentateuch [729d]; while one rabbinic midrash pressed the language of Genesis 3:14 for details on the gestation period of snakes (*Gen. R.* 20:4; ed. 185–186 [188])[3].

Normally, the explorer found in the storehouse of Scripture what he had himself brought into it, whether Platonic philosophy or (to choose an example from rabbinic Judaism) the detailed rules of Sabbath observance that had become traditional in second-century A.D. Palestine. If he interpreted two Scriptural passages in the light of each other, and thus discovered a new meaning which neither passage had in its own context – in Origen's image, if he fit the key into the lock and opened the door – this was because he already had a predisposition to correlate precisely those two texts. And yet the interpreter's ideas were transformed in the process of reading them into Scripture and then out again. The shape of the Bible's language modified and redirected his intentions, at the same time that his intentions reshaped his perception of the Bible and its message. Jews in antiquity came to Scripture to learn its wisdom; they in fact recreated it in their own image. Yet this image was itself born of Scripture, and refashioned under the influence of Scripture.

This complex and paradoxical process, which I have in mind when I speak of a symbiosis of Jews (and Christians) with their Bible, will be exemplified many times in the following pages. It is near the heart of Jewish

1 For an explanation of this reference, see Appendix I, section 1.

2 Origen was by all odds the most profound scholar and extraordinary thinker of the early church. He was born about 185, and lived and worked in Alexandria until about 232. Driven out by his bishop's hostility, he settled in the Palestinian coastal city of Caesarea, where he remained until his death between 251 and 255 [686,700,708]. Caesarea was at that time a major center of rabbinic Judaism, and there is ample evidence that Origen had extensive contact with the local Jewish scholars – a topic to which we will return, at length, in chapter VIII [421,664].

3 See Appendix I, section 6.

religious development in antiquity. If we want to grasp the essence of any one of the multiple forms of early Judaism, we cannot avoid asking how it understood the substance of its sacred writings, and what it did with that understanding.

A community founded on Scripture may regard all parts of its Bible as equally inspired. It is unlikely to regard them all as equally interesting. A Bible-belt fundamentalist will have an interest in the prophecies of the Book of Revelation that most Catholics or Episcopalians are not likely to share. Orthodox Jews, whose sacred history finds its point of central importance in the Sinai revelation, will not be apt to share the passionate concern with the opening chapters of Genesis that has made the truth of the Creation story a political issue of the 1980's.

So in antiquity. Let us use the number of times the literature of a community quotes a passage of Scripture as a rough indicator of the importance that the community attaches to it. We find that the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah occupies a disproportionately large place in the *Biblia Patristica* (an index of Biblical quotations or allusions in the Christian literature of the first three centuries [800]), because the church saw in this chapter a particularly important prophecy of the sacrificial death of its Messiah. In the counterpart to the *Biblia Patristica* that deals with the rabbinic literature [804], the place occupied by Isaiah 53 is remarkably small, presumably for the same reason. Early Judaism, like Christianity, reshaped Scripture not only by interpreting it. It reshaped it by deciding what portions of it were worth interpreting.

This brings us back to the *merkabah*. Christians, though they might sometimes pay homage to the awesome obscurity of this vision (for example, Jerome's *Epistle 53*, to Paulinus [621]), do not seem on the whole to have found it of outstanding interest [695]. We are not well enough informed about the varieties of Judaism that flourished before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D. [729a] to judge the role it played in their perceptions. But, when we turn to the form of Judaism that became dominant after 70, the Judaism that is usually called "rabbinic" after the title ("rabbi") given to the men who shaped and directed it, we find explicit evidence that the *merkabah* aroused not only excitement, but also a nervous suspicion that often seems to cross the border into fear. Both responses are strangely, and perhaps uniquely, intense.

Consider, for example, the anonymous regulation preserved in the Mishnah, Hagigah 2:1[4]:

4 See Appendix I, section 1.

The laws of forbidden sexual relations [Leviticus 18 and 20] may not be expounded by three ersons, nor the account of creation [Genesis 1:1–2:3] by two, nor the *merkabah* by one, un-ss he is a scholar and has understood on his own. He who contemplates four things – what is bove and what below, what is before and what after – would have been better off if he had ever been born. He who has no concern for the honor of his creator would be better off if he ad never been born.

Several details of this passage are obscure, but its thrust is unmistakable. e *merkabah* is to be treated as the most arcane of the Scriptures. Ex-unding it brings one dangerously close to those studies whose prosecu-n is an affront to the glory of God, whose devotee would be better off he had not been born.

The *merkabah* is physically dangerous, too. Rabbi Judah the Patriarch rly third century A.D.), "had a distinguished student who expounded egment of *maʿaśeh merkabah*[5]. Rabbi [Judah] did not agree, and [the ident] became a leper." So, at least, the Palestinian Talmud (Hagigah , 77a). The Babylonian Talmud (Hagigah 13a)[6] tells an even more ghtening story. "It once happened that a certain child was reading the ok of Ezekiel in his teacher's house, and he contemplated *ḥashmal* [or, rhaps, "he understood what *ḥashmal* was"][7]. Fire came forth from *shmal* and burned him up."

But, if expounded well, the *merkabah* could bring dramatic tokens of ine favor to the lucky expositor. A cycle of stories about the *merkabah* positions of R. Johanan b. Zakkai's disciples (late first century A.D.) ll conveys this point. When R. Eleazar b. Arakh, for example, expounded *ʿaśeh merkabah* in R. Johanan's presence, "fire descended from heaven d surrounded them. Angels came leaping before them, like a wedding ty rejoicing before a bridegroom. An angel spoke from the midst of fire: 'As you have expounded, Eleazar b. Arakh, thus is *maʿaśeh mer-bah*' " (PT Hagigah 2:1, 77a).

Evidently, the rabbis saw something in Ezekiel's vision that was vitally portant, yet so fearful that the ordinary person must be warned away m it. I know of no other case where the very act of studying a Biblical

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Rabbinic sources sometimes use the phrase *maʿaśeh merkabah* in place of *merkabah*, when it is treated, as here, as an object of exposition, study, or teaching. It is not clear how we are to translate the expression. The customary "work of the chariot" is vague, the alternative "account of the chariot" unlikely; "structure of the chariot" (so Ezekiel 1:16 uses the word *maʿaśeh*) is possible. There seems to be some slight difference in nuance between *merkabah* and *maʿaśeh merkabah*, but it is hard to say just what it is [552].

See Appendix I, section 3.

Ḥashmal is the mysterious Hebrew word, translated "gleaming bronze" in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSV), which Ezekiel uses to describe the fiery manifestation at the beginning of the *merkabah* vision (1:4), and the luminous splendor at its climax (1:27, cf. 8:3). In modern Hebrew, the word is used for electricity. No one is yet quite sure what Ezekiel meant by it [1a,6,19].

text is the object of extensive discussion, prescription, and restriction – as we find with the *merkabah*.

What was the *merkabah*'s power and danger? Its power, no doubt, had something to do with the obscurity of the *merkabah* vision. In the more intelligible parts of Scripture, the rabbis may have sensed, the divine mysteries hidden behind the veil of the Bible's simple language were kept so far back that the veil hung smoothly before them. Here they thrust themselves forward, their bulges distorting the veil's contours. Otherwise, how explain the difficulties of the prophet's language? The pious expositor could hardly suppose, like the modern interpreter, corruption of the text; still less, some confusion in Ezekiel's own mind. The difficulties, he might well reason, must point to the shape of the secrets behind them. Resolve those difficulties, and the secrets will become plain.

But the fear the vision aroused is still mysterious. We understand it no better when we are told that contemplation of the divine is inherently dangerous, because we do not grasp why this should be so. We may, indeed, look to Rudolf Otto's conception of the *mysterium tremendum* as an essential element of religious experience [849], and infer that the mixture of excitement and nervousness with which the rabbis approached the *merkabah* is far from being an isolated phenomenon. But this still does not give us an answer clear and definite enough to satisfy us. We must ask precisely what there was about the act of interpreting this Scriptural text, that called forth these responses from the rabbis. Otherwise, we miss our chance to understand an important if unconventional aspect of rabbinic Judaism, and perhaps of the phenomenon of the *tremendum* in general.

In his monumental books on Jewish mysticism, the late Gershom G. Scholem has proposed what might be at least a partial solution to our problem [589, 605].

Scholem's position – to simplify to the verge of distortion – is that the rabbis' discussions and restrictions on the *merkabah* point to something well beyond the interpretation of the Book of Ezekiel. They allude to a mystical practice which involved ascent to the divine realms and direct contemplation of the *merkabah* and its attendant beings. A group of strange and at times barely intelligible texts called the *Hekhalot* ("palaces," referring to the heavenly structures) preserve, sometimes in overlaid or distorted form, the experiences of these mystics. M. Hag. 2:1, and the anecdotes that the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds gather around it, view this ecstatic mysticism from the outside. To see it from the inside, we must make use of the *Hekhalot*.

In making his case, Scholem followed a path that had first been cut by the eleventh-century scholar Hai Gaon. Hai used the *Hekhalot* to elucidate a puzzling Talmudic account, which occupied Scholem and will presently

occupy us, of four rabbis who entered a mysterious "garden" (BT Hagigah 14b; below, chapters I and VI). Said Hai:

> You may be aware that many of the sages were of the opinion that an individual possessing certain explicitly defined qualities, who wishes to look at the *merkabah* and to peer into the palaces [*hekhalot*] of the celestial angels, has ways to achieve this. He must sit fasting for a specified number of days, place his head between his knees, and whisper to the earth many prescribed songs and hymns. He thus peers into the inner rooms and chambers as if he were seeing the seven palaces with his own eyes, and he observes as if he were going from palace to palace and seeing what is in them. There are two *mishnayot* that the Tanraim have taught on this subject; they are called *Hekhalot Rabbati* and *Hekhalot Zutarti*[8]. This much is widely known. [241]

Scholem did not follow Hai Gaon in his uncritical belief that the *Hekhalot* were authored by Tannaim. But, against such nineteenth-century scholars as Heinrich Grätz and Philipp Bloch [528,509], he argued that their central ideas were ancient, going back to the beginning of the Christian Era. The ecstatic journey to the *merkabah* was no medieval import from Islam (so Grätz), but an essential and authentic expression of rabbinic Judaism, which had been part of it from its beginning. The rabbis had been praised as sober rationalists, or condemned as pedantic legalists. Neither stereotype had allowed them a spark of mystical passion. And now, Scholem proclaimed, the "*merkabah* mysticism" of the *Hekhalot* proved that both stereotypes were fantastically wrong.

This same "*merkabah* mysticism," Scholem thought, yielded the key to the stories of heavenly ascension that filled the Jewish and Christian apocalypses of the last two centuries B.C. and first two centuries A.D. It explained particularly well a strange passage in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians (12:2–4), where Paul described himself as

> a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – and he heard things that cannot be taught, which man may not utter.

Paul was "caught up into Paradise." The four rabbis whose story Hai Gaon undertook to explain had entered a "garden"; and the Hebrew word for "garden," *pardes*, might well be understood as "Paradise"[9]. The parallel seemed compelling. Following Hai, Scholem had interpreted the Talmudic story as testimony to mystical ecstasy. So understood, it would now illuminate the Jewish background of Paul's experience.

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8 Hai uses *mishnayot* to mean "Tannaitic teachings." For a fuller explanation of this word, see Appendix I, section 1; on the "Tannaim," see section 2. In chapter IX, I extensively discuss the *Hekhalot* in general, and the "texts" that have come to be called *Hekhalot Rabbati* and *Hekhalot Zutarti* (the "Greater Treatise on the Palaces," the "Lesser Treatise on the Palaces").

9 The Hebrew and English words are in fact related etymologically. Unfortunately for Scholem's argument, rabbinic Hebrew does not seem actually to use *pardes* to mean "Paradise." We will return to this point in chapter I.

It followed that, in whatever ways Paul had broken with his Pharisaic past, in his penchant for mystical experience (II Corinthians 12:7) he remained faithful to it. As for the rabbis, they were far from stifling apocalyptic ecstasy with their "legalism." On the contrary, they treasured and nourished it. The *Hekhalot* texts became its manuals. And the *merkabah* remained, as it had been for centuries, its focus and its goal.

This marvellously attractive synthesis is flawed in several ways. The parallels on which Scholem rested much of his case, such as that between II Corinthians 12 and the rabbinic *pardes* story, are often equivocal [583]. Although it is hard to defend the nineteenth-century consensus that the *Hekhalot* were written after the end of the Talmudic period (that is, early in the Middle Ages), Scholem's early dating is just as doubtful. Scholem's stress on the reality of the *merkabah* mystics' ecstatic experiences can be misleading. He did not, of course, mean that they "really" ascended to heaven, but that they "really" believed they had done so. But it is easy to slip from this into the illusion that we can explain the ascension materials in the apocalypses and the *Hekhalot* by pointing to the supposed reality of the experience underlying them; whereas, of course, this hallucinatory "experience" itself cries out for explanation. This fallacy seems to me to dog much of Scholem's presentation.

I will develop these criticisms at several points in the chapters that follow. (It is a mark of the power of Scholem's synthesis that I am obliged to devote so much space to criticizing it.) For now, I will stress yet another difficulty I have with Scholem's position, which I find the crucial one; namely, that Scholem does not even try to solve the problem of the *merkabah* as I have defined it above, and as rabbinic texts like M. Hagigah 2:1 persuade me it ought to be defined. These texts, as we will see in chapter I, barely refer to ecstatic journeys. Instead, they show clearly that there was *something in the text of Ezekiel itself* that frightened the rabbis. They represent the *merkabah* as an extraordinary case – extraordinarily promising, extraordinarily dangerous – of the rabbis' symbiosis with Scripture. Scholem does not help us understand how this was so.

Yet we cannot dismiss Scholem's work and start from scratch. The links Scholem propounds – particularly the three-way connection of the apocalyptic ascensions, the rabbinic allusions to the *merkabah*, and the *Hekhalot* materials – seem real. If, as I believe, Scholem has not defined them properly, this will not justify our ignoring them. We must find a better way to state and to explain them. And we do best to start where the rabbinic sources suggest we ought, with the exegetical traditions on the *merkabah* visions of Ezekiel.

Sigmund Freud, in his "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis"

(better known as the case history of the "Wolf Man"), records a puzzling memory fragment of his patient's. "He was chasing a beautiful big butterfly with yellow stripes and large wings which ended in pointed projections – a swallow-tail, in fact. Suddenly, when the butterfly had settled on a flower, he was seized with a dreadful fear of the creature, and ran away screaming" [837b].

Freud, naturally, believed he had discovered what there was about the butterfly that so terrified his "Wolf Man." It would not be to our purpose to go into the details. What concerns us is that Freud believed, I think correctly, that the butterfly was bound into the "Wolf Man's" mental world by an elaborate network of associations which allowed it to become a tangible emblem of what he desired and what he dreaded. The "Wolf Man" was of course disturbed. But Freud has taught us that similar processes of association operate in all of us. Any object, however harmless, may become linked with what we wish and fear, and draw into itself the force of our wish and our fear.

Midrash, like Freudian psychoanalysis, involves a process of linking. The midrashic expositor associates one Scriptural passage with another, apparently from a totally different context. To take up again Origen's image, he fits the key that is beside one door into the lock of another. Midrash thus constructs from the Scriptures a network of conducting wires, which runs beneath the skin of the religious perception of reality. Points where particularly powerful wires intersect may take on a tremendous charge. To understand why a point is so charged, we must trace the wires that lead from it.

It is my argument in this book that ancient sources, rabbinic and other, give us the information we need to trace the associative wires that gave the *merkabah* its extraordinary charge of excitement and fear.

I do not mean to suggest by this that the rabbis feared the *merkabah* vision because it seemed to have overtones of some alien religious system (Christianity, Gnosticism, or the like). Explanations of this sort seldom appeal to me, because they do not take into account Judaism's ability – which, I believe, it shares with all or almost all other religions – to absorb aspects of other religions which seem compatible with its basic structure [729b]. Alienness *per se*, then, is no ground for rejection, much less terror. Rather, the *merkabah* must have set the rabbis' minds moving toward something which they found inherently thrilling or appalling. I see no reason to doubt that this "something" could have been generated within the rabbis' Judaism itself, without any influence from the outside.

What this "something" was, we must now seek.

My plan of investigation is as follows: We shall begin by mining those rabbinic sources that describe or regulate the process of expounding the

merkabah, for clues as to what direction we are to look for the crucial connections (chapter I). We will then pick out the main lines of *merkabah* exegesis, in extra-rabbinic Jewish literature (chapters II–III) and rabbinic (chapters IV–VIII), and seek to discover how they relate to each other and where they lead. Along our way, we will look at the ascension materials in the apocalypses (chapter III). With our exegetical investigation behind us, we will be ready to find a place for the *Hekhalot* and its ascensions in the *merkabah* tradition (chapter IX).

Chapter I

Shadows of the Merkabah

We begin our search in a state of bewilderment. We are looking for a "something" that somehow has to do with the visions of Ezekiel, that somehow had the power to stir up fear, excitement, and perhaps even ecstasy. But so far we have no inkling of what shape this "something" will take on, or in what direction we are to turn to look for it.

Rabbinic texts, speaking of *merkabah* and *ma^{c}aśeh merkabah*, can help us out of our bewilderment. These texts do not actually interpret the first chapter of Ezekiel. Rather, they talk about, and often pass judgment on, the process itself of interpreting this chapter. They do not tell us what the rabbis said about Ezekiel's visions, far less what there was about the encounters of Scripture and believer that could generate excitement and terror. But, like shadows cast by bodies we do not yet see, they point to where we are to look for these encounters; and they hint at what we must expect to see when we find them.

