Notes on the Study of Merkabah Mysticism and Hekhalot Literature in English

with an appendix on Jewish Magic

Don Karr

Merkabah (= CHARIOT) MYSTICISM developed out of speculation on and expansion of the visions of Ezekiel (chapters 1, 8, and 10) and, to a lesser extent, Isaiah (chapter 6) and Daniel (chapter 2). This strain of mysticism meanders through the intertestamental pseudepigrapha* and even touches corners of gnostic and Qumran texts.**

Merkabah material and references can be found in shreds, often more provocative than telling, in the Talmud and other rabbinic writings.† However, the major concentrated expression of merkabah mysticism is that cluster of writings which has come to be called the hekhalot (= HEAVENLY HALLS) literature, which is the focus of this paper.

---

* 1 Enoch 14; The Life of Adam and Eve (including The Apocalypse of Moses); The Apocalypse of Abraham. For translations of these, see James H. Charlesworth (ed.), The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 1 (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1983). 1 Enoch 14 is particularly important; Gruenwald (in AMM, p. 36) says, “…it is the oldest Merkavah vision we know of from outside the canonical Scriptures. … Indeed, one can consider this particular vision a model-vision of Merkavah Mysticism.” (On AMM, see below, p. 3.)


† Mishnah: Megillah 4:10, Haggigah 2:7, Tosefta Haggigah 2:1-7, Palestinian Talmud 77 a-d; Babylonian Talmud 11b-16a. See the books listed below by Halperin on page 3, Chernus on page 4, and Schäfer on page 15.
Arguments over the dating of this body of literature continue, but there is general agreement to a range of 200-800 C.E. The bounds and structure of these writings are also matters of dispute, for the notions of titles and fixed contents of a specific canon of hekhalot books appear to be more academic conveniences than reflections of the true nature or state of the literature.

Since the ’seventies, scholarly work on the hekhalot texts has increased dramatically, as the publication dates on a clear majority of the books and articles discussed below attest. Before this spate of academic activity, there were in English little more than Gershom Scholem’s works* and Hugo Odeberg’s attempt at a critical edition of one of the hekhalot texts** to shed light on this oblique collection of writings. Even as this lament is being recalled, no time should be lost in acknowledging Scholem’s inescapable influence on this and all other aspects of the study of Jewish mysticism. Some of Scholem’s conclusions regarding the hekhalot have been challenged, and some of his observations on and characterizations of the hekhalot texts have come to seem convenient, imposing order on that which is, in fact, near chaos. Yet, Scholem’s writings on this subject remain some of the clearest and best supported. They are also among the most accessible, not only in their style but in their actual availability. As for Odeberg, his lone work is more problematic. As significant as it was, Odeberg’s treatment of Sefer ha-Hekhalot (BOOK OF THE HEKHALOT, dubbed by Odeberg “3 Enoch”) is now considered unreliable and misleading on many points. But, as contemporary scholar David Halperin has pointed out†, Odeberg’s work has “proved easier to criticize than to emulate,” for critical editions of hekhalot texts—with English translations or not—are few indeed.

Today, however, we are in pretty fair shape to study merkabah mysticism and hekhalot texts, though some of the leading scholars in this field publish in German†† and, of course, Hebrew. Nevertheless, from the texts and studies now available in English, the persistent reader can certainly gain firm impressions of (i) the contents of the hekhalot texts, (ii) the issues captivating contemporary scholarship regarding the hekhalot texts, and (iii) the place of the hekhalot texts in the history and development of Judaism, early Christianity, and their mysticism.§

In the following pages, books, sections of books, and articles on merkabah mysticism and hekhalot literature—including translations—are described. I also discuss the various texts associated, however loosely, with the hekhalot corpus, with indications of sources for translations and studies of them.

---

* A list of Scholem’s works is given below, page 3.

Morton Smith’s “Observations on Hekhalot Rabba,” in Biblical and Other Studies, edited by Alexander Altmann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963) was another early notice. In the ’forties, Smith translated Hekhalot Rabba into English; this translation circulated among scholars in the field but was never published. The typescript was corrected by Scholem, whose notes appear in the margins. Scholem mentions Smith’s translation in Jewish Gnosticism…, page 11, note 4. A transcription is now online: http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/karr/HekRab/index.htm


† FACES, p. 364. (See below, page 4: 1988 • Halperin).

