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The Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature and Its Mystical Tradition

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

THE HEKHALOT AND MERKAVAH LITERATURE

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

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

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

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

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

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SCHOLARLY EDITIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

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

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

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

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

MYSTICISM IN THE HEKHALOT AND MERKAVAH LITERATURE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHAT IS MEANT BY MYSTICISM

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

tradition. Beneficial observations on these aspects are offered by McGinn in his discussion of the heuristic nature of mysticism:

When I speak of mysticism as involving an immediate consciousness of the presence of God, I am trying to highlight a central claim that appears in almost all mystical texts. Mystics continue to affirm that their mode of access to God is radically different from that found in ordinary consciousness, even from the awareness of God gained through the usual religious activities. . . . As believers, they affirm that God does become present in these activities, but not in any direct or immediate fashion. Mystical religious texts are those that witness to another form of divine presence, one that can, indeed, sometimes be attained within the context of ordinary religious observances, but which need not be. What differentiates it from another form of religious consciousness is its presentation as both subjectively and objectively more direct, even at times as immediate.⁴⁵

McGinn's observation highlights several distinctive principles, which are significant for the study of Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism. This observation expands the notion of mysticism, recognizing that the *unio mystica* model is not its only characteristic feature, and the principle of union with God does not embody its sole essence. Acknowledging alternative mystical models McGinn perceives a state of an immediate consciousness of the presence of God as pivotal and further contends:

. . . union is only one of the host of models, metaphors, or symbols that mystics have employed in their accounts. Many have used it, but few have restricted themselves to it. Among the other major mystical categories are those of contemplation and the vision of God, deification . . . ecstasy. All of these can be conceived of as different but complementary ways of presenting the consciousness of direct presence.⁴⁶

Several additional conceptual and ideological traits are suggested by McGinn's observation presented above. References to specific consciousness of the presence of God demonstrate a claim that there is an alternative realm of absolute divine entity, or ultimate reality, beyond the phenomenological world, which can be attained by human seekers. The mystical awareness is different from the awareness of God gained through the usual religious activities and thus, the attainment of the divine, according to this view, often occurs outside the framework of established, traditional religious life. In his discussion of the nature of mysticism, Dan similarly observes: "There is an alternative, nonsensual, and nonlogical way of achieving truth, the *via*

mystica, which can lead the mystic . . . to embrace some aspects of the hidden truth."⁴⁷

McGinn's account also emphasizes the internal mental realm of human consciousness, on which both the spiritual quest and its attained revelations occur. It highlights unique spiritual perception, awareness, and state of mind, radically different from that found in ordinary states of being, that influence the ways in which the ultimate divine reality is attained. J. E. Collins' observation, presented from a phenomenological-psychological perspective, further elucidates this aspect:

One who subjects himself/herself to the discipline required of the mystic path, either by self effort or by submission to a spiritual guide, experience, as a result of his/her dedication to this discipline, radical change within his/her consciousness. This transformation of consciousness may be manifested in a new epistemology, cosmology, ontology, soteriology, and so forth.⁴⁸

The significance of such human's states of consciousness, indirectly, also indicates another characteristic of the mystical phenomena—the private, introspective nature of the mystical process, which seems to be, primarily, of personal concern. D. Merkur's view of mysticism advances this aspect:

What, in my opinion, finally distinguishes mystics from other types of religious ecstatic is their standing in society. Shamans, mediums, and prophets are public social functionaries who act on behalf of their coreligionists in contacting their gods or spirits. Coreligionists may perform similar practices for personal or private reasons. Mystics tend to seek experiences of exclusively private concern. Private orientations may be achieved through religious experiences of many different type, mystical union is merely one example. In all cases, it is the inward turn, due to the impossibility of possessing public religious authority, that I think characterizes mysticism wherever it is found.