I explored these passages at length in my book, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* [552]. In this chapter, I summarize my results. Wherever I can, I will indicate the reasoning that underlies these results. But at times I must offer a flat statement in place of a complicated argument, and invite the interested reader to find the details of that argument in my earlier study.

1. "Many expounded the *merkabah*"

We find our first clue in a brief legal discussion, the main point of which does not concern the *merkabah*. In the course of a discussion of the synagogue functions that may be performed by a minor, a man dressed in tatters, and a blind man, the Mishnah (Meg. 4:6) rules:

> A blind man may *pores 'et shema^{c}*[1] and translate [the Torah reading, for the benefit of the congregation].

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1 I cannot translate this phrase. To explain it, I must first explain that the word *shema^{c}* refers pri-

R. Judah says: Anyone who has never seen the luminaries should not *pores 'et shema^{c}*.

Tosefta[2], expanding and annotating the Mishnah at this point, quotes these two sentences and adds a third:

They said to him: Many expounded the *merkabah* and never saw it. [T. Meg. 3(4):28]

What does this discussion mean? R. Judah b. Ilai, a Tanna of the middle or latter part of the second century, dissents from an anonymous (and therefore, according to the convention of the rabbinic writings, general) view, which permits a blind man to perform a specified liturgical function in connection with the *shema^{c}*. We do not know the reason for his objection. We may assume that it has something to do with the blessing, preliminary to the recitation of the *shema^{c}*, that praises God as "fashioner of light"[a]. The man born blind should not publicly praise God for wonders he has never seen. So far the Mishnah.

To this, the anonymous authorities respond: "Many expounded the *merkabah* and never saw it" (Tosefta). In context, this reply must mean: You, R. Judah, hold that it is objectionable for a person to speak before the congregation about phenomena he has never seen. How then do we find that many people expound the *merkabah* without ever having seen it – and no one raises an objection to that!

Only if we interpret the reply this way can we understand its bearing on the argument. Taken in isolation, indeed, it might bear a second interpretation: many people undertook mystical exercises in the hopes of obtaining a vision of the *merkabah*, but failed. But we would be at a loss to understand why R. Judah's opponents use this as a rebuttal. Why should they expect that this information will lead R. Judah to drop his objection to the blind man's being involved in the recitation of the *shema^{c}*?

It is true that the Babylonian Talmud quotes the anonymous reply with an alteration that points clearly to the second interpretation (Meg. 24b): "Did not many hope to expound the *merkabah*, and yet they never saw it?" That is, when the "many" failed to see the *merkabah*, their hopes of expounding it were disappointed. But we shall see that this change in wording accords with a prejudice of the Babylonian rabbis that *ma^{c}aseh merkabah* involves some sort of visionary experience. We may regard it as a Babylonian reinterpretation of the older Palestinian source.

marily to the verse Deuteronomy 6:4 ("hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one"; in Hebrew, the verse begins with the word *shema^{c}*), which became Judaism's central credo. It then comes to refer to a sequence of three Biblical passages beginning with this verse (Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 11:13–21, Numbers 15:37–41), which occupies a key position in the synagogue service. The phrase used here, *pores 'et shema^{c}*, evidently refers to some liturgical action connected with the recitation of the *shema^{c}*. Unfortunately, despite scholars' efforts [280], we are not sure just what that action was. Fortunately, it does not now matter to us.

2 See Appendix I, section 4.

a) (Endnotes see page 523ff.)

Take this older source by itself; what do we learn from it? First, that "expounding the *merkabah*" is a common activity. Next, that it normally does not presuppose or involve any direct experience of the *merkabah*. Third, that R. Judah's interlocutors see nothing wrong with it and assume that he will see nothing wrong with it; otherwise they would not have used it for their counterexample. Finally, if we press the implied parallel with *pores 'et shema^{c}*, we can infer that it has some connection with synagogue worship.

A casual allusion of the sort we have here is perhaps the closest thing to unimpeachable evidence the rabbinic literature can offer. A story may be fabricated for tendentious motives we can only guess at. Even legislation need not always accurately reflect the situation at which it is supposed to be directed. But when a writer or speaker mentions something that he assumes to be common knowledge, which does not interest him for itself but for the support it gives to some other point he is making, we have, if not reality itself, at least what the writer's contemporaries think of as reality. In the anonymous reply to R. Judah, we glimpse *merkabah* exposition in Tannaitic Palestine only briefly, but through clear atmosphere and an accurate lens.

2. Johanan b. Zakkai and the *merkabah*

The source we have just examined thus contrasts sharply with the stories to which we now turn, of how R. Johanan b. Zakkai's disciples expounded the *merkabah*. Here whatever reality there may be is so shrouded in a haze of miraculous legend that we do best to forget about the reality and concentrate on the legend.

We have the stories in four versions: T. Hag. 2:1; PT Hag. 2:1 (77a); BT Hag. 14b; and a broken text that occurs at the beginning of a Genizah fragment of a lost "Tannaitic" midrash to Exodus, known as the *Mekhilta of R. Simeon b. Yoḥai* (ed. 158–159 [196])[3].

The Genizah fragment opens in the middle of the narrative.

" ... If not, give me permission that I may speak before you." R. Eleazar b. Arakh expounded until fire burned all around him. When R. Johanan b. Zakkai saw that fire was burning all around him, he descended from his ass, kissed him, and said to him: "R. Eleazar b. Arakh, happy is she who bore you! Happy are you, Abraham our father, that this man emerged from your loins!"

The part of the story that would have told us what is going on is of course missing. But we can guess it from the parallels: R. Eleazar b. Arakh

3 See Appendix I, section 5c.

has asked his teacher, R. Johanan b. Zakkai, with whom he is travelling, to instruct him concerning *maᶜaśeh merkabah*; and Johanan has refused. (In the parallels, Johanan quotes the regulation, familiar to us from M. Hag. 2:1, that "the *merkabah* may not be expounded by an individual unless he is a scholar who understands on his own". We do not know whether *Mek. Simeon* also quoted this passage.) Eleazar has then undertaken to expound *maᶜaśeh merkabah* himself, which he does, with dazzling results.

In the two Talmuds, the effects are yet more spectacular:

> Fire descended from heaven and surrounded them. Angels came leaping before them, like a wedding party rejoicing before a bridegroom. An angel spoke from the midst of the fire: "As you have expounded, Eleazar b. Arakh, thus is *maᶜaśeh merkabah*!" Thereupon all the trees burst into song: *Then all the trees of the forest shall shout for joy* [Psalm 96:12]. [PT]

> Fire descended from heaven and surrounded all the trees that were in the field. They all began to sing. What was their song? *Praise the Lord from the earth, dragons and all abysses, fruit trees and all cedars! Hallelujah* [Psalm 148:7, 9, 14]. An angel spoke from the fire: "This is indeed *maᶜaśeh merkabah*." [BT]

Other disciples of R. Johanan[4] are encouraged to expound *maᶜaśeh merkabah*:

> When R. Joseph [= Jose] ha-Kohen and R. Simeon b. Nethaneel heard about this, they too began to expound *maᶜaśeh merkabah*. ... Although it was a summer day, the earth shook, and a rainbow was seen in the cloud[5]. A heavenly voice proclaimed: "The place is cleared for you and the couch is spread for you! You and your disciples are designated for the third set"[6]! [PT]

> When word of this reached R. Joshua, he and R. Jose ha-Kohen were walking together. They said: "Let us also expound *maᶜaśeh merkabah*"b). ... Although it was a summer day, the skies clouded over, and a sort of rainbow was seen in the cloud. The angels assembled to hear *maᶜaśeh merkabah*, like people assembling to see the entertainments of groom and bride.
>
> R. Jose ha-Kohen went and told R. Johanan b. Zakkai. [Johanan] said: "Happy are you [plural]! Happy your mother! Happy my eyes which thus saw! In my dream, moreover, you [plural] and I were sitting at table on Mount Sinai when a heavenly voice proclaimed from the skies: 'Come up here! Come up here! Large couches are prepared for you, large cushions are spread for you. You, and your disciples, and your disciples' disciples, are designated for the third set.' " [BT]

Tosefta's version, which I have left for last, is entirely bare of miraculous detail. Eleazar asks Johanan for instruction in *maᶜaśeh merkabah*. Johanan refuses, quoting either M. Hag. 2:1 or some related source. Eleazar discourses on the subject himself. Johanan then kisses him on the head and delivers a series of encomia, which occurs also in PT and BT, after the miraculous effects. In Tosefta, there is nothing in between. Nor does Tosefta

4 "R. Johanan b. Zakkai had five disciples: R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, R. Joshua b. Hananiah, R. Jose ha-Kohen, R. Simeon b. Nethaneel, and R. Eleazar b. Arakh" (M. Abot 2:8). Of these five, only R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus does not appear in any of the *merkabah* stories.

5 Rain during the summer is rare in Palestine.

6 I do not know what "the third set" means.

mention any of Johanan's other disciples. None of the four sources gives us any clue to what Eleazar or the other disciples said about the *merkabah*.

It is natural to assume that Tosefta's version is the oldest of the four and the closest to the historical facts, and that the other three sources have fancifully embellished Tosefta's sober narrative [615]. My own analysis of the sources [552] suggests to me that the development was considerably more complex and proceeded in a different direction. The miracles are the oldest elements of the tradition, which at no stage had anything much to do with historical fact. Tosefta deliberately suppressed them, for reasons we have yet to consider. The authors of the PT and BT versions, drawing on sources that continued to circulate beside the official version of Tosefta, reintroduced them.

The earliest stage of tradition, I believe, consisted of a pool of brief and extremely simple stories [527]. In these stories, one or another of Johanan's disciples expounded the *merkabah*; the powers above gave dramatic signs of their approval; Johanan added his own praise. The stories were extremely fluid – they may never have been written down in their original form – and the storytellers had no qualms about attributing the same miracle now to one disciple, now to another. This explains the ease with which certain details in our sources cross from one episode to another: PT, for example, invokes the image of angels behaving like wedding guests in connection with Eleazar b. Arakh; BT associates it with R. Joshua and R. Jose ha-Kohen[7].

But why do the narrators fail to tell us what Johanan's disciples actually said about the *merkabah*? Because it was not their purpose to tell us any such thing. What they wanted was to show the wondrous greatness of the ancient sages. They did this by describing the vivid tokens by which God and the angels showed their regard for the way these men expounded Scripture. We find the same spirit in an anecdote BT tells of R. Johanan's older contemporary Jonathan b. Uzziel: "When he was sitting engaged in Torah study, any bird that flew over him was immediately burned up" (Sukk. 28a). We miss the point of this story if we ask what part of the Torah Jonathan b. Uzziel was studying or what he thought about it. The point is the effect, emanating from his personal greatness, that the very act of his studying had on his surroundings. So with the *merkabah* stories.

And yet the *merkabah* cannot have been entirely incidental to these stories. The storytellers, after all, could have spoken of how Eleazar b. Arakh and the rest expounded Torah in their master's presence. Instead, they chose to specify the *merkabah* as the object of the disciples' exposition. Why?

7 PT describes the angels as "leaping" (*meqappeṣin*), BT as "assembling" (*mitqabbeṣin*). The two are obviously oral variants [406a].

The answer to this question is tied up with another problem: what led the storytellers to their choice of miracles? Fire surrounding the expositors or the neighboring trees; an angel speaking from the fire; trees bursting into song; angels behaving like wedding guests; the earth shaking; a rainbow in summertime; a voice from heaven trumpeting an invitation – why are these wonders, and not others, appropriate responses to a *merkabah* exposition? The earthquake perhaps reflects Ezekiel 3:12–13; the summertime rainbow almost certainly reflects Ezekiel 1:28[8]. But what about the rest?

Ephraim E. Urbach [615] was, as far as I know, the first to notice that most of the miraculous details in the *merkabah* stories have their home in the events surrounding the Sinai revelation. God descends on Mount Sinai in fire (Exodus 19:18), and Deuteronomy stresses the fiery character of the revelation (especially in chapters 4–5). God at Sinai, like the angel in the *merkabah* stories, speaks "from the midst of the fire" (Deuteronomy 4–5). R. Johanan dreams that he and his disciples are sitting at table on Sinai when the heavenly voice calls; Moses eats on Sinai with his companions before God summons him (Exodus 24:11, 15–18) [525]. The rabbinic elaborations of the Biblical story, some of which we will discuss in more detail later on, have an earthquake accompany the revelation; they picture the Sinai event as a wedding of God and his people, and lovingly describe how myriads of angels were in attendance. The rainbow, I must admit, belongs only to Ezekiel's vision, and I have not been able to find any parallel to the singing of the trees in connection with either Sinai or the *merkabah*. But five out of seven is not a bad score, and gives the impression that the miracles of the *merkabah* stories are intended to be faint reflections of the wonders that accompanied the giving of the Torah. When R. Johanan's disciples expound the *merkabah*, Sinai happens again.

Two stories which the Palestinian Amoraim told about their Tannaitic predecessors confirm this impression. In one story, R. Akiba sees Ben Azzai surrounded by fire as he expounds. Akiba thinks he is exploring "the chambers of the *merkabah*," but it turns out he is joining together verses from the three divisions of Scripture[9], "and the words of Torah were as joyful as the day they were given from Sinai ... in fire" (*Lev. R.* 16:4, ed. 354–355)

8 "Like the appearance of the bow that is seen in a cloud on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding splendor. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord." The "fourth month" of Ezekiel 1:1 is the "Tammuz" of the Jewish lunar year, corresponding to our June-July. (Targum translates "the fourth month" as "Tammuz"; PT and BT place the events in "summer," *tequfat tammuz*, literally "the season of Tammuz.")

9 That is, the Torah (the Pentateuch, the so-called Five Books of Moses); the Prophets (in which category Jews include the "historical books" from Joshua to II Kings as well as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve); and the Writings (all the other books of the Hebrew Bible).

[191][10]. The second story (PT Hag. 2:1, 77b) is about R. Eliezer and R. Joshua, and it does not mention the *merkabah*, but the point is the same: enveloping fire is a sign that the Sinai event is being replicated.

This assumption explains the details of the New Testament story of Pentecost. Pentecost is the Greek name for the Jewish festival of Shabu^{c}ot, the day in early summer on which the rabbis believed God had appeared to his people on Sinai. (This belief was older than the rabbis; we find it suggested in the Book of Jubilees, 1:1, 6:17 [431,433,684].) Appropriately, the apostles enter the new covenant, are "baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5), on the very day that their ancestors entered the old. Also appropriately, certain features of the Sinai event are repeated: "There appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:3–4). The apostles' speaking in tongues presumably reflects the rabbinic tradition that God gave the Ten Commandments in the seventy languages of humankind (BT Shabb. 88b [394,449]). Similarly, the fire resting upon them is a token of a new Sinai. We can extend the parallelism between the Pentecost phenomena in Acts and the wonders recorded in the *merkabah* stories if we accept the view of some New Testament scholars [71a] that Acts 4:31 was originally a variant of the Pentecost story: "the place in which they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness." The Christian writer used for his own purposes Jewish motifs connected with the Sinai event and the annual feast believed to commemorate it. These motifs underlie the stories of Johanan b. Zakkai and his disciples.

Our question now becomes: why are expositions of Ezekiel's *merkabah* answered by miracles associated with the Sinai revelation? What connection is there between these two Biblical episodes? The Book of Acts points us to the answer: the festival of Shabu^{c}ot.

From at least as far back as the beginning of the Christian Era, Jews read aloud in the synagogue on each Sabbath and festival a section of the Pentateuch, followed by a thematically related passage from the Prophets (Acts 13:15). It was centuries before this practice became a prescribed cycle of fixed readings: the rabbinic literature and the evidence from the Genizah[11] point to considerable local variation even in the Pentateuchal readings, and, as far as we can tell, the choice of Prophetic lection (*haftarah*, plural *haftarot*) was often left to the judgment of the individual preacher. We find in the rabbinic sources only the beginnings of an effort to regulate

10 See Appendix I, section 6.

11 See Appendix I, section 5.

the lectionary cycle, extending (M. Meg. 3:4–6, T. Meg. 3[4]:1–9, BT Meg. 30a–31b) to festivals and certain other special occasions [259,263, 306,313,336]. In this, as in other matters relating to synagogue worship, the rabbis do not seem to have invented rules and then tried to get people to follow them, but rather to have regularized what they found people already doing [410a]. When, therefore, the rabbis tell us that a certain passage is to be read on such and such a festival, we may assume that was the practice in the synagogues they knew. When they are not sure which of two passages is to be read, it follows that some synagogues read one passage and some the other.

Thus, to take the case in which we are now interested, M. Meg. 3:5 prescribes that the passage beginning with Deuteronomy 16:9 is to be read on Shabu^{c}ot, while T. Meg. 3(4):5 gives the passage beginning with Exodus 19:1 as an alternative. We may deduce that some synagogue leaders in Tannaitic Palestine thought it appropriate that the people hear a Pentateuchal prescription for Shabu^{c}ot (Deuteronomy 16:9–12) on the occasion of the festival, while others preferred the story of the event that Shabu^{c}ot was supposed to commemorate. Mishnah and Tosefta do not try to fix the *haftarah* for the occasion. But a purportedly Tannaitic passage in BT Meg. 31a tells us that "Habakkuk" (presumably chapter 3, in which the rabbis found references to the Sinai revelation) is the *haftarah* associated with Deuteronomy 16:9ff. [48], while "the *merkabah*" is the *haftarah* to Exodus 19:1ff[12].