†† In German there is Peter Schäfer and his team. Certainly, the most significant work which Schäfer has overseen is Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1981), which presents in the original Hebrew and Aramaic an array of manuscript readings side by side. Synopse was followed by Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur by the same team (1984, same publisher). Soon after, German translations of Synopse appeared (1987 onward, Mohr/Siebeck). Schäfer has also published a collection of his articles—ten in German, three in English—as Hekhalot-Studien (1988, also Mohr/Siebeck).
Studies
LISTED CHRONOLOGICALLY

1965


   The studies of Gershom Scholem form the basis of contemporary scholarship on Jewish mysticism, and, hence, provide the foundation of subsequent work on merkabah mysticism and hekhalot texts. Other works by Scholem address this subject at length:

     - LECTURE 2: “Merkabah Mysticism and Jewish Gnosticism”
     - pages 8-21; pages 373-6: § MERKABAH MYSTICISM; pages 377-81: § METATRON
     - CHAPTER 1. “Shi'ur Komah: The Mystical Shape of the Godhead”

   These works (Major Trends..., Jewish Gnosticism..., Kabbalah, and Mystical Shape...) are cited not only to establish the starting point for “modern” scholarship on hekhalot-merkabah mysticism but also to demonstrate Scholem’s own development in appraising the subject.

1980


   The first half of AMM analyzes the major features of the merkabah tradition, beginning in Jewish apocalyptic, then developing into “the literature that first gives a full-scale presentation of Merkavah mysticism” i.e., the hekhalot literature, “composed in Eretz-Yisrael (circa 200-700),” thus ending “as a creative literary stream … some time in the Ge’onim period.”

   The second half of AMM describes the hekhalot texts one by one, including Re’uyot Yehezkel and Sefer ha-Razim.

   Two appendices by Saul Lieberman follow: (1) “Metatron, the Meaning of His Name and His Functions,” and (2) “The Knowledge of Halakha by the Author (or Authors) of the Heikhaloth.”


   Halperin’s study investigates the references to the merkabah tradition in Mishnah Hagigah 2:1, Tosefta Hagigah 2:1-7, Palestinian Talmud Hagigah 77a-d, and Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 11b-16a.

   “...I believe that I have shown that Scholem’s position is not securely supported by the rabbinic sources on the merkabah, which, taken by themselves, provide little reason to believe in the existence of the ‘merkabah mysticism’ envisioned by Scholem.” – page 184

1982


   This series of essays shows the relationship between merkabah mysticism and rabbinic midrashim following, generally, two motifs: the revelation on Mount Sinai and the eschatological rewards of the world to come.
Refer also to Chernus’ articles:


1983


1984


  The “three types” discussed in this brief work are (a) ascent to the divine world, (b) the mysticism of Hebrew letters, and (c) *Sar Torah* (PRINCE OF THE TORAH) revelations. *Three Types* is reprinted in Dan’s *Jewish Mysticism*, Volume I: LATE ANTIQUITY (Northvale – Jerusalem: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998).

1985


1988


  *From Apocalypticism…* is a collection of twelve articles (plus an introductory essay), most previously published. Four of the articles are new, and one appears in English for the first time.

  “The traditions and writings which are discussed in this collection of studies crystallized among people whose intellectual horizons were not as clearly and sharply outlined as those of the modern mind. For those people, the demarcation lines between dreams and dream-like situations, on the one hand, and rational wakefulness, on the other, were rather flexible and likely to be altogether ignored.” (PREFACE, page i)

  Refer to Gruenwald’s article


  FACEx is a thorough study which challenges many conclusions and assumptions of previous scholars, tracing *merkabah* material from the Bible, through the apocalypses and rabbinic literature, concluding with the *hekhalot* texts. Translations of the text *Re’iyot Ye’zekiel* (VISIONS OF EZEKIEL) and other important segments of *hekhalot* material are included.