Finally, McGinn's observation denotes the significance of religious texts, through which mystical notions are conveyed. Recognizing literature as a source in which mystical concepts are described, expressed, and communicated verbally, this assertion denies a previous, commonly received view about the absolute nature of mystical ineffability. In a similar vein C. A. Keller notes: "Mystical writings are . . . texts which discuss the path towards realization of the ultimate knowledge . . . and which contain statements about the nature of such knowledge."⁵⁰

McGinn's reference to religious texts also indicates, it seems, the significance of an exclusive religious perspective, from which experiences and revelations are decoded and presented in the textual sources. Spiritual awareness of other realities is thus related as a mystical consciousness of the presence of God. Merkur's observation, directs attention to the specific nature of mystical states of mind:

Mystical experiences are religious uses of otherwise secular alternate states of consciousness—or more precisely, alternate psychic states. What makes an alternate state experience a religious one is its personal or cultural valuation.⁵¹

The subsequent chapters of this study examine in detail the intricate manner in which these notions, characterized as mystical, are presented in the distinct context and terminology of the Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism. The following discussion of this chapter, as an introduction, briefly describes the presence of such notions in specific sources of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature. It intends to demarcate its mystical writings and to outline their prominent features.

THE HEKHALOT AND MERKAVAH MYSTICAL LITERATURE

Several of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literary texts are regarded as forming the main mystical core of the literature: *Hekhalot Rabbati* (The Greater Book of Hekhalot), *Hekhalot Zutarti* (The Lesser Book of Hekhalot), *Ma'aseh Merkavah* (The Works of the Chariot), *Sefer Hekhalot* (The Book of Hekhalot), also known as the *Hebrew Book of Enoch* or *3 Enoch*, the *Shi'ur Komah* texts (Measurements of the Divine Body), various fragments relating to Metatron known as *Shivah Metatron* and several *Genizah* fragments.⁵²

Descriptions in *Hekhalot Rabbati* present an account of Rabbi Ishmael's journey to heaven in order to find out if the death decree of ten prominent Jewish sages was decided by God.⁵³ Rabbi Nehunia ben Ha-Kanah's ecstatic ascent is similarly recorded. The text also outlines various stages of the visionary ascent, paradoxically designated in the texts as the "descent to the Merkavah," including its goals, techniques, and revelations.⁵⁴ Depiction of the upper worlds, the divine chariot, and the angelic rituals are provided.

Hekhalot Zutarti relates Rabbi Akiva's ascent to the upper heavens, delineated in a version of the story of "four who entered the *Pardes*," found also in the Tosefta, the Talmud, and the Midrash. Rabbi Akiva's accomplishments are highlighted as he is compared to the other three sages who "entered the *Pardes*."⁵⁵ Their harsh fate illustrates indirectly the risks of the journey as well as the ways in which to avoid them. Rabbi Akiva also describes his vision of ascending to heaven, and

instructs members of Merkavah group who wish to ascend. This literary tradition also makes references to Moses, portrayed as an ancient mystic who ascended on high to behold God.⁵⁶ The text also offers details concerning spiritual goals and specific methods and practices designed, it seems, to influence the adept's awareness and to induce ecstasies. It narrates the stages of the visionary ecstatic journey, including its dangers and challenges. Divine revelations are also disclosed.⁵⁷

Ma'aseh Merkavah provides information concerning spiritual goals, techniques, visionary ascents to the chariot, and spiritual achievements.⁵⁸ It includes general descriptions, songs, hymns, and prayers, recited by the Merkavah seekers before God, as well as a few accounts presented as their personal testaments.

Sefer Hekhalot, known as *3 Enoch* or *The Hebrew Book of Enoch*, reports Rabbi Ishmael's ascent to the highest seventh heaven and recounts his encounter with the Prince of the Countenance, Metatron, who shows him the structure and secrets of the divine world. The account details the personal experiences and spiritual transformation which Rabbi Ishmael undergoes before he enters the divine realm. The story of Enoch, son of Jared, the human being who was transformed into the divine archangel Metatron, echoes Rabbi Ishmael's account. It offers additional data concerning the voyage from the phenomenological to the transcendent world, the final transformation at the end of the path, and the nature of divine revelations.⁵⁹

The *Shi'ur Komah* traditions consist largely of visions of the manifested, anthropomorphic image of God.⁶⁰ They also incorporate subtle exegetical interpretations of these revelations, presented from a specific spiritual viewpoint as will be demonstrated. Finally, several *Genizah* fragments from Cairo add various details, mainly about the visionary journey and its entailed revelations.