We cannot be sure how old the Talmudic passage is that combines the Sinai story and the *merkabah* vision, as, respectively, the Torah reading and the *haftarah* for Shabu^{c}ot. The Gemara's claim that it is Tannaitic is open to some question. But, as we proceed, we will see much circumstantial evidence that the synagogue practice it records was very early and very widespread. Once the preachers noticed that Psalm 68:18[13] has God's "chariotry" (*rekheb*, from the same root as *merkabah*) present at Sinai, Sinai and the *merkabah* were paired, and it became natural to interpret the one passage in the light of the other. We will have plenty of opportunity to examine the midrashic results of this coupling. What is important for us now is that it appears to be behind the combination of *merkabah* expositions and Sinai-like wonders in the stories of Johanan b. Zakkai's disciples.

If this is so, we can make a good guess about the origin of the *merkabah*

12 When Shabu^{c}ot was extended to two days, all four passages found a place in its liturgy. Modern synagogues thus read them all.

13 68:17, in most Bible translations. Throughout this book, I use the verse divisions of the Hebrew Bible text, which, especially in the Psalms, sometimes differ slightly from those of most English versions. I cite the English verse number beside the Hebrew, only where I have reason to think that the reader will have difficulty finding the reference.

stories. Their home was the synagogue. The occasion with which they were particularly associated was Shabu^{c}ot. The prototypes of their heroes were the preachers who expounded the *merkabah* as Shabu^{c}ot *haftarah*. We recall that T. Meg. 3(4):28 tells us that "many expounded the *merkabah*" in Tannaitic Palestine, and gives us a hint that their expositions had something to do with synagogue worship. We now perhaps get a glimpse of who these men were and the context in which their expositions took place. We will later see that the preachers used the *merkabah* vision in order to give the people a particularly vivid and exciting picture of the glory and power of the God who proclaimed his Torah from Mount Sinai. The people were excited, and wanted more. Contemporary preachers could do no more than bring the spectacle of Sinai before the mind's eye. How great were the holy men of former generations, whose *merkabah* expositions were climaxed by real glimmerings of Sinai's glory! Happy their eyes, which thus saw! All of this was at the level of wistful fantasy. It had not yet occurred to the people that they might indeed find ways to see the things that their preachers told them about. We will later see what happened when it did (chapter IX).

The miracle stories that constitute the oldest stratum of the *merkabah* traditions involving Johanan b. Zakkai give us some sense of what the *merkabah* looked like to the crowds who came to hear the synagogue preachers. They have an atmosphere of thrilled and delighted wonder. All is bathed in the sunshine of divine approval. The skies cloud over, but only to show the rainbow. Fire descends, but does no one any harm. Angels dance. Heavenly voices trumpet invitations to bliss. We are far away from the dour prohibitions of M. Hag. 2:1, from the unfortunate child burned by fire from the *hashmal* (BT Hag. 13a).

Where does this other, grimmer picture of the *merkabah* come from? Who imported it into the Johanan b. Zakkai traditions, in the form of Johanan's quoting the regulation that "the *merkabah* may not be expounded by an individual unless he is a scholar and understands on his own"? How does it come, in Tosefta's version, entirely to choke the miraculous element?

The key to these questions, too, lies in the synagogue.

3. The Mishnah: Megillah 4:10, and parallels

Given the fact that Jews have used the *merkabah* vision at least since Talmudic times as *haftarah* for an important festival, it is a little surprising to find that the Mishnah forbids it to be used as *haftarah* on any occasion whatever. "The *merkabah* may not be used as *haftarah*. R. Judah [however] permits it" (M. Meg. 4:10).

A conflict between accepted practice and Mishnaic dictate is not by

itself extraordinary. The collective judgment of the Jewish people on where the authoritative *halakhah* lies has not always been the same as that of the Mishnah's editors, and, in this case, advocates of the synagogue practice could and did appeal to the dissenting opinion of R. Judah b. Ilai[14]. But the opposition between ruling and practice is here so extreme that it gives the impression of going beyond disagreement into confrontation. We must take a closer look at it.

Let us begin with the full text of the passage that contains the restriction on the *merkabah*:

> The story of Reuben [Genesis 35:22] may be read [to the congregation in the synagogue] but may not be translated [into the Aramaic vernacular]. The story of Tamar [Genesis 38] may be both read and translated. The first story of the [golden] calf [Exodus 32:1–6] may be both read and translated, while the second [Exodus 32:21–24] may be read but may not be translated. The blessing of the priests [Numbers 6:24–26] and the story of David and Amnon [? perhaps II Samuel 11–13] may neither be read nor translated.
>
> The *merkabah* may not be used as *haftarah*. R. Judah permits it.
>
> R. Eliezer says: *Declare to Jerusalem* [Ezekiel 16] may not be used as *haftarah*.

In order to understand what is going on here, we must briefly leave the *merkabah* for the more general subject of forbidden Scriptures.

Tosefta and BT preserve a baraita that is clearly related to M. Meg. 4:10, but is considerably longer and arranged differently (T. Meg. 3[4]:31–38, BT Meg. 25a–b) [253]. The baraita classifies more than a dozen Biblical passages under three headings:

1. Those that may be both read and translated;
2. those that may be read but may not be translated;
3. those that may be neither read nor translated.

The first list, of those passages "that may be both read and translated," is by far the longest of the three. The use of these texts in the synagogue is not restricted in any way. Obviously, however, some people must have questioned whether the passages listed were suitable for reading in the synagogue. Otherwise the baraita would not have needed specifically to affirm that they are.

What sort of Biblical passages does the baraita treat? More than half of them involve sex – usually, with a heavy touch of brutality or perversion. They include stories that have embarrassed pious readers of the Bible for

14 The Mishnah itself (ᶜEd. 1:5–6) offers two alternative explanations of why its editors permit dissenting voices to be heard alongside the authoritative opinion of the majority: so that later courts that vote to overturn the consensus of their predecessors will have some traditional authority to appeal to; or, so that a minority opinion can be clearly identified as such and permanently rejected. Whichever explanation we prefer, there is no doubt that the Mishnah's editors represent the anonymous dictum as majority opinion, and thus place their authority behind it.

generations. Lot's daughters get him drunk and seduce him (Genesis 19:30–38). Reuben sleeps with his father's concubine (Genesis 35:22). Judah gets his daughter-in-law Tamar pregnant (Genesis 38). Thugs gang-rape a Levite's concubine until she is dead; her master cuts her into twelve pieces "and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel" (Judges 19). David's son Amnon rapes his own half-sister (II Samuel 13). We need not be surprised that some people wondered how hearing these episodes read in synagogue would affect the congregation. Nor is it surprising that they recoiled from the sixteenth chapter of Ezekiel, an obscenely graphic representation of Jerusalem as a promiscuous wife[15].

In one case, which will turn out to be important for our argument, I believe that the baraita conceals an erotic passage behind the discreet title "warnings and punishments" [552]. In rabbinic terminology, a "warning" (*ʾazharah*) is the Torah's categorical prohibition of a certain action, while a "punishment" (*ᶜonesh*) is the Torah's prescription of the penalty you must pay if you do this action. The Pentateuch is full of "warnings" and "punishments"; but the only place I know of where they are concentrated in such a way that they can be used to designate a specific passage is Leviticus 18 and 20, where the subject is forbidden sex, mostly incest. The purpose of these chapters is of course to warn people away from the forbidden relations. But some may reasonably have wondered if the cumulative effect of all the "nakedness" that is being "uncovered" in Leviticus 18 might not be to stir up a yen for exactly what is forbidden[16].

The baraita also lists a few passages whose propriety seems to have been questioned for reasons that had nothing to do with eroticism. The objections to the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24–26 and to Deuteronomy's "blessings and curses" seem to be connected with the circumstances of their use in the synagogue rather than with their content [302,552]. There remain Genesis's account of creation (*maᶜaśeh bereshit*), which we will meet again when we examine M. Hag. 2:1; and two stories of the golden calf, of which the second is enrolled in the list of those passages "that may be read but may not be translated."

Tannaitic sources quoted in T. Meg. 3(4):36 and BT Meg. 25b, and Amoraic statements collected in PT Meg. 4:11 (75c), make pretty clear that the

15 "It once happened that someone read [in synagogue the passage beginning] *declare to Jerusalem her abominations* [Ezekiel 16:2] when R. Eliezer was present. He said to him: 'Why don't you go declare the abominations of your mother?'" (T. Meg. 3[4]:34; parallels in PT Meg. 4:12, 75c, and BT Meg. 25b). R. Eliezer, it should be said, was not famous for his courtesy or tact.

16 Paul seems to have had experiences of this sort. "If it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died" (Romans 7:7–9).

nucleus of the "second story of the calf" is Exodus 32:22–24, where Aaron explains to a furious Moses why and how he has made the golden calf. We may infer from this that the Bible's own account of the calf's construction (Exodus 32:1–6) is the "first story." A statement quoted in the name of R. Simeon b. Eleazar (ca. 200 A.D.) gives us a hint as to why the rabbis thought that the "second story" should be kept under wraps: "From the reply that Aaron gave to Moses, the heretics went astray" (T. Meg. 3[4]:37). BT's version of this statement adds a quotation from Exodus 32:24: *And I cast it into the fire, and out came this calf* (BT Meg. 25b). The eleventh-century French Talmud commentator Rashi, commenting on this passage, tells us that the heretics "dared to assert that there is reality in idol-worship." We will return to these cryptic remarks in chapter V, where we will see that they provide a key bit of evidence for our investigation.

But what of the *merkabah*? BT's version of our baraita does not mention it at all. Tosefta's version – and this is the only significant point, apart from the textually uncertain ending, on which the two versions differ – tacks a reference to the *merkabah* on to the end of list number one: "The *merkabah* may be read to the public." The formulation of this sentence is entirely different from that of all the preceding rulings, each of which says that the passage in question "may be both read and translated." It is obviously an addition to the first list.

In other words, the author of the original baraita took so for granted that the *merkabah* was appropriate for synagogue use that he did not bother to say so explicitly. It was left for a later writer to affirm that the *merkabah* may be read in public, presumably because some people were questioning the practice.

How does M. Meg. 4:10 fit into this? The Mishnah, as a complete work, is certainly older than BT and almost certainly older than Tosefta. This, together with the general assumption of scholars that the shorter of two sources is likely to be the older, would naturally prejudice us in favor of the view that the author of the baraita has expanded the briefer text of M. Meg. 4:10 [203,390]. My own comparison of the sources has convinced me that the reverse is true [552]. The Mishnaic passage is a digest of the baraita. Its author worked from the version of the baraita that Tosefta preserves, the version that mentioned the *merkabah*. This author's purpose – or, at least, one of his purposes – was to keep the *merkabah*, and perhaps the entire Book of Ezekiel, as far away from public view as possible. To this end, he reversed two of the baraita's rulings. According to the baraita, Ezekiel 16 might be both read and translated; M. Meg. 4:10 ignored this ruling, and recorded only R. Eliezer's opposition to the passage. (We have already seen what R. Eliezer thought of people who read from Ezekiel 16.) According to the baraita, the *merkabah* might be read to the public; M. Meg. 4:10 banished it entirely from the synagogue.

The Mishnaic passage associates the older, more lenient view of the *merkabah* with R. Judah b. Ilai. R. Judah belonged to what is conventionally called the third generation of Tannaim, who worked in the middle and later part of the second century A.D. We may thus place the hardening hostility toward the *merkabah* in the last decades before Judah the Patriarch and his associates edited the Mishnah. In Judah b. Ilai's time, as we have seen, "many expounded the *merkabah*." To judge from the stories of Johanan b. Zakkai's disciples, the crowds in the synagogue saw the *merkabah* as God's own gingerbread house, filled with the wonders of his good pleasure. The author of the baraita in BT Meg. 25a–b, who worried about whether people should be exposed to "the second story of the calf" and the steamy tales of life in David's palace, could not imagine any objection to the *merkabah*. Now someone had seen a witch in the gingerbread house. The people must be kept away. R. Judah the Patriarch and the other scholars who edited the Mishnah evidently shared this alarming vision. As we have just seen, they included in their compilation a tendentious digest of an older source which, if its rulings had been followed, would have kept the *merkabah* out of the synagogue and therefore out of the average Jew's awareness. And, in the middle of a tractate that is supposed to deal with a type of pilgrimage sacrifice called *hagigah*, they included an ominous warning against "expounding the *merkabah*" and otherwise probing what ought not to be probed.

4. The Mishnah: Hagigah 2:1

I have translated the passage in question, M. Hag. 2:1, in the Introduction (pp. 3–4). It is a remarkably difficult text, whose problems grow more complex the more one studies them. As it now stands, this mishnah restricts the exposition of three Biblical passages, each one of which is guarded more stringently than the one before: the laws of forbidden sexual relations (*ʿarayot*, referring to Leviticus 18 and 20), the account of creation (*maʿaśeh bereshit*), and the *merkabah*. It sets, beside the study of these passages, the investigation of the realms that lie outside the visible structure of the world ("what is above and what below, what is before and what after" [573]), and thus hints at the condemnation of both. Anyone who busies himself with such things has no care for God's honor, would be better off if he had not been born. This effect is the work of an editor or series of editors who artfully combined what appear to have been originally discrete elements, each with its own history. Everything in the mishnah, however, is anonymous, and we can trace the development and the assembling of its components only in the most hypothetical and doubtful way [552].

was the editing of the Mishnah. We do not know how great its impact was on the Jewish public; which is to say, on that segment of the Jewish public that was disposed to listen to the rabbis. The *merkabah* continued to be read in the synagogues, and there is some evidence that the later Amoraim did not take M. Hag. 2:1 entirely seriously [555]. But terrifying stories of the physical dangers of *merkabah* study, which give the impression of being popular in origin, seem then to have begun to circulate [561]. Supernatural fire answers the *merkabah* exposition of the child who studies *ḥashmal*, as it once answered the exposition of R. Eleazar b. Arakh. But this time it burns.

Several different pieces of evidence combine to suggest that the first half of the third century was the heyday of those who wanted to suppress the *merkabah*.

1. Origen writes in the prologue to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* that "it is a practice among the Hebrews that no one is permitted so much as to hold [the Song of Songs] in his hands, unless he has reached a full and mature age." The Jewish sages, he continues, teach all the Scriptures to the young, but keep four passages to the end: "the beginning of Genesis, in which the creation of the world is described; the beginnings of Ezekiel the prophet, which tell of the cherubim; the end [of Ezekiel], which deals with the building of the Temple; and this book of the Song of Songs" (ed. 62; cf. tr. 23 [641,645]). If Nautin's chronology of Origen's writings is correct, this testimony will date from about the year 245 [692].

Origen's "Hebrews," like M. Hag. 2:1, treat both *maʿaśeh bereshit* and the *merkabah* as texts whose study must be restricted, but the criterion for access to them is entirely different. As usual, Origen seems to have been well informed about what his Jewish neighbors were doing. Fifty years or so later, BT Hag. 13a tells us, R. Eleazar b. Pedath declined R. Johanan b. Nappaha's offer to teach him *maʿaśeh merkabah* by saying, "I am not old enough" [555][17]. We will presently see that Origen was also right in thinking that his contemporaries had problems with the end as well as the beginning of the Book of Ezekiel.

17 Jerome (d. 420) copies Origen's information in the prologue to his *Commentary on Ezekiel* (ed. 3–4 [622]), but, since he thinks he knows from Numbers 4:3 that "a full and mature age" means thirty (*Commentary* to Ezek. 1:1; ed. 5), he confidently tells us that Jews cannot read the four passages before they are thirty. He makes the same claim in his letter to Paulinus (*Epistle 53*; ed. 460–461 [621]). Gregory Nazianzen (d. 389), using the same logic but a different text of Numbers 4:3 (the Septuagint), gives the age as twenty-five (*Orationes*, II, 48; *PG* 35, 456–457). But Origen was right not to specify an age; there is no evidence from Jewish sources that there was a fixed age before which one could not study *maʿaśeh bereshit* or the *merkabah*. (The Jewish prohibition of studying philosophy or kabbalah before age forty does not appear before the later Middle Ages [565].)

There is thus no reason to doubt Origen's testimony that third-century Jews also tried to limit the reading of the Song of Songs, even though there is no rabbinic evidence for such a restriction. (Saul Lieberman has found some trace of it in a medieval Yemenite midrash [322].) We cannot be sure what they objected to about this book. Scholem has proposed that the Song of Songs was the source and focus of speculations on the dimensions of God's bodily organs, later called *Shiʿur Qomah* (below, chapter IX), and that the rabbis insisted on keeping these secret [597]. He may be right; but there is another explanation more in keeping with the context in Origen, as well as with the character of those passages that some Jews did not want to have read in the synagogues (above, section 3). If a person does not have the maturity to realize that the Song of Songs is a spiritual allegory, he might get the impression that it is a very sexy book.

2. The traditions that Jewish authorities once tried to suppress the entire Book of Ezekiel also seem to date from the first half of the third century.

> Rab Judah said in the name of Rab[18]: Let us remember for good that man, Hananiah b. Hezekiah, without whom the Book of Ezekiel would have been concealed [*nignaz*] on the ground that it contradicted the Pentateuch. What did he do? He had three hundred measures of oil brought to him in his upper chamber, and he sat there and expounded it [until he had explained away the contradictions]. [BT Hag. 13a, Shabb. 13b, Men. 45a]

> It once happened that a certain child was reading the Book of Ezekiel in his teacher's house, and he contemplated *ḥashmal*, whereupon fire came forth from *ḥashmal* and burned him up. [The rabbis] therefore tried to conceal the Book of Ezekiel. R. Joshua b. Gamala[c] said to them: "If this one is a scholar [and thus permitted by M. Hag. 2:1 to study the *merkabah*], all are scholars!" [BT Hag. 13a]

The heroes of these stories, Hananiah b. Hezekiah and Joshua b. Gamala, are figures from the prehistory of the rabbinic movement; they lived in the first century A.D., before the destruction of the Temple [427]. But the reality the stories reflect is that of the late second and early third century, when the problems the Book of Ezekiel posed seemed particularly troubling. The book begins with the *merkabah*; it ends with legislation for a restored temple (chapters 40–48), which more than once contradicts the ritual laws of the Torah (BT Men. 45a; *Sifre Deut.*, *Ki Teṣe'* #294, ed. 313 [220])[19]; in between is a brutally obscene denunciation of the holy city (chapter 16). The Mishnah's editors, in response, tried to exclude parts of the book from the synagogue. From this it was only a step to Ezekiel's total exclusion from the religious life of Judaism[20]. But this last step, our

18 Rab was a Babylonian Amora active about 220–250. The man transmitting his statement, *Rab* Judah (b. Ezekiel), is a very different person from *Rabbi* Judah (b. Ilai). ("Rab" was a title given to some Babylonian Amoraim.)