  FACEx is valuable in a way that few books of this ilk are in that Halperin invites the reader to engage in his entire scholarly process, which he lays out in great detail in his 450-page text, two-tiered
notes (footnotes and endnotes), seven informative appendices (Appendix I: “Orientation to Rabbinic Sources” is especially helpful), and full reference list (which is divided into sixteen sections according to topic).

Refer to Halperin’s articles

1989

Poetics of Ascent offers a translation of Ma’aseh Merkabah with a speculative analysis regarding the functions of this text’s “ritual language.”

Further, see Janowitz’ article

1991

Mystical Prayer...gives a full treatment and translation of Ma’aseh Merkabah (WORK OF THE CHARIOT).

Mystical Prayer is a revised and expanded version of Swartz’ PhD dissertation, LITURGICAL ELEMENTS IN EARLY JEWISH MYSTICISM: A Literary Analysis of “Ma’aseh Merkavah” (New York: New York University, 1986).

1992

After a discussion of the ironic errors of this lecture’s title, Dan identifies the “distinctively mystical elements in Hekhalot literature” as residing in only five texts: Hekhalot Rabbati, Hekhalot Zutarti, Sefer Hekhalot (or 3 Enoch), Ma’aseh Merkabah, and Shi’ur Qomah.

Revelation... has been reprinted in Dan’s Jewish Mysticism, Volume One: LATE ANTIQUITY (Northvale – Jerusalem: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998).


HMG is a detailed look at a selection of hekhalot texts. Instead of summarizing each text in turn, Schäfer organizes his analysis thematically, considering each text’s notion of God, angels, and man. He clarifies the roles of two distinct motifs: (i) ascent through the hekhalot to the throne of glory, and (ii) the adjuration—either to God or to one of his angels.

Refer to Schäfer’s articles


1993


Dan reviews all of the major topics, issues, and texts in a manner which does not exclude the non-specialist. Ancient Jewish Mysticism expands Dan’s earlier chap book, Three Types of Ancient Jewish Mysticism (University of Cincinnati, 1984)—see above 1984 • Dan.

Further elaborating on the topics covered in The Ancient Jewish Mysticism is the collection of articles which comprises Dan’s Jewish Mysticism, Volume One: LATE ANTIQUITY (Northvale – Jerusalem: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998; hereafter JM1), in which Dan’s articles listed below have been reprinted.

Refer also to the following articles by Joseph Dan:


1994


“This book … is an attempt to treat in a comprehensive manner the problem of visionary experience in some of the main texts of the classical period of medieval Jewish mysticism. I have isolated the problem of vision and visualization since this constitutes one of the essential phenomenological concerns in the various mystical corpora produced by Jewish authors throughout history. I make no claim that mysticism is identical to or collapsible into the phenomenon of vision. I do, however, maintain that the examination of this issue provides an excellent speculum through which to view the religious experience of different Jewish mystics.

While the major focus of this book, from a chronological perspective, is the High Middle Ages (chapters 5 to 7), in chapter 3 I discuss the nature of the vision of the glory in the ancient Jewish mystical corpus known as the Hekhalot or Merkavah literature. The justification for including this chapter is both historical-textual and phenomenological.” (—page 9; my ellipses—DK)