All these Hekhalot and Merkavah accounts present, in a distinctive language and vocabulary, several particular features, which reach a level of explicit literary formulation. These are closely related to the mystical notions discussed above. The Hekhalot and Merkavah mystical accounts claim the existence of an alternative realm of ultimate reality which stands beyond the physical phenomenological world. Seen from a specific religious perspective, this sphere is classified in terms such as the Heaven of Heavens, the King's palaces, or God's Merkavah (chariot). These traditions, likewise, acknowledge an inner contemplative process of attaining the absolute achieved by human seekers. This experience is depicted as visionary contemplative journeys out of this world to celestial realms. The members of the Merkavah circle undergo a series of mental inner stages, through which several qualified individuals acquire a unique spiritual perception, awareness,

and consciousness. This state enables them to attain the divine reality in a personal direct manner, which seems to be of private concerns. They see God's celestial palaces, behold the King at his beauty, and gaze at the Merkavah.

As mentioned earlier, in these Hekhalot and Merkavah diverse literary accounts, we find no consistent information regarding mystical concepts. In none of the writings can we find an attempt to convey mystical ideas in a methodical fashion, or to introduce a coherent and systematic mystical doctrine. On the contrary, complex references to various mystical teachings, practices, visions, revelations, and exegesis are present in the nonhomogeneous Hekhalot and Merkavah literary genres. They are transcribed in multiple modes of expression and composed from diverse perspectives as records of inner experiences and visions, as well as theoretical information, general descriptions, narratives, and instructions.

We read reports revealed as the mystics' testaments during the experience.⁶¹ Likewise, the mystics' later reflections of their experiences are recorded, as well as reports and explanations from a third person's perspective.⁶² Theoretical teachings or what seem to be narrations of exemplary mystical principles are also found in the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature.⁶³ Narratives, such as the "*Pardes* story" or the "account of the ten martyrs," also provide references to mystical concepts, as well as direct dialogues between teacher and disciple, and general instructions, directed to the people who aspire to engage in specific spiritual quests.⁶⁴ Poetic forms, expressive prayers, exegetical interpretations of mystical visions are additional literary genres which manifest mystical concepts in the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature.⁶⁵

Both the variety of sources and the lack of consistency clearly challenge attempts to draw precise and decisive conclusions regarding the nature of Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism. It is important, however, to note the advantages of such a broad and richly layered literature. Consideration of the many-sided mystical literature of any tradition, followed by an analysis of its significant literary genres, can contribute to a wide understanding of this specific mystical tradition. The broad range of significant literary texts, genres, and forms do not obscure the investigation. Rather, they reveal its many aspects, phases, and outlooks, and can be of great value for comprehending the complexity of any specific mystical tradition. In his discussion of mystical literature, Keller observes diverse literary genres which are often included in mystical sources. Often, according to Keller, these different literary categories do not present unbroken and direct accounts of the pure experience. Nevertheless, when seen holistically, they provide

access to prominent aspects and characteristics of the specific mystical tradition in which they were compiled.⁶⁶

The advantages of this approach in the study of the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature becomes evident. Its wide scope in structure, genre, and content, allows an extensive examination of the mystical tradition. It provides rich material from various sources and angles, which manifest many characteristics and parallel aspects. Furthermore, the breadth of this literature exhibits corresponding notions found in several of its literary accounts. These similar aspects, which occur in various composite texts and redactions, demonstrate the shared conceptual and spiritual heritage of Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism. It is meaningful to note that the Hekhalot and Merkavah literature was never granted any official canonical rank. Nevertheless, common mystical notions prevailed over long periods of time in its diverse textual components. The lasting nature of these ideas attest to the vitality, respected status, and continuity of the Hekhalot and Merkavah mystical tradition.