19 See Appendix I, section 5.

20 It is not quite clear what "concealment" implies. The verb *ganaz* is often used for sacred objects which are "concealed" to protect them from being profaned (hence the name *genizah* for a

stories told their third-century audience, would be needlessly drastic. After all, they argued, those parts of Ezekiel that now trouble us also troubled the greater men who came before us, and their leaders were able to resolve the difficulties.

Third-century Jews told similar stories about how their authorities once came near to suppressing Ecclesiastes. I have argued that these accounts respond to their audience's concerns about the apparent hedonism and skepticism of Ecclesiastes. They soothe these concerns by reflecting that King Hezekiah and his colleagues had weighed Solomon's writings and decided that Ecclesiastes was worth preserving after all [403]. I would interpret the stories of the near-concealment of Ezekiel in the same way[d]. Their setting is ancient, but their subject is the anxieties of the third century. Their message is that the problems that caused these anxieties were settled long ago.

3. But the most important relic of the *merkabah* scare of the early third century is a remarkable literary creation which I have reconstructed on the basis of Tosefta and the two Talmuds, and called, for want of a more traditional title, "the mystical collection" [552].

The mystical collection is a series of seven stories, parables, and other items that appear all to treat *maᶜaśeh merkabah* and other aspects of Judaism's supposed secret doctrine. All of the components of the collection are older than the collection itself; the compiler wrote none of it on his own. But, like the authors of the Synoptic Gospels, he was a master of creative editing, of the art of gathering and arranging older sources in such a way that they take on the new meaning he wants them to have. (We will see that many of the men who fashioned the rabbinic literature were richly gifted with this talent.) The result was a shudderingly effective pamphlet about the dangers of probing too deeply into the secrets of divinity, filled with vague hints of menace which let the imagination do the work of frightening itself.

The collection begins with the story of Johanan b. Zakkai and Eleazar b. Arakh. But the warm and dreamy atmosphere of celestial approval, which had characterized the old miracle stories, has now turned cold. The compiler – who, I believe, gave the story the form it now has in Tosefta – has

synagogue storeroom). "Concealing" the Book of Ezekiel would then affirm its divine origin. On the other hand, rabbinic references to the proposed "concealment" of Solomon's writings seem to be talking about exclusion from the Biblical canon [352,403,404,420,457]. The rabbis themselves seem to have been unsure of the nuance of the verb: T. Shabb. 13 (14):2–3 assumes that the "concealment" of a Targum of Job shows that it is sacred, while BT Shabb. 115a thinks it proves the opposite. But, whether or not the "concealment" of the Book of Ezekiel meant decanonization in theory, the practical result would certainly have been to remove it from the Bible used by the Jewish people.

cut out the miracles. The accent of the story has shifted to the opening dialogue between R. Johanan and his pupil. "Rabbi," Eleazar b. Arakh requests, "teach me one segment of *maᶜaśeh merkabah*." The master's response is cold and angry: "Did I not say to you from the beginning that 'the *merkabah* may not be expounded by an individual unless he is a scholar and understands on his own'?" To be sure, R. Johanan warms when R. Eleazar shows him how well he indeed "understands on his own." But his praise of Eleazar emphasizes that this is a rare accomplishment: "There are those who expound properly but do not practice properly, those who practice properly but do not expound properly; Eleazar b. Arakh expounds properly and practices properly." Ordinary people, this implies, must keep clear of *maᶜaśeh merkabah*.

I do not think that the compiler of the mystical collection invented either the opening discouragement of R. Eleazar (it seems also to have been part of *Mek. Simeon*'s version, which is independent of the mystical collection) or the concluding encomia. But, by deleting the miraculous element, he moved them to center stage. They deliver the message that the reader is to carry away with him. R. Johanan b. Zakkai now stands like a grim-faced prophet in a Byzantine painting, holding an open book in one hand and, with the other, pointing to its text: "The *merkabah* may not be expounded ..."

The compiler reinforced the message with the other material at his disposal. R. Johanan b. Zakkai transmitted his doctrine to R. Joshua b. Hananiah, Joshua to R. Akiba, Akiba to Hananiah b. Hakhinai (T. Hag. 2:2 and parallels). Akiba alone, of the four rabbis who entered the mystic "garden" (*pardes*), came out unharmed (T. Hag. 2:3–4 and parallels). Only he, as one of the few privy to the secret teaching, knew how to look upon the "garden" without harming himself, to thread the narrow path between the terrifying dangers that beset the seeker of mysteries (T. Hag. 2:5 and parallels). Akiba's less lucky or less gifted colleague, Ben Zoma, went mad from what he saw in the "garden." Thus it was that Joshua b. Hananiah found Ben Zoma one day walking in a trance, at first seeing and hearing nothing. When R. Joshua finally got his attention, Ben Zoma

> said to him: "I was contemplating *maᶜaśeh bereshit*; and only the space of an open hand divides the upper waters from the lower waters. Scripture speaks of 'hovering' here [in Genesis 1:2, where *the spirit of God was hovering over the waters*] and also [in Deuteronomy 32:11]: *As an eagle stirs up its nest, hovering over its young.* As [in Deuteronomy] 'hovering' means simultaneously touching and not touching, so [in Genesis] 'hovering' means simultaneously touching and not touching."
>
> R. Joshua said to his disciples: "Ben Zoma is outside."
>
> A few days later Ben Zoma was dead. [PT Hag. 77a–b; cf. T. Hag. 2:6, BT Hag. 15a]

"Ben Zoma is outside" – mysterious words, all the more ominous for their obscurity! After reading what happened to Ben Zoma, we hardly need the midrash that concludes the mystical collection – a midrash warning

against asking about what happened before the six days of creation (T. Hag. 2:7 and parallels) – to convince us that we ought not think too deeply about the first verses of Genesis. The story seems to hint at unspeakable mysteries whose depths can swallow up all but the most expert inquirers. This solemn impression is so strong that it is at first hard to take seriously Henry A. Fischel's view that the story was originally a variant of a joke that went the rounds of the Hellenistic world, about the dreamy intellectual who is so busy staring at the stars that he forgets to look where he is going and so breaks his neck [386]. Yet I find Fischel's argument, and his use of Hellenistic parallels, persuasive. The compiler of the mystical collection has brilliantly used his editorial techniques to conjure up an atmosphere of mystery and menace.

The compiler did not reinterpret all of his sources so drastically. At least one of them, the midrash with which he concluded his collection, seems originally to have said exactly what he represented it as saying. Yet his skill in teaching his assembled witnesses to sing a new song, a chorus to the Mishnah's restrictions on the *merkabah*, is very impressive. He forced the restraint of M. Hag. 2:1 upon the enthusiasm of the old *merkabah* miracle stories, and introduced R. Johanan b. Zakkai himself as the advocate and possibly even the author of the Mishnah's ruling. He reinforced this message of warning and reserve with a series of parables and anecdotes, most of which seem originally to have had nothing to do with the *merkabah*. Totally anonymous, an editor rather than an original writer, he perhaps made the most important contribution to the picture of *maʿaśeh merkabah* that dominates both *Gemarot* to Hag. 2:1.

This *maʿaśeh merkabah* emerges as a secret doctrine about the divinity, based on a mysterious exegesis of Ezekiel which was known only to a few initiated rabbis. This image can hardly fail to impress anyone who works with the Talmudic materials on the *merkabah*. Yet the secret doctrine remains so elusive – even some of the Palestinian Amoraim admitted they did not know where to find it, and assumed that it had died out after Hananiah b. Hakhinai (PT Hag. 2:1, 77b) – that I suspect it never existed.

We can, I think, understand how the belief in the esoteric *maʿaśeh merkabah* arose: read Johanan b. Zakkai's warning against expounding the *merkabah* and his subsequent praise of Eleazar b. Arakh's exposition, without the miracles in between, and you will hardly escape the impression that Eleazar knew something ordinary folk did not. We can understand more easily why the rabbis cultivated it once it had arisen: if you claim religious authority, it is to your advantage that people believe that some of those with whom you are associated have inside knowledge of the supernatural.

Thus the belief became, as beliefs will, a powerful reality in its own right. But it does not point us toward the ways Jews in fact interpreted Ezekiel's *merkabah* in Tannaitic and Amoraic times, or what these interpretations

meant to them. For this, we must look in the two directions that have begun to trace themselves before us: toward the popular synagogue expositions that charged the *merkabah* miracle stories with their excitement; and toward the dark suspicions that moved Judah the Patriarch and his colleagues to try to drive Ezekiel's vision from the synagogue.

Where, in all of this, are the ecstatic journeys to the realms of the *merkabah*? We will see nothing of them as long as we stay with the Palestinian rabbinic sources. When we turn to Babylonia, we will find the situation changed. To understand how, we must turn back to the mystical collection and look at the most mysterious of its stories: the episode of the four rabbis who entered *pardes*.

6. The *pardes* episode: the Palestinian versions

Tosefta (Hag. 2:3–4) relates the following:

> Four men entered a garden (*pardes*): Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher[21], and R. Akiba. One of them looked and died; one looked and went mad; one looked and cut the young plants; one ascended safely and descended safely.
>
> Ben Azzai looked and died. Of him Scripture says, *Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his saints* [Psalm 116:15].
>
> Ben Zoma looked and went mad. Of him Scripture says, *If you find honey, eat only your fill* [Proverbs 25:16; the Biblical text concludes: *lest you become stuffed with it and vomit it*].
>
> Elisha looked and cut the young plants. Of him Scripture says, *Do not let your mouth bring your flesh into sin* [Ecclesiastes 5:5].
>
> R. Akiba ascended safely and descended safely. Of him Scripture says, *Draw me, we will run after you* [Song 1:4].

PT (Hag. 2:1, 77b) repeats this passage with a few variations. It omits the four names from the very beginning. It has Ben Zoma die and Ben Azzai go mad, and not the other way around; this is, I think, a late alteration of no importance to us [552]. It has Akiba *enter* safely and *go out* safely rather than *ascend* and *descend* safely; one manuscript (Erfurt) of Tosefta shares this reading, which I believe to be the original one.

BT (Hag. 14b, concluded on 15a and 15b) agrees with Tosefta against PT on all three points. (Only one manuscript, Göttingen 3, has Akiba *enter* and *go out*.) But it differs crucially from both Tosefta and PT in another

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21 Aher, "other one," is a nickname for the heretic rabbi Elisha b. Abuyah. It is normally used in BT, the Palestinian sources preferring to call him simply "Elisha." We do not know why Elisha was called "other one," nor do we have any clear idea what he did or what his heresy consisted of. Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa's suggestion that he was a Sethian Gnostic is the most recent of a long line of challenging but unproven proposals which stretches back more than a century; Stroumsa gives references to other hypotheses [451]. The rabbinic stories about Elisha – many of them hauntingly beautiful – are concentrated in PT Hag. 2:1 (77b–c) and BT Hag. 15a–b. *Ruth R.* 6:13 and *Eccl. R.* 7:8 substantially repeat much of PT's material.

way. The sentence that follows the opening list of names ("one of them looked and died," etc.) is missing from BT. In its place we read: "R. Akiba said to them: 'When you draw near the stones of pure marble, do not say, "Water, water." For it is written, *He who speaks lies shall not be established in my* [God's] *sight* [Psalm 101:7].'"

If the reader is by this time entirely confused, he will sympathize with the puzzlement of one Jewish community in the eleventh century, who wrote to ask Hai Gaon: "What was that 'garden'? What did [Ben Zoma] look at when he went mad? ... What does it mean that [Elisha] 'cut the young plants'? ... When R. Akiba 'entered,' what place did he enter? Why did he 'enter safely and go out safely'[22]? ... Will our master please explain ... ?" [241].

We have already glanced at Hai Gaon's answer: the "garden" is a metaphor for the celestial "palaces," entry to the garden a metaphor for heavenly ascensions of the sort prescribed in the *Hekhalot*.

It would be pointless to try to survey all the efforts made from Hai Gaon's time to our own to unravel the meaning of the *pardes*. Scholem's interpretation is now the one most commonly accepted. Following Hai Gaon's lead, but taking *pardes* yet more literally, Scholem identified it with the "paradise" into which Paul was caught up (II Corinthians 12:2–4), and suggested that the *pardes* story describes an ecstatic experience essentially the same as Paul's [583,593]. The main problem with this view is that, although *pardes* sounds very much like "paradise" and the two words are in fact linguistically related, rabbinic Hebrew does not seem to use *pardes* with this meaning. Admittedly, the Qumran fragments of the original Aramaic text of the Book of Enoch do use *pardes qushṭa*, "Garden of Righteousness," for paradise (32:3, 77:3; we will have more to say about the Book of Enoch in chapter III) [130,143]. But the relevance of this to rabbinic usage is very doubtful. The rabbinic *pardes* is a pleasure garden or a park.

Following Urbach's suggestions [616], I have tried to show from the structure of the older Palestinian versions (Tosefta, PT) that the first paragraph of Tosefta's account is a metaphor whose application is explained in the following paragraphs [552]. The *pardes* is not a real location which we are to hunt for in heaven or on earth, but an image the author uses to convey something about the lives and actions of his four characters.

22 Notice that Hai Gaon's questioners are quoting a text that had Akiba *enter* and *go out* instead of *ascend* and *descend*. Other features of their questions, notably the odd fact that it does not occur to them to ask about the "stones of pure marble," suggest to me that they are reading, not BT, but a source akin to the Erfurt manuscript of the Tosefta. Hai Gaon's reply, however, clearly presupposes the BT version.

Considered this way, the *pardes* passage is no longer as bizarre or as isolated as it seems at first sight. It falls into the category of rabbinic parables that use the image of the pleasure garden or park – once, indeed, to represent "the future paradise[23]," but also the world, the holy land, the people of Israel, and the precepts of the Torah [279,552]. It was the compiler of the mystical collection who, by placing the *pardes* story in its present context, gave it its eerie and other-worldly quality. As we will see, the men who rewrote the passage for BT carried this process of "mystification" a large step further.

To what, then, did the *pardes* metaphor originally apply? I can give only a partial and tentative answer. One parable, in *Deut. R.* 7:4 [327][24], contains a suggestive parallel to Elisha's cutting the young plants: a person who learns Torah and does not practice it is like someone who plants trees in a king's *pardes* and then cuts them down. This would fit the learned libertine Elisha b. Abuyah very well. But it does not much help us understand what happened to his three companions.

We may perhaps explain the reference to Akiba in a different way, by concentrating on the Biblical proof text that the *pardes* passage applies to him. These words are drawn from the beginning of the Song of Songs, from the following context:

> Therefore young girls [*ʿalamot*] have loved you. Draw me; we will run after you. The king has brought me into his chambers. Let us rejoice and be glad with you [Song 1:3–4].

Both *Mekhilta* and *Sifre Deut.*[25] quote a midrash that explains the first sentence as referring to Judaism's martyrs. The expositor reads the Hebrew consonants of *ʿalamot*, "young girls," as if they spelled the two words *ʿal mawet*, "unto death." The text then comes to mean, "unto death have they loved you," that is, God. *Sifre* does not name the author of the midrash, but *Mekhilta* attributes it to R. Akiba. Akiba died for Torah at the hands of the Romans [439a], and it looks very much as if *Mekhilta*'s editor assumed that this exemplary martyr must be the expositor who so eloquently praises martyrdom.

Akiba "went out safely" from the *pardes*. Tosefta elsewhere (Hull. 2:23) applies the expression "went out safely" to a man who departs this life free of the taint of heresy. How did Akiba depart his life? According to the tradition recorded in BT Ber. 61b, he was reciting the *shemaʿ*'s attes-

23 *Gan ʿeden leʿaʾid labo'*.

24 See Appendix I, section 7.

25 *Mekhilta, Shirah* ch. 3, ed./tr. 2:26–27; Sifre, *We-Zot ha-Berakhah* #343, ed. 398–399 [195, 220] (see Appendix I, section 5). *Song R.* 7:1, section 2, contains a parallel (cf. also 5:9). I suspect that Revelation 12:11, which says that the faithful "loved not their lives even unto death," presupposes this midrash. If so, it must be at least as old as Akiba, and very likely older. (Shmuel Safrai attributes a similar conjecture to David Flusser [338a,434a].)

tation that "the Lord is one" while the Romans tortured him to death, "until his soul went forth[26] on the word 'one.' A heavenly voice proclaimed: 'Happy are you, R. Akiba, that your soul went forth on the word 'one'!" Akiba was then presumably transported into celestial bliss. I suggest that the author of the *pardes* passage used Akiba's safe departure from the *pardes* to describe his soul's blessed departure. He applied to it the Scriptural text that, as we have seen from *Mekhilta*, had come to be associated with Akiba. I imagine he understood this text somewhat as follows:

> Therefore unto death [the martyrs] have loved you [God]. Draw me, [Akiba said to God;] we [faithful ones] will run after you. The King has brought me into his chambers [of bliss in the next world]. We will rejoice and be glad with you.