After providing a summary of scholarship on hekhalot literature, CHAPTER 3, “Visionary Ascent and Enthronement in the Hekhalot Literature,” discusses the vision of God as presented therein, citing Hekhalot Rabbati most often. Wolfson explores problematic aspects—“The Paradox of Seeing the Hidden God,” eroticism, anthropomorphism—which bear upon the import of the texts: Did actual experiences determine the texts, or did the texts determine the experiences? Are the experiences themselves “real” or “imagined”? Does the hekhalot literature represent experience or exegesis? Are such distinctions useful in understanding the intent of the hekhalot authors? Through the chapter, Wolfson remains in dialogue with other scholars who have treated the hekhalot material—Scholem, Schäfer, and Halperin in particular.
“From a phenomenological perspective as well, it is obvious that the Hekhalot corpus is an intrinsic part of such a study [i.e., of visionary experience in medieval Jewish mysticism], insofar as the vision of glory and the chariot served as a paradigm for visionary experience in later Jewish mysticism, influenced in particular...by the philosophical reinterpretations of this religious experience, as will be discussed in chapter 4 [“Theories of Glory and Visionary Experience in Pre-Kabbalistic Sources”]. To be sure, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the various ‘trends’ of Jewish mysticism took shape in such a way that the chariot vision is hermeneutically transformed. It is nevertheless the case that the major mystical ideologies of the period to be discussed in this monograph, the German Pietists [CHAPTER 5: “Haside Ashkenaz: Vertical and Docetic (= “real” or “imagined”) Interpretations of the Chariot Vision”] and the Provençal-Spanish kabbalists of the theosophic trend [CHAPTERS 6 and 7, “Visionary Gnosis and the Role of the Imagination in Theosophic Kabbalah” and “The Hermeneutics of Visionary Experience: Revelation and Interpretation in the Zohar”] orient themselves in terms of the chariot. In that sense we can speak of these schools as hermeneutical transformations of the Hekhalot mysticism.” (—pages 9-10; my brackets, parentheses, and ellipses—DK).

Further, refer to Wolfson’s articles


1995


Deutsch gives an account of the relationship between Gnosticism and merkabah mysticism using Scholem’s written statements on these as a starting point. He surveys a range of scholarly opinion on issues surrounding these topics, drawing on many of the writers mentioned in this bibliography. Deutsch summarizes his view of Scholem on page 36: “Even though his [Scholem’s] comparative analysis of Gnosticism and Merkabah mysticism is problematic from a number of methodological perspectives, its role as an intellectual catalyst cannot be overstated.”


“Many statements about Jesus in the Gospel according to John can be paralleled by what is said about Metatron in 3 Enoch and the Son in Valentinian Gnosticism. Perhaps the most striking similarity is that they all are represented as the possessor of the Name of God, the concept of which plays an enormous role in Judaism. As the figure of Metatron appears to be some sort of systematization of and elaboration upon everything that was said about the principal angel in older sources, works outdating even John, it would seem that both Johannine and Gnostic Christology owe to mystical Judaism.” (INTRODUCTION, pages 3-4)

DESCENT offers a discussion of the heavenly journey, *yeridah*, literally “descent,” to the *merkabah* in various passages of the *hekhalot* literature. Kuyt outlines the contents of *Hekhalot Rabba*, *Hekhalot Zutreti*, *Ma'aseh Merkabah*, *Merkabah Rabba*, 3 Enoch, and one of the Genizah fragments. Translated excerpts from all these are included.

1996


“This monograph represents a critical juncture in Thomas studies since it dispels the belief that the Gospel of Thomas originates from gnostic traditions. Rather, Jewish mystical and Hermetic origins are proposed and examined.” (—ENDFLAP)


In *Scholastic Magic*, Swartz translates and analyzes the *Sar Torah* (PRINCE OF THE TORAH) texts with an eye toward the cultural environment which produced them.

1997


In chapters 4 through 7, passages from *Shi'ur Qomah*, 3 Enoch, *Razo shel Sandalphon* (SECRET OF SANDALPHON, a *hekhalot*-related text), and *Hekhalot Rabba* are translated and analyzed.

1998


The first half of the book (Parts 1 and 2) provides an excellent survey of *merkabah* material and the literature (apocalyptic, non-apocalyptic—including Qumran material—and Christian) clustered around it from Hellenistic times through the first century. Part 2 examines *merkabah* mysticism in some detail to set up an analysis of its connections with Johannine mysticism.


“...Aseneth displays significant affinities with traditions about the adjuration of angels and ‘ascent’ to heavens as known to us from the problematic *hekhalot* and related materials. ...Given the nature of our sources, it seems impossible to know what if any actual connections might exist between Aseneth and *hekhalot* traditions. But if the longer version of Aseneth in particular does stand in some self-conscious relationship to the *hekhalot* traditions, gender may well be a significant factor in the differences.” (—When Aseneth Met Joseph, page 173)


Lesses concentrates on the adjuration sections of the *hekhalot* material. Along with an analysis of these “ritual performances,” Lesses presents a survey of current scholarship (covering many of the authors mentioned in the present paper). Further, she attempts to set the adjurations of the *hekhalot* into the milieu of the Greco-Egyptian ritual literature of late antiquity.
Refer to Lesses’s articles


1999


  “Within Merkabah mysticism, God is frequently depicted as an exalted and highly remote figure. Thus, Scholem was partly right when he described the gulf between humans and the God in Merkabah mysticism. Yet, Scholem erred when he emphasized the impossibility of closing this gulf—that is, when he defined the God of Merkabah mysticism as absolutely inaccessible or transcendent. How was the distance between human beings and God breached in Merkabah mysticism? The answer to this question requires an appreciation of the paradoxical nature of the angelic vice regent” (*Guardians*, p. 9). Deutsch discusses Metatron in this role, with comments on Akatriel; he then examines similar figures in Gnosticism (Sabaoth) and Mandaeism (Abathur).

Further, refer to Deutsch’s article


2000


  Kanarfogel tracks the influence and use of *hekhalot* and other mystical and magical material to 12th- and 13th-century Germany and France. He argues that esoteric teachings and practices spread beyond the Hasidei Ashkenaz to the *tosafists*, rabbinic descendents of Rashi, conventionally considered to have been inclined exclusively toward study of the Talmud.

2001


  In the first chapter, Davila provides an excellent summary of the issues and debates in *hekhalot* scholarship. He then makes his case for understanding the *hekhalot* texts not as being mere literary constructs but as describing the experiences of real practitioners, whom Davila likens to shamans, *i.e.*, “religious functionaries,” “intermediaries” seeking “to gain power over the spiritual world.”

Further, see Davila’s articles

- See below, page 13: *Paradise Now*. 

Eskola says in the introduction (page 17), “...it will be the main purpose of this work to investigate the relationship between Jewish merkabah mysticism and New Testament exaltation Christology by focusing on the central metaphor of the throne. In this study our interest lies in the occupants of the throne, in enthronements, and in the function of the throne in different contexts.”

2002


In the first section of *A Transparent Illusion*, Morray-Jones builds upon (and occasionally corrects) comments regarding the “water test” passages in his own earlier two-part article, “Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1-12): The Jewish mystical background of Paul’s Apostolate, Part 1: The Jewish Sources” and “Part 2: Paul’s Heavenly Ascent and Its Significance (both in *Harvard Theological Review* 86, Cambridge: 1993). Thereafter, Morray-Jones offers an in-depth analysis of the “water vision episode” within the context of the *hekhalot* literature, i.e., Hekhalot Rabbati and, especially, Hekhalot Zutarti. An extensive appendix discusses “Solomon and the Queen of Sheba,” a story which “appears to derive from the same traditional background and to be related in some manner to the water vision episode itself” (—page 230).

Refer to Morray-Jones’ articles


• “Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition,” in *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1 (The Oxford Centre for the Hebrew and Jewish Studies, 1992)

• See below, page 13: *Paradise Now*.

2003


Arbel’s summary of *hekhalot* and *merkabah* literature and scholarly approaches to it is not as engaging or detailed as, for instance, the introduction in Davila’s *Descenders to the Chariot* (see above). However, Arbel nicely treats the question, “What is MYSTICAL about *hekhalot*-merkabah mysticism?” i.e., what are its “mystical” characteristics and intentions?

FROM THE SUNY PRESS CATALOGUE (Spring 2003): “While previous scholarship has demonstrated the connection between Hekhalot and Merkavah mysticism and parallel traditions in Rabbinical writings, the Dead Sea Scrolls, apocalyptic, early Christian, and Gnostic sources, this work points out additional mythological traditions that resonate in this literature. Arbel suggests that mythological patterns of expression, as well as themes and models rooted in Near Eastern mythological traditions are employed, in spiritualized fashion, to communicate mystical content.”