Only after the mystical collection had provided the *pardes* passage with a new context, and therefore a new frame of interpretation, did the King's chambers come to be understood as "the chambers of the *merkabah*" [519].

I offer these solutions to the riddles of the *pardes* passage only tentatively. I am fairly sure, though, that Scholem was essentially wrong as far as its original meaning is concerned. Whatever it is, it is not a literal description of an ecstatic journey to a *pardes*-paradise in heaven or anywhere else. But I am equally sure that, as far as the revised version of the passage that we find in BT is concerned, Scholem was essentially right.

7. The *pardes* episode: the Babylonian version

We recall that BT's version of the *pardes* passage omits the opening statement that "one of them looked and died, one looked and went mad," and so forth. This omission is easily explained. The opening summary is only appropriate within the structure of the metaphor; once the passage is no longer understood as a metaphor, it comes to seem pointless. The author of the BT version, who understood the passage as a literal narrative, deleted it.

In its place he put a cryptic warning which has baffled generations of interpreters. "R. Akiba said to them: 'When you draw near the stones of pure marble, do not say, "Water, water." For it is written, *He who speaks lies shall not be established in my sight* [Psalm 101:7].'"

What can this possibly mean? Where and what are the "stones of pure marble"? How do Akiba's companions "draw near" to them? What might

26 The verb used here, *yaṣa'*, is the same as that used in the *pardes* passage to say that Akiba "went out safely." The parallel in PT Ber. 9:5 (14b), however, which differs from BT on several important details, uses a different verb (*pareḥah nishmato*).

induce them to say, "Water, water"; and why should they not say it? How would this seemingly banal utterance mark them as liars in God's eyes?

We will probe these questions in some detail in chapter VI, and weigh Scholem's theory that the warning refers to a test which, according to the *Hekhalot*, the ecstatic traveller will meet at the gate of the sixth palace [593,609]. In the meantime, let us grant Scholem's essential point, that Akiba and his companions are conceived as travelling through some very strange places that do not seem to be on this earth. This is, I repeat, the conception found in the version that is unique to BT.

We meet this conception again in BT's stories of Elisha b. Abuyah. One of these stories is particularly valuable in that, as in the *pardes* passage itself, we can compare it with the Palestinian tradition on which it is based and see how the Babylonian storytellers have shifted the meaning.

In PT Hag. 2:1 (77b) we find Elisha performing the forbidden act of riding his horse on a Sabbath. His student R. Meir, who remains faithful to him to the end, walks after him, learning Torah from him. At one point, Elisha tells Meir to turn back, for he has calculated from his horse's paces that they have gone the distance that an observant Jew is permitted to walk on the Sabbath. Meir calls on Elisha to "turn back" himself – that is, repent.

> He said to him: "You have all this wisdom, and yet you do not repent?"
> "I cannot," he said.
> "Why not?"
> He said to him: "Once I was passing in front of the Holy of Holies mounted on my horse, on a Day of Atonement that happened to fall on a Sabbath. I heard a heavenly voice coming forth from the Holy of Holies: '*Return, backsliding children*! [Jeremiah 3:14] – except for Elisha b. Abuyah, who knew my power and rebelled against me.'"

Now let us hear the same dialogue, as reported in BT Hag. 15a:

> He said to him: "Why don't you turn back, yourself?"
> He replied: "I already heard from behind the *pargod*: '*Return, backsliding children*! – except for Aher.'"

In the Babylonian Talmud, the *pargod* is the celestial curtain that separates God from his attendants. The Babylonian narrator has transferred the scene from the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem to the corresponding Holy of Holies in heaven [365,379,456]. The curtain that separates the earthly Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple is transformed into the *pargod*[27].

In another story, quoted earlier in BT Hag. 15a, this conception blossoms into a weirdly baroque account of Elisha's damnation. Aher "saw

27 I do not mean, of course, to suggest that the older Palestinian version is any more reliable historically than its Babylonian adaptation. The Temple was destroyed at least seventy years before Elisha can have had this conversation with R. Meir.

Metatron, to whom permission had been given to sit one hour each day to record the merits of Israel." He is astonished to find seated any heavenly being but God. "Perhaps," he reasons, "there are two divine powers!" Thereupon:

> They brought out Metatron and flogged him with sixty fiery lashes. "Why," they said, "did you not rise before him when you saw him?" He received permission to erase Aher's merits. A heavenly voice proclaimed: "*Return, backsliding children*! – except for Aher."

We need not here discuss the meaning of Aher's fatal deduction that "there are two divine powers" [445], or the role that the angel Metatron – a very important figure in the *Hekhalot*, to whom we will turn our attention in chapter IX – plays in the story. What is important for us is that BT assumes that Elisha has visited heaven, seen Metatron, heard his doom proclaimed from behind the *pargod*. It is hard to imagine an occasion when all this could have happened apart from the visit to the *pardes*.

We may guess that it was the Babylonian transmitters of the *pardes* story who first changed "R. Akiba entered safely and went out safely" to "R. Akiba ascended safely and descended safely." Medieval scribes "corrected" most Tosefta manuscripts in accord with the Babylonian Talmud, which they thought authoritative.

When are we to date the Babylonian reinterpretation of the *pardes* episode? The stories in BT offer us one clue: the strange punishment of "sixty fiery lashes" that is inflicted on Metatron. We find this image elsewhere in BT, in passages that can be traced to fourth-century Babylonia [552].

Have we seen traces of this reinterpretation in any other materials? Indeed we have. In the very first section of this chapter, we saw how BT Meg. 24b makes a small but crucial alteration in the reply that the anonymous sages give to R. Judah b. Ilai. Tosefta had reported it as:

> Many expounded the *merkabah* and never saw it.

In BT this became:

> Did not many hope to expound the *merkabah*, and yet they never saw it?

The Babylonian transmitter could not believe that the sages would so calmly have taken for granted that people who expound the *merkabah* do not actually see it. As far as the transmitter was concerned, the very essence of "expounding the *merkabah*" was experiencing a vision of this entity. What the sages meant, he reasoned, was that many *hoped* to expound the *merkabah* but, since they never managed to see it, obviously did not succeed.

It is only a guess, but a fair guess, that the same cluster of ideas, cultivated in fourth-century Babylonia, was responsible for the revisions in both BT Hag. 15a and Meg. 24b. R. Akiba and his companions made their way to *pardes* by expounding the *merkabah*. They indeed saw the *merkabah*, but the sight proved more than they had bargained for. Ben Azzai looked and died. Ben Zoma looked and went mad. Elisha b. Abuyah looked and saw his own damnation.

In other words, the Babylonians held beliefs that we can recognize from the *Hekhalot*.

8. Conclusions

The rabbinic testimonies about exposition of the *merkabah* have pointed us in three main directions:

First, toward the synagogues of second-century Palestine. "Many expounded the *merkabah*" to the crowds, particularly on the feast of Shabu^{c}ot. The story of the Sinai revelation was read from the Torah, Ezekiel's vision was read from the Prophets. Working from these two Scriptures, the preachers fed their people's hungry imaginations on the glories of the God who had given them his Torah.

Second, toward R. Judah the Patriarch and his colleagues. They saw danger. If there was food for the imagination in the *merkabah*, this food might be poisoned. It must be kept under lock and key. This they tried to do, but with only moderate success. Their suspicions gave an ominous tinge to the Talmudic traditions about the *merkabah*. But in the synagogues, which were the focus of their concern, the *merkabah* continued to be read and preached.

Third, toward Babylonia in the Amoraic period, particularly the fourth century. Here, expounding the *merkabah* stopped being a matter of Bible study alone. It took on overtones of ecstatic experience, of journeys to realms filled with strange and dangerous sights.

These are the shadows that *merkabah* exegesis cast upon the rabbinic literature. They raise a throng of questions which we have not yet begun to explore. How, for example, did the preachers use the *merkabah* vision to fasten the people's attention on the God of Sinai? Why did the Mishnah's editors find this frightening? How did the idea of the heavenly ascension step into this arena of enthusiasm and fear? How did it beget the *Hekhalot*?

We are ready to look for the entities that projected the shadows.

Chapter II

The Beginnings of Merkabah Interpretation

We are not, however, yet ready to deal with rabbinic *merkabah* exegesis.

Rabbinic Judaism, innovative as it was, was hardly a novel creation of the years after 70 A.D. Judaism had been a Scripture religion for centuries before the birth of the rabbinic movement. When the rabbis took up and read their Bible, they did so equipped with a rich inheritance of exegetical tradition; and this was as true of the *merkabah* vision as of any other part of Scripture.

We know far less than we would like to about the Scripture exegesis of pre-rabbinic Judaism. Yet the sources that survive allow us to trace something of the early development of the lines of *merkabah* interpretation that the rabbis were later to follow. With their aid, we can have a perspective on rabbinic *merkabah* exegesis that the rabbinic texts themselves would not permit us.

In this and the following chapter, I have not tried for a chronological arrangement of the materials to be discussed. The Septuagint Greek translation of Ezekiel, which I discuss in section 3 of this chapter, is probably some decades at least earlier than the Qumran texts treated in section 2. The apocalypses, which require a chapter to themselves, include sources both earlier and later than the Septuagint and the Qumran writings. Rather, I have aimed at an arrangement that will allow the exegetical themes, and the issues that I see developing in them, intelligibly to emerge.

The first source of *merkabah* exegesis we will examine, however, is also the oldest. It is the Book of Ezekiel itself. Ezekiel the book interprets the visions attributed to Ezekiel the prophet; and it is the task of our first section to examine how.

1. The Book of Ezekiel

a) Introduction. At first sight, the proposal that we treat the Book of Ezekiel as a commentary on its own contents is bound to seem paradoxical, not to say eccentric. The book sets forth a series of visions and messages within the framework of a unified narrative, written from beginning to end in the first person. The "I" who speaks is Ezekiel the son of Buzi the priest,

a Jewish exile in the land of Babylonia by the river Chebar. It is clear enough, we might think, that this Ezekiel wrote the book himself. Yet, on closer reading, this turns out not to be clear at all. Tensions, disguised at first by the book's appearance of unity and structure, rapidly begin to appear. Some of them are perhaps the creations of hyper-critical modern scholars. But others cannot be dismissed so easily; they suggest that some process of editing, rewriting, and annotation lies between the earliest materials preserved in the Book of Ezekiel, and the book as we now have it.

What was this process, and how large a role did Ezekiel himself play in it? Scholars have not settled on any consensus. The "radicals" of the early twentieth century begrudged Ezekiel more than a few scattered verses of the book named after him; while the more "moderate" scholars of the past few decades have declared the book substantially Ezekiel's, although arranged and expanded by faceless editors [12,14]. Of the three major commentaries published in this century, Cooke's (1936) notes what are supposed to be secondary accretions to the text, but takes little interest in who added them or why; Zimmerli's (1969) boldly dissects the alleged strata of the book and tries to explain the significance of secondary as well as original materials; while Greenberg's (1983, to chapters 1–20 only) sees the Book of Ezekiel as a skillfully crafted composition which may derive, in its entirety, from Ezekiel himself [1,19,6].

Greenberg sharply and effectively criticizes the approach of Zimmerli and his confreres. Their operations, he argues, rest on subjective and arbitrary prejudices about what the prophet must have been trying to say; they prove their assumptions by excising whatever does not conform to them. Significantly, though, Greenberg himself occasionally speaks of editorial activity in the Book of Ezekiel (on pages 125–126, 199, for example). Ezekiel, indeed, may have been his own editor. But, once we are prepared to see the creation of the Book of Ezekiel as a complex process involving more than a single act of composition, we have opened the door to the possibility that the process may have extended beyond Ezekiel's lifetime. I thus find myself, for reasons that will become clearer as we go on, in agreement with Zimmerli's basic position that much editorial labor, involving many years and many contributors, lies between Ezekiel and his book. Even if we cannot hope to reconstruct the details of this labor (and here I disagree with Zimmerli and the rest), we cannot ignore it when we come to consider the visions of the divine entourage and their relation to the book that contains them.

b) Ḥayyot and cherubim. How this affects us will become clear in connection with the *ḥayyot* (sing. *ḥayyah*)[1], the beings whose description

1 The word is usually translated, in accord with the basic meaning of the Hebrew root *ḥay*, "living

The destroyed Temple is rebuilt, the departed glory has returned; the sin of the Israelites is purged, the wounds of their punishment healed. The action of the Book of Ezekiel, which began at the river Chebar, is concluded on the mountain of the Temple to come (40:2), and its rhythms are marked by the comings and goings of God's glory and the *hayyot*-cherubim that carry it [12b,13]. The initial vision of God and his entourage, which once seemed so purposeless, now appears as a foreshadowing of the grand cycle that underlies the rest of the book.

To put it another way, the Book of Ezekiel has provided a context for the vision of chapter 1, and has thereby proposed an interpretation for it. Were we to assume that the prophet Ezekiel wrote the Book of Ezekiel as we now have it, we could have little hesitation about accepting this interpretation. But, since I am not prepared so to assume, I find matters rather more complicated. I must ask whether it was Ezekiel himself – or, at any rate, the author of chapter 1[3] – who provided this interpretation of the initial vision. If not, is the interpretation nevertheless correct? And, given the scope of our study, I must ask a third question: to what extent did this interpretation influence later expositors of chapter 1?

I think the answer to the first question is probably no. As I have already indicated, I consider the Book of Ezekiel the creation of multiple authors, all of whom wrote under the "I" of Ezekiel. In chapters 8–11, and particularly chapter 10, the original text appears to have been so overlaid by repeated interpretations and expansions that it is almost impossible to distinguish the original, or to separate the several layers that were later added [10]. Ezekiel 10:9–17, I believe, is secondary in its entirety, and consists mostly of a brief commentary on 1:15–21 which was deposited in chapter 10 at some point in that chapter's formation [9]. (We will soon have to look more closely at this important passage.) Beyond this, I am not prepared to go into the very difficult question of who wrote what in chapter 10, let alone the rest of the Book of Ezekiel; especially since, once we reach the point when Jews have come to regard both the primary and the secondary material as the words of Ezekiel and therefore the object of exegetical attention, the issue loses its importance for us.

3 For the purpose of this study, I see no need to decide whether or not it was a prophet of the Babylonian captivity who wrote the first chapter of Ezekiel. If I call the author "Ezekiel" in what follows, it is a matter of convenience only, and not a judgment on this question. – It may perhaps seem more urgent for us to decide whether the chapter had in fact a single author, or whether it consists of a series of additions to an original nucleus [11,12]. But I think we can sidestep this issue as well. Our concern is with the impact of the *merkabah* vision on later writers, and with their ways of understanding it. Now, as far back as we can trace the impact of Ezekiel 1 on other sources (including secondary material in the Book of Ezekiel itself), it had this impact as a unified piece of work, evidently not much different from the text that we now have. Of secondary interpretation of chapter 1 preserved in chapter 1 itself, I can find no trace (below). The developmental history of Ezekiel 1 is, as far as we are concerned, its prehistory. I therefore leave it aside, and treat the chapter as if it were a single source by a single writer.

I do not, however, believe that it was the author of chapter 1 who announces, in chapter 10, that his bizarre *hayyot* are none other than the familiar cherubim. It is true that the *hayyot*, like the cherubim, carry the deity and mark the place where he gives revelation; it is true that the language of chapter 1 occasionally suggests the language describing the Tabernacle or Temple[a]. But the *hayyot* are so unlike the cherubim that I cannot imagine that anyone who knows, on whatever subconscious level, that the two are identical, would describe them with all the idiosyncrasies of Ezekiel 1. Given that so much of chapter 10 was written to interpret chapter 1, it seems to me more likely that the *hayyot* = cherubim equation was made by someone who was baffled by the *hayyot* and needed a context in which he could make sense of them. He found this context in the Jerusalem Temple. He, or some later editor, used this perception as one of the principles around which he organized the Book of Ezekiel.

After this discussion, it should come as no surprise that my answer to the second question is also no. Whatever the *hayyot* were originally supposed to be, I do not think they were the cherubim familiar from Israelite tradition and cult.

But to the third question – about the influence of the *hayyot* = cherubim identification on later Jewish expositors – we would expect a somewhat more positive answer. After all, the whole organization of the Book of Ezekiel seems to vouch for this equation's being the key to the meaning of the *merkabah* vision. The later interpreters who dealt with Ezekiel could hardly be expected to ignore this clear message.

Surprisingly, they do. Not absolutely: the idea that Ezekiel's *hayyot* are the guardians of the ark and the denizens of the Holy of Holies has indeed left its traces on *merkabah* exegesis, particularly outside the rabbinic literature[b]. Most Jewish interpreters take their identity as cherubim seriously enough that it is not until the *Hekhalot* literature that we find *hayyot* and cherubim mentioned side by side, as distinct classes of angels. But, all in all, the impact of this conception on later *merkabah* interpretation is surprisingly slight. We frequently find the *merkabah* placed in a ritual context, sometimes of the Temple, more often of the synagogue. But the presence of the *hayyot* in the role of the Biblical cherubim is rarely more than a minor detail.

Our first foray into history of exegesis has thus reached what is by and large a dead end. Not because it does not lead us back to what the *hayyot* meant to the man who first described them – that is not the question we want to answer here – but because it does not lead us forward into any of the main roads of *merkabah* exegesis in post-Biblical Judaism.

Yet we have not wasted our time. We have touched on the important

issue of context and its role in ancient Bible interpretation. The people who first added their interpretations to Ezekiel's visions and organized them into the book that bears Ezekiel's name dealt with a baffling and idiosyncratic image by fitting it into a context where it seemed to make sense: the central shrine of the Temple whose destruction Ezekiel prophesied. The expositors who came after them found this context far less meaningful. Unlike the modern commentator, they felt few qualms about ignoring it and looking for the meaningful context elsewhere in Scripture. In Origen's image of the house of locked rooms, the key will not be found next to the door it opens. One must look for it elsewhere in the Bible.

c) "Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place." We find evidence of one such extended search for context in the form of a significant scribal error in Ezekiel 3:12–13 – truly a Freudian slip of the pen. The mistake is in one letter only of the Hebrew text; and yet for centuries it had the deepest influence on the way Jews perceived the *merkabah*.

If we reconstruct the text of verse 12 the way nearly all critical commentators agree it must be reconstructed [19], we can translate the passage as follows:

> A spirit [or, "wind"] lifted me. I heard behind me the sound of a great quaking as the glory of the Lord arose from its place [*berum kebod YHWH mimmeqomo*], and the sound of the wings of the *hayyot* rustling against each other, and the sound of the wheels [*'ofannim*] opposite them, and the sound of a great quaking.

Clear enough. But our extant Hebrew text (known as the Masoretic Text, commonly abbreviated "MT") has the graphically similar *barukh* in place of *berum*, with the following result:

> A spirit lifted me. I heard behind me the voice[4] of a great quaking: "Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place!" [*barukh kebod YHWH mimmeqomo*]. And [I heard] the voice of the wings of the *hayyot* rustling against each other, and the voice of the *'ofannim* opposite them, and the voice of a great quaking.

We cannot be sure just when *berum* was changed to *barukh*. But the error is certainly an early one, for it was already in the Hebrew text that the Jews of Alexandria used when they translated Ezekiel into Greek, probably in the second century B.C. (see below).

What caused the error? Any hand-copied text, sacred or profane, is bound to have its share of random blunders made by overworked or distracted scribes. But I do not think this is one of them. I believe that the copyist had found a context for the *merkabah* vision in another dramatic vision, this time described by Isaiah. Perhaps unconsciously, he altered Ezekiel's text in accord with this context:

4 *Qol* can mean both "sound" and "voice." It will soon become clear why I translate it "voice" this time round, and why I leave the *'ofannim* in Hebrew.

> In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, his train filling the Temple. Seraphim were standing over him. Each of them had six wings: with two he would cover his face, with two he would cover his feet, and with two he would fly. And one would cry out to the other: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts! The whole earth is full of his glory." The bases of the thresholds then shook at the voice of the one crying out, and the house [that is, the Temple] would be filled with smoke. [Isaiah 6:1–4]

Once *barukh* has replaced *berum*, the resemblance of Ezekiel 3:12–13 to this passage in Isaiah is almost eerie. Ezekiel's "great quaking" corresponds to the shaking of the bases of the thresholds in Isaiah. Isaiah ties this shaking to a great cry of praise uttered by the Lord's winged attendants[5]. Ezekiel now has a corresponding doxology, nearly meaningless and therefore profoundly evocative: "Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place[6]." And, just as Isaiah suggests that the attendant beings cry out their formula antiphonally, so the altered text of Ezekiel: the "voice of the *'ofannim*" answers the "wings of the *hayyot*." The wings of the *hayyot* thus give the impression of being their organs of song – a remarkable idea that we will meet again and again – and the *'ofannim*, "wheels," no longer appear as the mechanical objects we might have imagined, but as active supernatural beings who correspond to the *hayyot*.

d) The wheels. We do not know how deliberately our unknown scribe changed *berum* to *barukh*, or whether he was aware how much that tiny alteration had brought Ezekiel's vision into line with Isaiah's. Perhaps he would have been astonished to see, as we will, how later generations dealt with the text he had created. But the change he made is not isolated. One aspect of his new text, the new role hinted at for the *'ofannim*, seems to link it to the treatment of the *'ofannim* in Ezekiel 10:9–17, and to suggest that these two passages belong to the same exegetical process.

Ezekiel 10:9–17, I have argued [9], paraphrases and interprets the description of the "wheels" in the original *merkabah* vision (1:15–21). Although its author assumes and supports the equation of the *hayyot* with the cherubim, made throughout chapter 10, his real interest is in the *'ofannim*. He turns these "wheels" from machines into angels, almost literally fleshing them out. In verse 11, he equips them with heads; in verse 12, with flesh, arms, and wings. (It is clear both from the context of these

5 We know very little about the seraphim. The root of their name suggests the idea of burning (cf Isaiah 6:6). The Bible elsewhere uses "seraph" for snakes, perhaps mythological (Numbers 21:6 Deuteronomy 8:15), who are sometimes supposed to be able to fly (Isaiah 14:29, 30:6). But the seraphim of Isaiah 6, who have to cover their feet, do not sound like flying snakes.

6 "I have seen him [the Israeli scholar David Flusser] disconcert other scholars by insisting that the errors in sacred texts and the ignorant misreadings of them were really the constructive element in the history of civilization, since the religious ideas that have had most success have mainly been founded upon them." – Edmund Wilson [79].

verses and from their relationship to 1:17–18 that their subject is the *'ofannim* – not, as commentators normally assume, the *ḥayyot*-cherubim.) While he does not go so far as to specify what the heads of the *'ofannim* look like, a later author made up for his reticence by inserting verse 14 into his text (in MT only: the Alexandrian translators did not know this passage):

> Each one had four faces: first, a cherub's face; second, a human face; third, a lion's face; and, fourth, an eagle's face.

When I originally discussed 10:14, I tried to show that its author had taken his cue from a corrupt reading at the end of Ezekiel 1:15 (according to MT), which suggested that the *'ofannim* have the same four faces as do the *ḥayyot*. (He does not, however, give them precisely the same four faces; we will return to this point.) But this suggestion only went so far, because I could not think of any real reason why either the author of 10:14 or the earlier author of the rest of 10:9–17 should want to turn the *'ofannim* into a second order of angels, differing from the *ḥayyot*-cherubim only in their names and perhaps a few of their features. But now I think the alteration in Ezekiel 3:12–13 provides the clue. Influenced either by the altered text itself, or by the exegetical tradition that gave rise to the alteration, the writers of 10:9–17 wanted to affirm that the *'ofannim* stand over against the *ḥayyot* as a second angelic choir. The two groups can now cry aloud to each other, as 3:12–13 suggests they do: "Blessed be the glory of the Lord from its place!"

The process we are seeing here is a bit paradoxical. Ezekiel 10:9–17, by reinforcing the equation of the *ḥayyot* and the cherubim, confirms that the *merkabah* belongs in the context of the Jerusalem Temple, and that its importance is to mark the changes in God's attitude toward this Temple. But the Temple setting suggests something else: that Ezekiel's vision should be coupled with Isaiah's, which also takes place both around God's throne and in his Temple. Once this happens, Ezekiel's *merkabah* begins to vibrate to rhythms set by Isaiah. The *ḥayyot* and the *'ofannim*, for all their idiosyncrasies, absorb some of the energy of the seraphim and begin to act like them. Later on, we will find all three groups of angels calling out their doxologies from everlasting to everlasting, in realms considerably more exalted than the Jerusalem Temple; the historical context that the editors of the Book of Ezekiel gave to the *merkabah* is left far below.

I do not know how far this midrashic process had gone when Ezekiel 10:9–17 was written, or when someone made the change that turned *berum* into *barukh*. It seems clear, however, that we have at least its beginning in the text of the Book of Ezekiel itself. We will presently see that it develops into a tradition of *merkabah* exegesis so distinct that it will be useful to give it a name. We will call it, for the time being, the *hymnic tradition*.

In the meantime, why does the writer of 10:14 change the four faces of the *ḥayyot* when he transfers them to the *'ofannim*? Why does he delete the ox's face of 1:10, and replace it with a not very informative "cherub's face"? Here, too, we seem to be at the beginning of a tradition. We will see, again and again, that the bovine features of the *merkabah* (1:7 and 10) particularly engage expositors' attention. They must therefore engage ours. Let us file this question away, until we can do more with it.

e) Expansions of Ezekiel 1? In describing the *merkabah* exegesis preserved within the Book of Ezekiel, I have said nothing about exegetical expansions of chapter 1 itself. This is because, with one trivial exception to be noted below, I do not think there were any. If the text of Ezekiel 1 were in fact open to such expansions, as many modern scholars think it was, it is very strange that it occurred to none of the busy glossators to insert into it some hint that the *ḥayyot* are in fact cherubim. More likely, chapter 1 was a fixed text from relatively early times. The later editors and commentators, who filled chapter 10 with their exegetical suggestions, considered chapter 1 too sacred to meddle with.

It is true that MT's text of Ezekiel 1 contains words and even sentences that we do not find in the Alexandrian Greek translation (the Septuagint; abbreviated "LXX"), and that modern scholars often regard these as interpolations which were added too late to find their way into the text that the Alexandrians translated. This is a plausible hypothesis; as I have said, I think it is true for 10:14. But, in chapter 1, it is normally possible to show either that MT's "pluses" derive from mechanical scribal error – from which even chapter 1 was never immune – rather than deliberate alteration (as in 1:27); or else that MT's reading is in fact older and better than the shorter LXX text (as in 1:14, 24, 25–26) [34]. We will see shortly that the Alexandrian translators had their own exegetical axes to grind.

There is only one place in chapter 1 where I would say that MT contains an exegetical addition missing from LXX: verse 22, where MT adds a single word that characterizes the crystalline firmament as "terrible" or "awesome." To this, I would add 8:2, where, in the brief gloss "like the appearance of splendor," an annotator of MT makes the earliest attempt we know of to explain the mysterious word *ḥashmal*. Add also 10:14, and we have the only three MT "pluses" I can think of in the *merkabah* materials that seem to represent deliberate exegesis.

f) The merkabah as Scripture. We do not know when the Book of Ezekiel came to be essentially the document we now have, or when it was enrolled among the Prophetic books of the Hebrew canon. The second development need not have followed directly upon the first. An ingenious suggestion of Robert H. Pfeiffer (following A. B. Ehrlich) would, if correct, imply that

not all of the book's early readers approached it in a spirit of reverence. Three Hebrew words that break the context of Ezekiel 45:20, Pfeiffer thinks, were originally a marginal gloss, a reader's disgusted comment on Ezekiel's eccentric Temple legislation: "From [the pen of] a man mistaken and foolish" [43].

This unknown critic, if he indeed existed, did not prevail. The Book of Ezekiel could hardly have been preserved if it had not come to be regarded as a true oracle of God, deserving its place among the words of the prophets. We can be fairly sure that this happened before about 200 B.C. Early in the second century, a Palestinian scribe named Joshua b. Sira listed Ezekiel in his catalog of ancient pious men, placing him between Jeremiah and "the twelve prophets"; this order reflects the sequence of books in the Jewish canon (Sira 49:6–10 [45])[7]. As far as Ben Sira was concerned, Ezekiel's main claim to attention was that he had seen the *merkabah*: "Ezekiel saw a vision, and told about varieties of chariot [*zene merkabah*]." We do not know what Ben Sira meant by "varieties of chariot." We may take comfort from the fact that Ben Sira's grandson evidently did not know either; in his translation, Ezekiel "saw a vision of glory, which [God] showed him upon a chariot of cherubim."

This is the first time this chapter that we have seen the word *merkabah* inside quotation marks. The Hebrew text of the Book of Ezekiel never uses "chariot" to designate the totality of what Ezekiel saw; and Sira 49:8 is, with the possible exception of I Chronicles 28:18[8], the first surviving Hebrew source to do so. (LXX Ezekiel 43:3, which we will look at below, may be nearly as early, but it is in Greek.) The choice of this title reflects a natural enough interpretation of Ezekiel's vision. But it is worth noting that it is an interpretation; for, thanks to this name, the *merkabah* vision can and will find new Biblical contexts which extend its implications far beyond what we have seen so far.

With the beginning of the second century B.C., our study of the *merkabah* exegesis in the Book of Ezekiel is over. Our study of the exegesis of the Book of Ezekiel must begin.

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7 The Greek translation of Ben Sira's book, made by his grandson late in the second century, was included in the Apocrypha under the title of "Ecclesiasticus," or "The Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach" (the Greek form of Ben Sira's name). Substantial portions of the Hebrew original, including the passage that now concerns us, were found in the Cairo Genizah [45].

8 The detailed instructions that David gives Solomon for building the Temple include a plan for "the model of the chariot [*merkabah*], the cherubim, in gold, for those who spread their wings and shelter the ark of the covenant of the Lord." This may or may not refer to Ezekiel's vision. (The Greek translation of this verse, incidentally, seems to have influenced the translation of Sira 49:8.)

2. Qumran

a) Introduction. Khirbet Qumran is the name the Arabs gave to a small ruin on the eastern shores of the Dead Sea. Until 1947, when an Arab shepherd discovered seven Hebrew scrolls in a jar in one of the nearby caves, no one cared much to know what it was. In the early 1950's, the ruin was excavated, and turned out to be a building complex that had evidently been occupied from the late second century B.C. to about 68 A.D. (with a gap of a few decades at the end of the first century B.C.). The Romans had apparently destroyed it while suppressing the Jewish revolt of 66–70, which ended with the destruction of the Temple.

We are not absolutely certain who lived at Qumran. But the scholarly consensus is that it was a monastery of the Jewish sect known as the Essenes, who hid their extensive library in the surrounding caves when they fled before the Roman armies in 68. The remains of this library are what we now call the "Dead Sea Scrolls." They include not only the seven original scrolls from what is now called Cave I, but several other scrolls from nearby caves; and, from the so-called Cave IV, tens of thousands of fragments of what had once been scrolls. The Roman soldiers had perhaps found Cave IV centuries before the archaeologists did, and hacked the better part of the Essenes' library to pieces [71b][9].

The Essenes, like the early Christians to whom they have often been compared, believed that they and their times were the focus and fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. Few of the prophets interested and influenced them more than Ezekiel [55,66]. Because, for example, Ezekiel prophesied that the Zadokite priests would be God's chosen ministers in the future era (44:15), they called their priests "the sons of Zadok" (*Damascus Rule*, iii, 20 – iv, 3; tr. 100 [77]). Because Ezekiel suggested that the punishment of the Israelites is to last 390 years (4:4–5), they dated the beginning of their sect "three hundred and ninety years after [God] had given [Israel] into the hand of king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon" (*Damascus Document*, i, 16; tr. 97 [77]) [72]. What, we may wonder, did these devoted students of Ezekiel do with his *merkabah*?

b) The "Angelic Liturgy." In 1960, John Strugnell published two fragments from Cave IV which seemed to bear on this question [75]. Both are

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9 As a first introduction to the Dead Sea Scrolls, Edmund Wilson's *Dead Sea Scrolls 1947–1969* is a fine and appealing book. Wilson was of course no specialist; and the books of Millar Burrows, Frank Moore Cross, Jr., and Geza Vermes provide a more scholarly orientation [78,57,58,61, 77a]. Vermes has translated most of the Dead Sea material that has so far been published (most of the Cave IV fragments have not yet appeared) [77]. Fitzmyer's bibliography extends through the early 1970's [65].

parts of a much longer work – we do not know how long it was – which Strugnell called "the Angelic Liturgy." Strugnell found fragments of what he thought were four manuscripts of this composition among the Cave IV materials. (One fragment has also turned up at Masada [80,81].) He dated his four manuscripts on the basis of their script, and assigned the oldest of them to about 50 B.C., which thus becomes the latest possible date for the composition of the "Angelic Liturgy."

Strugnell published, with the text of his two fragments, translations and commentaries. In the following years, Carmignac proposed improvements on Strugnell's readings and translations; Yadin, Baumgarten, Fujita, and Rowland discussed different aspects of the material Strugnell had published; Dupont-Sommer, Gaster, and Vermes incorporated the Angelic Liturgy into their translations of the Scrolls [59,80,53a,67,160,63,58,77]. In 1982, Lawrence H. Schiffman again published Strugnell's fragments, with new translations and very extensive notes [74]. Carol Newsom's masterful publication of all the surviving fragments – *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice: A Critical Edition* (Scholars Press, 1985) – appeared too recently for me to take account of it here.

Strugnell referred also to a Cave IV fragment, not part of the Angelic Liturgy, which contained a paraphrase of the *merkabah* vision [76]. He never published this text, but he kindly allowed me to examine it in 1975. After I discuss the Angelic Liturgy, I will report on what I saw.

As I have said, we do not know how long the Angelic Liturgy was. We also do not know why it was written. Sections of its text begin with rubrics which specify what follows as "the song of the burnt-offering" of this or that Sabbath, described with an ordinal number and a date. We do not know just who is singing the songs or offering the sacrifices. The actors in these compositions, if not the speakers, are celestial beings with titles like "priests of the exalted heights"; the realms in which they move are described in language drawn from the Temple (*hekhal, 'ulam, parokhet, debir*). One unpublished passage, which Strugnell permitted me to examine, seems humbly to contrast "our" earthly priesthood and praise with that of the celestial beings. Some of the Qumran hymns found in other sources express an aching desire to join the heavenly company (*Hymns* [1QH] iii, 19–23, vi, 12–13, xi, 10–14; *Blessings* [1QSb] iii, 26–27, iv, 23–26; tr. 158–159, 169–170, 186, 208), and the Angelic Liturgy may perhaps have been intended as a bridge[10].

Most people who have studied the Angelic Liturgy, Scholem among them

10 In Newsom's edition, the "unpublished passage" appears as 4Q400 2, lines 6–7; the passages Strugnell published are 4Q403 1 i, lines 16–26, and 4Q405 20 ii–21–22, lines 7–14. – Newsom has perhaps solved the problem of the text's extent and structure.