See also Arbel’s article


Elior details the traditions and literature leading up to the *hekhalot* texts. She writes, “Heikhalot literature preserves the living continuation of the sacred service by recovering it from the realm of space and time: the Temple/heikhal is lifted up to the heavens, and the priests serving therein become the ministering angels in the supernal Temples; the sacred service in these heavenly sanctuaries is described explicitly in terms of the rituals of the earthly Temple. This metamorphosis is implemented through the terminology of Merkavah mysticism, combining the hallowed memory of ritual with creative imagination and visionary inspiration, creating a bridge between the ‘revealed’ and the ‘hidden’” (INTRODUCTION, pages 14-15). Elior attempts to show that *merkabah/hekhalot* mysticism grew out of practices described in the writings of the Qumran sect.

Refer, however, to the critical comments made about Elior’s *Three Temples* by presenters Nehemia Polen, Alan F. Segal, Jonah Steinberg, and Lawrence H. Schiffman at the 36th Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies (Chicago: December 19-21, 2004), § 4.5, HEAVENLY SECRETS AND HUMAN AUTHORITY IN THE THOUGHT OF SECTARIANS, SAGES, AND EARLY JEWISH MYSTICS, Chair: Rebecca Lesses (CDs and tapes available from Content Management Corporation, 3043 Foothill Blvd., Suite #2, La Crescenta, CA 91214: 818-857-0874). Find also the “devastating critique of most of [Elior’s] major theses” (—quoting Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, p. 14, n. 51) by Martha Himmelfarb in “Merkavah Mysticism since Scholem: Rachel Elior’s *The Three Temples,”” in *Wege Mystischer Gotteserfahrung: Judentum, Christentum und Islam / Mystical Approaches to God: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, edited by Peter Schäfer (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2006). Ironically, Elior reiterates arguments from *The Three Temples* in a paper which appears immediately before Himmelfarb’s in the same volume (see the list of Elior’s articles immediately below).


Also, see Elior’s articles


• See below, page 13: *Paradise Now*.
2005


  ‘My emphasis on the situated nature of “Merkavah mysticism” [as opposed to a “radical alternative or esoteric counterpart of ‘normative’ rabbinic Judaism”] represents, at least in part, a reaction to the scholarly literature that stems from this homogenizing tendency [which is to “routinely conflate later applications or elaborations on Heikalot texts with the Jewish ‘mystical’ or ‘magical’ literatures of Late Antiquity”]. To this end, this study aims to illuminate the particular historical circumstances and ideological motivations that led the creators of Hekhalot Rabbati to formulate their novel conception of heavenly ascent as an esoteric ritual discipline. I thereby pointedly emphasize the role of Heikhalot literature in the transformation of Jewish religious thought from its largely decentralized roots in Late Antiquity to its gradual drive towards systematization in the High Middle Ages.’ (—PREFACE, pages viii-ix)


  PART ONE, “Evolution of the Roles and Titles of the Seventh Antediluvian Hero in Mesopotamian, Enochic, and Merkabah Tradition” [Chapter Three deals primarily with Sefer Hekhalot (3 Enoch)]

  PART TWO, “Polemical (Adamic, Mosaic, and Noachic) Developments and Their Role in the Evolution of Enoch’s Roles and Titles in the Slavonic Apocalypse (= 2 Enoch)”

  Orlov fills a gap in scholarship by reintroducing the Slavonic pseudepigrapha (THE APOCALYPSE OF ABRAHAM, THE LADDER OF JACOB, and, particularly, 2 Enoch) into the progression from Second Temple apocalypticism to hekhalot literature (which progression, borrowing from Hugo Odeberg’s analysis, can be epitomized as 1 Enoch → 2 Enoch → 3 Enoch). Orlov refers to 2 Enoch as “proto-heckhalot,” which indicates, in Orlov’s assessment, the degree to which rabbinic mystical and hekhalot literature relied upon it.