[604], have found it strongly reminiscent of the *Hekhalot*. I share this impression, although I do not find it easy to put my finger on just what it is that creates it. Strugnell's second fragment, like much of the *Hekhalot*, is saturated with language drawn from Ezekiel's *merkabah*; both fragments, but especially the second, use terminology that resembles that of the *Hekhalot*[c]. But there are also less tangible resemblances. As Schiffman remarks, both the Angelic Liturgy and the *Hekhalot* are remarkably difficult to punctuate. Phrases and sentences run into each other, and the reader often does not know where one thought ends and another begins. The result is that one comes away from these texts, even if one has understood most of the words, with only the vaguest idea of what has been said. Some sort of poetic structure, usually involving parallelism, often breaks the surface; but, in both the *Hekhalot* and Strugnell's second fragment, the structure is sporadic and inconsistent.

The first of Strugnell's fragments consists of the latter part of a series of poetic stanzas describing blessings pronounced by seven "chief princes," apparently angels[11]. I cannot identify any reference to Ezekiel's *merkabah* in this fragment, and therefore do not think that it advances our inquiry.

The second fragment is much different. It is a description of the heavenly hymnody, obviously inspired by the *merkabah* vision. Although it is not exegetical in form, it presupposes a considerable development of *merkabah* midrash in what I have called the hymnic tradition, often hidden behind innocent-seeming poetic expressions. Unlike most of the texts belonging to the hymnic tradition which we will examine, it makes no use at all of Isaiah 6. Its two poles are, on the one hand, the tumultuous noise that Ezekiel associates with his vision (1:24–25, 3:12–13); and, on the other, the Lord's coming to Elijah in "a sound of delicate silence" (I Kings 19:12). The author of the Angelic Liturgy develops this paradox, which is already implicit in the latter Biblical text.

The difficulty of deciding where sentences and phrases begin and end makes it almost impossible to translate this passage with any confidence. I attack this problem by focusing on what I see as traces of poetic structure – or, better, of several poetic structures – and using them to indicate units of content.

11 To give some idea of the texture of the passage, I quote Schiffman's translation of one stanza:

The fifth of the chief princes
Shall invoke blessing in the name of His wonders
Upon all who know the secrets of the most pure
With seven words of His true exaltation.
And bless all who hasten to do His will
With seven wondrous words,
And bless all who acknowledge Him
With seven majestic words for those who acknowledge (His) wondrousness.

The fragment begins with nine words that are broken and hard to read. Schiffman translates them: " ... those who serve before the glory in the tabernacle of the angels of knowledge. The *keruvim* [cherubim] fall before him ..." I propose the following translation of the rest:

They give blessing as they raise themselves;
A sound of divine silence.
[ ] and tumultuous chant as they lift their wings;
A sound of divine silence.
They bless the image of the *merkabah*-throne
Above the firmament of the cherubim,
And they hymn the splendor of the firmament of light
Beneath the seat of his glory.
When the *'ofannim* go, the angels of the holy place return;
The spirits of the Holy of Holies go forth, like appearances of fire, from beneath his glorious wheels [*galgalle kebodo*].

All around are appearances of fiery grain-ears [? perhaps "rivers" or "paths"] in the likeness of *hashmal*;
Constructions of brightness, gloriously interwoven;
Wondrous colors, mixed in purity –
The spirits of the living God that travel about perpetually with the glory of the wondrous chariots.

There is a silent sound of blessing in the tumult of their movement,
And they praise the holy place when they turn back.
When they raise themselves, they raise wondrously;
And when they return [?] they stand still.
The joyful sound of hymning becomes quiet
And the silent blessing of God.
In all the camps of God ... d)

At this point, the text becomes too broken to translate.

It is not easy to summarize what is being described here. The tension between sound and silence in the divine realm is clearly a major theme. We get a strong impression of endless circular motion, accompanied by the reverent hum of the sound-silence and by a glow of prismatic color (the rainbow image of Ezekiel 1:28?). The "glorious wheels" (*galgallim*, from Ezekiel 10:2, 6, 13) are perhaps the model for this movement.

The author, as I show in endnote *d*, draws upon Ezekiel even more extensively than appears at first sight. He seems to assume certain features of the hymnic tradition of interpretation, which are becoming familiar to us. The parallelism of the *'ofannim* and the "angels of the holy place" in line 9 suggests that the *'ofannim* have been detached from the chariot and become angelic beings in their own right [160]. Line 3 associates the lifting of angels' wings with "tumultuous chant"; we may suspect that the author, like the later Jewish sources we will examine, has taken from Ezekiel 3:12–13 the hint that the *ḥayyot* use their wings as organs of song. (The Hebrew of line 3 is marvelously assonant: *hamon rinnah barim kanfehem*.)

But there is more. The fragment, near its end, refers to "the camps of God" (*maḥane 'elohim*). This of course points to Ezekiel 1:24: "I heard the sound of their wings ... like the sound of a camp [*maḥaneh*]" [67,74,75]. But it also points to another Biblical text:

> While Jacob was travelling on his way, angels of God met him. When he saw them, Jacob said: "This is the camp of God [*maḥaneh 'elohim*]." And he called the name of that place Mahanayim ["two camps"]. [Genesis 32:1–2]

Which passage was our author using, Genesis 32:1–2 or Ezekiel 1:24? To pose the question like this is to miss the point. He used both; or, more correctly, he used Genesis to interpret Ezekiel, and then incorporated the result of this exegesis. What kind of "camp" do the wings of the *ḥayyot* sound like? Hardly an ordinary military camp, whose noises would probably not be the most pious or edifying. Surely Ezekiel meant the "camp of God" that Jacob saw; surely it was the praises of these angelic soldiers that the *ḥayyot* pronounced with their wings. The author has ranged as far as Genesis to construct a context for the *merkabah*.

Line 14 introduces us to a more complicated case of context-building, this time involving the Book of Zechariah. Here we read of "the spirits [*ruḥot*] of the living God that travel about [*mithallekhim*] perpetually with the glory of the wondrous chariots [*markebot*]." The plural "chariots" warns us that there is more going on here than meets the eye. Ezekiel, after all, sees only one *merkabah*; why does the Angelic Liturgy use the plural [67,74,75,160]?

For the answer, we must turn to Zechariah 6:1–7:

> I again lifted up my eyes, and I saw four chariots [*markabot*] going forth from between the two mountains, which were mountains of brass. The first chariot had red horses; the second chariot had black horses; the third chariot had white horses; the fourth chariot had spotted [?], powerful [?] horses[12].
>
> I said to the angel who was speaking with me: "What are these, my lord?"
>
> He replied: "These are the four winds [or "spirits"; *ruḥot* can mean both] of the heavens, who go forth from attending upon the Lord of all the earth. The one with black horses goes forth to the north country; the white horses went forth after them; the spotted [?] horses went forth to the south country. The powerful [?] horses went forth, and wanted to go travel about [*lehithallekh*] the earth. He [God?] said, 'Go, travel about [*hithallekhu*] the earth.' So they travelled about [*wattithallakhnah*]."

We thus find three of line 14's key words – "spirits/winds," "travel about," and plural "chariots" – in Zechariah 6:1–7. I have no doubt that the author of the Angelic Liturgy (or the tradition that he followed), wanting to know more about Ezekiel's chariot, turned to Zechariah's description of angelic chariots for information. One passage of the *merkabah* vision, in particular, seemed to suggest that this was the right direction to go:

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12 The translation of *beruddim 'amussim* is uncertain, and the text evidently corrupt. Verses 6–7 seem to forget about the red horses, and to treat the "spotted" and the "powerful" ones as two different groups. This problem has no bearing on the point I am making.

This was the likeness of the *hayyot*: their appearance was like blazing coals of fire, like the appearance of torches, travelling about [*mithallekhot*][13] among the *hayyot*. [Ezekiel 1:13]

The author superimposed Zechariah's vision, like a transparency, over Ezekiel's, using the verb *hithallekh* as his fixed point of orientation. The result:

Ezekiel:	Coals/torches		travel about	as part of	*merkabah*.
Zechariah:	Spirits	attend God,	travel about	as	*markabot*.
Ang. Lit.:	Spirits	of living God	travel about	with	*markabot*.

When we look at the first column, we see that Zechariah's "spirits" occupies the same slot as Ezekiel's "coals of fire ... torches." We may guess that the Angelic Liturgy's description of the "spirits" as "fiery grain-ears" (*shibbole 'esh*) results from a combination of the two, and that the expression is a poetic variation of Ezekiel's "coals of fire" (*gaḥale 'esh*).

Line 10 also refers to "spirits": "The spirits of the Holy of Holies *go forth*, like appearances of fire, from between his glorious wheels." Here, too, the author combines Ezekiel 1:13 with Zechariah 6:1–7. "Appearances of fire" reflects Ezekiel's "appearance of torches"; in Zechariah, "the spirits [= "winds"] of the heavens *go forth* from attending upon the Lord of all the earth"; and the rest of Ezekiel 1:13–14 suggests that the *ḥayyot go forth* and return like lightning[14]. The Angelic Liturgy does not tell us where the spirits "go forth" to, or why they "travel about perpetually with the glory of the wondrous chariots." But the context in Zechariah would lead us to expect that they act as God's messengers, patrolling the earth on his behalf (cf. Zechariah 1:7–15).

If we assume that this last conception was indeed part of the hymnic tradition as the author of the Angelic Liturgy knew it, we begin to understand some of the details of the Book of Revelation. "Before the throne [of God]," the seer tells us in Revelation 4:5, "burn seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God"; and, in 5:6, "the seven spirits of God" are "sent out into all the earth." We will see in the next chapter that the author of the Book of Revelation drew from the same stream of *merkabah* tradition as did the Angelic Liturgy, and therefore might be expected to combine Scriptural passages in a similar way and draw similar conclusions.

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13 MT has here *hi' mithallekhet*. But the Hebrew text that LXX translated seems to have had *mithallekhot* [19], and the use of Ezekiel 1:13 in the Angelic Liturgy and the Book of Revelation (chapter III, below) best makes sense if we assume the latter reading. I have slightly altered the translation of this verse that I gave in section 1, in order to make my present point clearer.

14 Verse 13 concludes: "The fire was splendid, and from the fire lightning *went forth*" (*yoṣe'*, the verb I have consistently translated "go forth" throughout this discussion). Verse 14 is difficult, and is usually – incorrectly, in my opinion [34] – taken to be a late addition to the text [1,19]. We will look at its problems more closely when we consider the Targum (chapter IV). For now, let us translate it: "The *ḥayyot went forth* and returned like the appearance of lightning."

The Angelic Liturgy itself represents this tradition somewhat as follows: The *merkabah* beings – who include cherubim, *'ofannim*, angels, and spirits – hymn their Lord in a tumult of praise that is, paradoxically, "a sound of delicate silence." They use their wings (if I have interpreted line 3 correctly) as their organs of song. Jacob saw them, as God's soldiers, in their camps. Zechariah saw them, as God's messengers, going forth to patrol the earth.

c) The merkabah paraphrase. The Cave IV fragment paraphrasing the *merkabah* vision, which I mentioned at the beginning of this section, will give us a brief rest from all of this midrashic entanglement. It seems simple enough, if only because too little of the text is preserved for us to guess how complicated it is.

The fragment is only fourteen lines long and is badly damaged. We have no idea of its context, although Strugnell has correlated it with several other fragments of a pseudo-Ezekiel, sometimes paraphrasing the canonical Ezekiel. Unlike some of the other fragments, this text speaks of Ezekiel in the third person; oddly, however, the few remaining words of the lines that precede the description of the *merkabah* include a first-person suffix. These opening words seem to depend on Daniel 10:7.

The account of the *merkabah* is much shorter than Ezekiel 1, and does not strictly follow the order of the Biblical account. The word *merkabah* (which, we recall, Ezekiel does not use) appears near the beginning. There follow the four *ḥayyot* and their four faces, then the *'ofannim*, then the "coals of fire" of Ezekiel 1:13. The last line, which is badly broken, contains four letters which I think are the beginning of *hannora'*, "the terrible", this is the adjective that MT applies to the crystalline "firmament" of 1:22[e]. There is no reference to "cherubim" (as opposed to *ḥayyot*), or any other trace I can detect of Ezekiel 10.

There is an odd detail in the enumeration of the faces of the *ḥayyot*. Instead of the "face of an ox [*shor*]" that we find in Ezekiel 1:10, the author of the paraphrase speaks of a "calf" (*ʿegel*). I do not know if this makes any real difference. But we have seen that the author of Ezekiel 10:14 was also for some reason unhappy with the ox's face, and I have suggested we keep an eye on the way expositors treat the *merkabah*'s bovine elements. Here is a second datum for our file.

3. The Septuagint

a) Introduction. The Septuagint (LXX) is the oldest translation of the Bible into Greek, made at Alexandria before the beginning of the Christian Era. Although it later became the standard Old Testament of the Christian

Church, LXX was translated by Jews and, as far as we can tell, for Jews. We may therefore hope that it has something to tell us about how Greek-speaking Jews outside Palestine perceived the *merkabah*. We will not be disappointed.

We do not know when the Greek translation of Ezekiel that we now have was made. The Alexandrian Jews did not translate all their sacred Hebrew books into Greek at the same time. To make things more complicated, there is evidence that they and their Palestinian cousins continued to revise and improve upon their translations for centuries, and it is hard to be sure what edition of a given book our LXX manuscripts represent [22,37]. According to the tradition of the Alexandrian Jews, the Pentateuch was the first part of the Bible to be translated, and the translation was made during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–247 B.C.) by seventy Palestinian scholars (hence its name Septuagint, "seventy," LXX). We may safely believe that the translation of the Pentateuch indeed came first; and, although we must take the rest of the tradition with a grain of salt, it is more likely to exaggerate than to understate the antiquity of the translation. It follows that the Greek Ezekiel cannot be any older than about the middle of the third century B.C. As for its latest possible date, Ben Sira's grandson evidently knew a Greek Ezekiel when he translated his grandfather's book toward the end of the second century B.C., for he mentions in his prologue translations of "the law itself, the prophecies, and the rest of the books." But this does not give us an airtight dating, for we do not know for sure that his Greek Ezekiel was our Greek Ezekiel.

H. St. John Thackeray argued in 1903 that more than one individual took part in the translation of Ezekiel, and Nigel Turner has since developed his suggestions [47,49]. My own study of the *merkabah* chapters of LXX [34], which I will be summarizing in the next few pages, has suggested to me that Thackeray and Turner were on the right track. The translator of Ezekiel 43 seems to have had before him a Hebrew text of Ezekiel 1:24 that was fuller, and closer to our MT, than that which lay before the translator of Ezekiel 1. Further, he inserted into his translation of 43:2 a midrash that properly belongs in 1:24. This suggests that some distance, probably of time but possibly also geography, separated the two translators. It also implies that the translator of chapter 43 was the later of the two, and that an accepted translation of chapter 1 already existed when the translator of chapter 43 set to work; otherwise, why would the latter translator have had to find room in his own work for a midrash that belongs in chapter 1? If chapter 1 was read in the synagogues in Alexandria on special occasions (Shabuᶜot, for example), as we have seen that it was in Babylonia and probably Palestine at a later time, we can understand that it might have been translated into Greek long before the rest of the book.

This still does not give us a date for the passages in which we are interested. I have found only one feeble clue that might help us. The noun *qalal* occurs in the Hebrew Bible only in Ezekiel 1:7 and Daniel 10:6, and in both places LXX translates it "flashing like lightning" (*exastraptōn*). This rendering has the support of the context in Daniel 10:6, but seems baseless in Ezekiel 1:7. We might infer from this that the translator of Ezekiel 1:7 drew on the translation of Daniel 10:6. No conclusion of Bible scholarship is more certain than that chapters 10–12 of Daniel were written in 166–164 B.C. (below, chapter III); add a few years for Daniel to be translated into Greek, and we have about 150 B.C. as the earliest possible date for the translation of Ezekiel 1. The translation of Ezekiel 43 must be even later. If this argument is right, its upshot is that the evidence we are about to consider is probably earlier than the Qumran Angelic Liturgy, but by less than a hundred years.

b) Ezekiel 43:2. Let us begin with Ezekiel 43. The most obvious modification of the *merkabah* material in this chapter is that the translation of verse 3 actually calls the object of Ezekiel's vision "the chariot"; it is one of the earliest sources in any language to do so. But a variation in verse 2 is nearly as striking and a good deal more instructive. MT's Hebrew text, describing the glory of God that approached from the east, says:

> His voice[15] was like the sound of many waters.

But LXX translates:

> The voice of the camp was like the voice of many repeaters [*diplasiazontōn*].

In a situation like this, the text critic's first suspicion is that LXX is translating a Hebrew text that is different from MT's. But this is only a plausible explanation when – as is often the case – the Hebrew words that LXX seems to be translating are graphically similar to those in MT, so that we can imagine how a scribal error would get us from one text to the other. That is not the case here.

The first part of the simile is plainly drawn from Ezekiel 1:24:

> I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the voice of Shaddai[16], when they went, a sound of tumult [?] like the sound of a camp. When they stood, they let down their wings.

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15 Hebrew *qol* means both "voice" and "sound"; so does Greek *phōnē*. I translate "voice" or "sound" according to context.

16 "Shaddai," or "El Shaddai," is a Biblical name for God, used frequently in the Book of Job. It is conventionally translated "the Almighty," although nobody knows what it means. The author of Ezekiel 10:5 explains "the voice of Shaddai" as "the voice of El Shaddai when he speaks." Despite James Barr's criticism, I am attracted to G. R. Driver's suggestion that 1:24 originally read *keqol shedi*, "like the sound of a downpour" [21,2]. But this has nothing to do with the use of the verse by later Jewish expositors, who took for granted that the Scripture intended the divine name Shaddai.

Like the author of the Angelic Liturgy, the translator of Ezekiel 43:2 evidently understands the "camp" of 1:24 as the camp of God's angels that Jacob saw (Genesis 32:1–2). The "many repeaters," then, must be those angels who ceaselessly praise God (as in the Angelic Liturgy), repeating phrases like *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts* and *Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place.* (The author of the Book of Revelation, too, applies Ezekiel's "sound of many waters" to the voice of the multitudes singing hymns before God; 14:1–3, 19:6.)

Even the rather odd term "repeaters," which the author applies to them, has its source in the Hebrew Bible:

> God's chariotry is two myriads, thousands of *shin'an*;
> The Lord is among them [at?] Sinai in holiness. [Psalm 68:18]

We do not know what *shin'an* are. The rabbis applied their midrashic ingenuity to the puzzling word[17]; less imaginatively, RSV translates the phrase, "thousands upon thousands." The root of the word seems to be *shanah*, "to double" or "repeat." The translator of Ezekiel 43:2 – or, more likely, the tradition that he followed – deduced from this etymology that the *shin'an* are the "repeaters" of God's praises, who were present with God's chariotry (*rekheb*) at Sinai, and who therefore were part of Ezekiel's chariot vision. He aptly translated their title into Greek as *diplasiazontōn* (Greek *diplos*, "double," corresponds to Hebrew *shanah*).

Apart from my philological observations, practically everything I have said about LXX Ezekiel 43:2 was already said nearly 1600 years ago. Jerome wrote, in his commentary on this verse (ed. 623 [622]):

> *Like the voice of camps and like the voice of many doublers*[18], [says Scripture,] in order that one may grasp the mysteries of God's army. Jacob, understanding this, *called the name of that place "Camps"* [Genesis 32:2]; and it is elsewhere written concerning these [camps] that *God's chariot is myriads multiplied, thousands of those who rejoice* [Psalm 68:18]. The camps and the multitude are said to have one *voice* because of their common agreement in the praise of God. And the voice of those hymning the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is *doubled: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Sabaoth; the earth is filled with his Glory* [Isaiah 6:3].

The translator's allusion to Psalm 68:18, which Jerome seems instinctively to have grasped, establishes a link between Ezekiel's *merkabah* and the chariots that came to Sinai. We have already seen that the later synagogue practice of reading about both Sinai and the *merkabah* on Shabu^{c}ot attests a belief that the two are connected. Now we find a trace of this belief in

17 *Pesiqta de-Rab Kahana, Ba-Hodesh* #22 (ed. 219–221 [206]); see below, chapter IV.

18 Jerome quotes LXX Ezekiel 43:2 rather freely, and translates *diplasiazontōn* as "doublers" (*geminantium*) rather than "repeaters." His subsequent translation of Psalm 68:18 is based on LXX, which translates *shin'an* as if it were *sha'anan*, "at ease." (So one of the rabbis quoted in *Pesiqta de-Rab Kahana*. The translator of Ezekiel 43 obviously understood the word differently from the translator of Psalms.)

pre-Christian Alexandria. The Sinai event has entered the hymnic tradition of *merkabah* exegesis, as part of the context in which Ezekiel's vision must be understood.

c) Ezekiel 1:23. We find another trace of the hymnic tradition in the translation of Ezekiel 1 itself, which we have seen to be older than that of Ezekiel 43.

1:23 says about the *hayyot*, according to MT:

> Beneath the firmament their wings were straight, each to the other.

But LXX translates:

> Beneath the firmament their wings were stretched out, fluttering to each other.

"Stretched out" seems a reasonably straightforward translation of "straight." But where does the wings' "fluttering" come from?

The word that I translate "fluttering," *pteryssomenai*, occurs in only two other places in LXX. One of them is Ezekiel 3:13:

> And I saw [!] the voice of the wings of the living creatures[19] fluttering to each other [MT: "rustling against each other"], and the voice of the wheels opposite them, and the voice of the quaking.

The other is Ezekiel 1:24, where fourteen manuscripts read *pteryssesthai*, "fluttered," in place of *poreuesthai*, "went":

> I heard the sound of their wings when they fluttered like the sound of much water ...

The use of "fluttering" in all three passages only makes sense if we assume that, in the dialect of Greek used by the LXX translator, the word could indicate the creation of a musical sound. (I must admit that I have no other evidence of the word's having this nuance.) We have already seen a hint in Ezekiel 3:12–13 that the *hayyot*'s wings are their organs of song, and have perhaps detected a trace of this notion in the Angelic Liturgy. When we examine the Targum in chapter IV, we will see this belief developed in the context of Ezekiel 1:24–25. The LXX translator reads it into 1:23, in a particularly ingenious way: instead of *yesharot*, "straight," he reads midrashically *sharot*, "singing." "Their wings were singing, each to the other."[20]

d) Ezekiel 1:7. We have so far been able to use the Greek translation of Ezekiel as evidence that certain features of the hymnic tradition were

19 *Zōa*, the word LXX uses to translate *hayyot*, is unambiguous.

20 Another Greek source – admittedly, much later than LXX – attests this belief. The Paris Magical Papyrus preserves an exorcism, written (according to Deissmann) about 300 A.D. and saturated with Jewish ideas, that refers to the Jewish God as the one "to whom the wings of Cheroubin [*sic*] sing praises" (line 3061) [707].

known, even outside Palestine, as far back as the second century B.C. (The most important of these features, for our purposes, is the use of Psalm 68: 18 and the consequent linking of the *merkabah* to Sinai.) But there is one more peculiarity[f] of LXX Ezekiel 1 that does not fit in with the hymnic tradition, but with another line of thought which we have begun to trace. It appears in the translation of verse 7:

> [MT:] Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot, and they sparkled like polished [?] brass.
>
> [LXX:] Their legs were straight, and their feet were winged, and [were?] sparks like flashing brass; and their wings were swift.

LXX's concluding "and their wings were swift" is apparently a midrashic expansion of the unusual word *qalal* (which I have hesitantly translated "polished"), whose root can mean "to be swift." We will meet this rendering again in an unexpected context in chapter VIII. For now, I am more interested in the first appearance of the wings in this verse; when they sprout, so to speak, in place of the missing "calf's foot" of MT.

We can explain their appearance, if we want, as the result of two scribal errors in the Hebrew text that lay before the translator: the concluding *ʿegel* ("calf") was omitted because of its resemblance to the preceding *regel*; and *kekhaf* was accidentally written *kenaf* (the two words look almost alike in Hebrew). The best the translator could do with the resulting *wekhaf raglehem kenaf regel* was "their feet were winged." This is plausible enough. Yet we have seen that a scribal error can serve a purpose, and we must ask if the disappearance of the calf's foot could have been a goal important enough to justify some manipulation of the text, either during the process of translation or earlier.

It is at least an odd coincidence that two later translations, both associated with rabbinic Judaism – the Aramaic Targum and the Greek Aquila – also apply a vanishing cream to the calf's foot: they vocalize *ʿegel* as *ʿagol* and thus translate, ungrammatically, "a round foot" in place of "a calf's foot" [389]. We recall that the ox's face disappears from Ezekiel 10:14. This item, too, must be filed away.

4. Conclusions

The earliest Jewish *merkabah* expositors whose work we have were the unknown persons who built the *merkabah* vision into the structure of the Book of Ezekiel. They did not allow the apparition at the river Chebar to stand solitary and baffling; they proposed for it a context which gave it a meaning within the concerns of the prophet whom they supposed to have seen it. The cornerstone of their proposal was their equation of the bizarre *ḥayyot* of Ezekiel 1 with the familiar cherubim of Israelite tradition. So

identified, the *ḥayyot* appear to Ezekiel at Chebar in order to foreshadow God's leaving his earthly home in Jerusalem, and his eventual return to it. They and their *merkabah* become part of Ezekiel's prophecy of the exile and restoration of God's people.

We need not debate the correctness of these editors' understanding of the *merkabah* vision. What is important for us is that later expositors by and large ignored it. Of course, they did not literally dismember the Book of Ezekiel; the book had become part of the Holy Scriptures, inspired and untouchable. But they dissolved the context that the book's editors had created, and built a new one for it, drawing their material in bits and pieces from other Scriptures. Isaiah saw God surrounded by seraphim chanting his holiness; Zechariah saw his chariots on patrol. Jacob saw a "camp of God"; Elijah heard a "sound of delicate silence." The hymnic tradition of *merkabah* exegesis brought these elements together, to form a new setting for Ezekiel's vision.

In this company, the *merkabah* appears to have little to do with Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem or with the Babylonian exile. It has risen into an ethereal realm, where its only contacts are with other celestial entities. The seraphim, *ʾofannim*, and *ḥayyot* everlastingly sing *Holy holy holy* and *Blessed be the glory of the Lord* to each other. They do not have much to say to human beings.

This last sentence, of course, cannot be true. The *merkabah* and its attendants can hardly have interested anyone unless they seemed to communicate something important to earthly folk. The hymnic tradition must convey a message of this sort, which it is our task to decipher.

Besides, we have already seen a hint that the hymnic tradition is not quite as indifferent to history as appears at first sight. If it carries the *merkabah* up and away from Ezekiel's Babylonia, it brings it down to earth again at Mount Sinai. The myriads of God's chariotry, the author of Psalm 68 had written, made their appearance at Sinai. Now the hymnic tradition wove this passage into its net of Scriptures, and thereby made the Sinai revelation part of the setting of the *merkabah*.

We now seem for the first time to be moving toward a solution to some of the questions we raised at the end of chapter I. We have not yet gone very far. We have seen the earliest evidence of Sinai and the *merkabah* brought together, but do not know what this combination meant to the people who proposed it. We have begun to trace the contours of the hymnic tradition, but have not yet grasped why its bearers or their audiences found it important and exciting. Nor have we seen grounds for aversion to the *merkabah*. A few odd ripples, indeed, have appeared around the details of the calf's foot and the ox's face; and they may hint at something sinister moving beneath the surface. But we do not know what it is.

Of heavenly ascensions, too, we have so far seen nothing. We do not have

God's throne and, by implication, to supplant him. His paradigmatic hero is Lucifer at the same time that it is Moses. (Naturally enough, the two figures start to blend. Both, for example, acquire a pair of horns.)

To the extent that the rabbis were aware of this development of the synagogue *merkabah* tradition, it must have been for them among the most horrific of all the lines of thought that led from Ezekiel's vision. It was obviously subversive of their own leadership. More profoundly, it plunged into ambiguity the essential nature of the hero who brought Torah for Israel; and, beyond that, the whole enterprise of seeking God.

It is not hard to imagine that other Jews might have found this development exciting and liberating, for exactly the same reasons.

Like the "Wolf Man's" butterfly, Ezekiel's *merkabah* became the nexus of these thrills and terrors in the mental world of rabbinic Judaism. The rabbis therefore chased it, and ran screaming from it.

The terrors, like the thrills, were their own creation. I see no evidence that any of the alarming developments of *merkabah* exegesis, sketched above, represent alien conceptions which assaulted rabbinic Judaism from the outside. It was the rabbis, or Jews in the rabbinic sphere, who conceived and elaborated them. But it was the rabbis, too, who saw them as threats to the collective sanity of their religious culture, and responded with suppression and dread.

It did not have to be this way. There are religions outside the Judaic sphere, particularly in the East, which seem perfectly comfortable with a monistic conception of God as source of both good and evil. Their adherents, we may imagine, would regard the "dangerous" ideas we have examined in these pages as self-evident and humdrum. That the rabbis did not, that they saw these ideas as dangerous and repudiated them in horror, is a fact of crucial importance in characterizing rabbinic religion.

The accomplishments of our study, therefore, are not limited to our having laid bare what the rabbis regarded as the secrets of the *merkabah*, elucidated a cluster of obscure passages in the rabbinic literature, explained the origin and function of the ascension materials in the apocalypses and more particularly in the *Hekhalot*. None of these achievements seems to me trivial, in and of itself. But we may subsume all of them in a greater one, of tracing out a set of ideas which the rabbinic system was on the one hand capable of evolving, and which on the other hand it rejected as utterly incompatible with its essential values. If, as I think, we can come to know an individual both through the nature of his repressed impulses and through the obligation he feels to repress them, it seems reasonable that we can approach a religious culture in the same way. We have therefore made a fresh contribution to the task of defining and describing what was basic about rabbinic Judaism.

Can we extend this achievement to other religions of the ancient Mediterranean, or to religion in general? I have chosen here to limit myself as much as possible to Judaism, and have made only the most sparing use of comparisons across religious lines. I have indeed concerned myself with Origen, but only as an indirect source for Jewish exegetical traditions; I have made only occasional tentative forays into Origen's own faith.

I believe, nevertheless, that much of the work I have done here (particularly in chapter IX) can serve as a starting point for future comparative studies. Origen's Christian mythology offers a particularly rich field for such investigations. Several passages of his *Homilies* on Numbers and Joshua, for example, seem to interpret Joshua's wars against the Canaanites as shadowy reflections of greater celestial struggles, in which humans challenge and expel hostile powers entrenched in the heavens[1]. He invokes in this connection a passage which appears to have been one of his favorite Scriptural quotations [800]; namely, Ephesians 6:12: "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

This conception is obviously parallel to the Jewish myth, underlying the *Hekhalot*, of the human invasion of heaven. But how are we to explain the connection? This parallel, unlike the ones analyzed in chapter VIII, is not so easily explained as a case of Jewish influence on Origen; his speculations seem too well integrated into his patterns of thought to be regarded as alien elements grafted on to them. I am therefore disposed to imagine a parallel development in Judaism and Christianity, conditioned by factors which remain to be clarified.

The same cluster of ideas may somehow be linked with the growth of the Arian "heresy" in the early fourth century. Conventionally, scholars have regarded the central issue between the Arians and their "orthodox" opponents as the relationship among the persons of the Trinity. Was the Son equal to the Father (as the "orthodox" claimed) or subordinate to him? But a recent study, by Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, has argued for a shift of emphasis. The essential claim of Arianism, they propose, was that Christ was a creature of God's whom God promoted to divinity, and that humans may strive for a comparable promotion [672b]. If Gregg and Groh are right – and I am hardly competent to judge this issue – the Arian Christ turns out to resemble the Metatron of the *Hekhalot*. Here again, I am not proposing Jewish influence on Arianism. I am suggest-

1 *Homilies on Numbers*, VII, 5–6; XVI, 6; cf. XXVIII, 1–3. *Homilies on Joshua*, I, 5–6; XII, 1–2; cf. XXIII, 4; XXV, 4. Annie Jaubert briefly discusses the role of these passages in Origen's angelology [630a]. The fact that "Jesus" is the Greek form of the name "Joshua" naturally encouraged this interpretation of Joshua's conquests.

ing, rather, that there may have been something in the intellectual atmosphere of the fourth-century Mediterranean world that made divinization an attractive and plausible fantasy. What this was, I do not attempt to speculate.

What of Gnosticism? Despite Scholem's controversial description of the faith of the *Hekhalot* as "Jewish Gnosticism" [589], scholars have so far not agreed on whether there can have been any such thing as a "Jewish Gnosticism," or, if there was, whether the *Hekhalot* represent it [548]. The theme that occupies the *Hekhalot*, of humans struggling upward against a hostile celestial hierarchy, is certainly redolent of Gnosticism. But the strong anti-Jewish thrust of most ancient Gnostic systems makes it hard for us simply to identify the *Hekhalot* as Gnostic. It does not get us very far to suggest that Gnosticism influenced the writers of the *Hekhalot,* since this does nothing to explain why these Jewish authors should so passionately have embraced alien conceptions. The reverse hypothesis, that the *Hekhalot* influenced Gnosticism, suffers from a similar liability, plus the chronological difficulty that the Gnostic texts seem to be older than the *Hekhalot* [504a].

The issue is important, and must be resolved sooner or later. I have not tried to deal with it here, because I could not see how it would contribute to solving the problems to which this book is devoted. On the contrary: only when we have understood what belief in heavenly ascension meant to the *Hekhalot* authors, in their own context, will we be able to make significant comparisons between ascensions in the *Hekhalot* and in Gnosticism. The current investigation is thus an essential preliminary to comparative analysis, and not the other way round.

I will not try to anticipate the results of such comparative study. Whatever they are, they will have to explain the specific parallels between midrashic and *Hekhalot* sources on the one hand and Gnostic writings on the other, which Ithamar Gruenwald has observed [548] and which I have discussed in Appendix VI. They will also, I think, have to take into account the parallel conclusions that Elaine Pagels and I reached, independently of each other, on how the social worlds of the Gnostic and the *Hekhalot* writers influenced their mythologies (above, page 437).

There is another way in which the implications of this book range beyond the study of Judaism. From time to time, I have made use of certain of the grand constructions of twentieth-century psychology, in order to make sense of the data before us. In chapter V, I invoked Jung's quaternities; in chapter IX, the views of Freud and his followers on the male terror of the vagina (section B2).

I came to the data without prior allegiance to either Freud or Jung, and have therefore had no qualms about using their ideas in an eclectic and

piecemeal fashion. In doing so, I have provided what may be at least partial confirmation of one or both. If it is the case that Freud or Jung has permitted me to explain the otherwise inexplicable, it will follow that the theories of one or both must contain, even if neither represents, truth.

Whatever progress I have made in clearing up the riddles of the *merkabah* and its meaning for the rabbis, I do not sense that its mystery is entirely dispelled. A numinous mystery continues to cling to, if not to obscure, Ezekiel's strangest vision and the marks that it made on the thought of early Judaism.

Freud, often stereotyped as a reductionist, knew better than to box the world into a system. His favorite quotation was Hamlet's "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy" [837c]. He was aware that reality has its unruly threads which cannot be trimmed away, which lead off into unexplored darkness.

The dream, said Freud, has its "navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown" [837]. So, perhaps, do the communal dreams that lie at the heart of our religions.

For the rabbis, Ezekiel's *merkabah* was such a navel. Through it, their dreaming was nourished.

The manner of nourishment is what this book is about.

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