2006


  Alexander treats “Heikhalot Mysticism and Qumran” in CHAPTER 5, stating,

  …comparison of Qumran mysticism with Heikhalot mysticism draws Qumran into the larger discipline of the study of Jewish mysticism, and puts it in a broader intellectual context. It is probably not unfair to say that the study of the Scrolls has been somewhat marginalized within the study of Judaism, and its significance underestimated by mainline Jewish Studies scholars (see Schiffman 1994 [Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls—noted immediately below]). … It is only recently that attempts have been made to integrate the Qumran evidence into the general history of Jewish mysticism (e.g., Elior 2004 [The Three Temples—noted above]). As we shall see, this evidence arguably challenges Scholem’s paradigm of Jewish mysticism [as in Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism—noted above], and forces a revision of it… (—pages 121-2) [my brackets—DK]

  Regarding the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and other “mystical” texts from Qumran, see


______________.


______________.


In an effort to determine the relationship of Paul’s ascent in 2 Cor. 12 to other early ascent accounts, a range of texts is considered, including 4QBerakhot and the Slavonic Enoch. Hekhalot literature, primarily Sepher Hekhalot (5 ENOCH), is discussed in Chapter 8.

Note Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones’ objections to Gooder in The Mystery of God, pages 402-404. (Mystery of God is listed below: 2009 • Rowland/Morray-Jones.)


These eighteen articles, gathered from symposia of the Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism unit of the Society of Biblical Literature conducted over a ten-year span commencing in 1995, are described in DeConick’s preface as “a pioneering volume, the first ever to collect international voices that are mapping this field of study” (page xx).

CONTENTS:
Abbreviations
PREFACE

PART 1: HERMENEUTICS AND EXPERIENCE
• Alan F. Segal, “Religious Experience and the Construction of the Transcendent Self”
• Christopher Rowland, with Patricia Gibbons and Vicente Dobronuca, “Visionary Experience in Ancient Judaism and Christianity”
• Seth L. Sanders, “Performative Exegesis”

PART 2: COMMUNAL IDENTITIES
• Rachel Elior, “The Emergence of the Mystical Traditions of the Merkabah”
• James R. Davila, “The Ancient Jewish Apocalypses and the Hekhalot Literature”
• Ra’anan S. Boustan, “Rabbi Ishmael’s Priestly Genealogy in Hekhalot Literature”

PART 3: COSMOLOGY
• Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones, “The Temple Within”
• Andrei A. Orlov, “God’s Face in the Enochic Tradition”
• Cameron A. Afzal, “Wheels of Time in the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ”
• Kevin Sullivan, “Sexuality and Gender of Angels”

PART 4: APOCALYPTICISM
• Frances Flannery-Dailey, “Lessons on Early Jewish Apocalypticism and Mysticism from Dream Literature”
• Kelley Coblenz Bautch, “Situating the Afterlife”

PART 5: PRACTICES
• Celia Deutsch, “The Therapeutae, Text Work, Ritual, and Mystical Experience”
• Andrea Lieber, “Jewish and Christian Heavenly Meal Traditions”
• Charles A. Gieschen, “Baptismal Praxis and Mystical Experience in the Book of Revelation”
• Daphna Arbel, “Divine Secrets and Divination”

2007


CHAPTER 3 “The Ethics of Gazing: The Attitude of Early Jewish Mysticism toward Seeing the Chariot; and CHAPTER 4 “Concealment and Power: Magic and Esotericism in the Hekhalot Literature.”

Toward the end of CHAPTER 4, Halbertal writes, “The fundamental unit for the transmission of esoteric oral knowledge is the family. According to the testimony of Rabbi Eleazar of Worms, the termination of his family line, as a result of the early death of his son and combined with the diminution of his students, moved him to commit the secrets of the Torah to writing. The fear of the loss of the secret as a result of the diminution of the line of transmission justified the writing down of the secret; thus, the knowledge could be passed on without relying on the continuous chain of oral tradition.” (—page 33)


In the introduction to the articles in PART TWO, Orlov writes
It should be noted that 2Enoch, the Apocalypse of Abraham, and the Ladder of Jacob represent a unique group of texts that share a theophanic and mediatorial language that, in my view, is as different from the mainstream of early apocalyptic and pseudepigraphic writings as it is from later Hekhalot materials. This group of materials gives evidence of the lost practical and literary development that could very well represent an important transitional stage in early Jewish mystical testimonies, serving as a bridge from the matrix of early Jewish Apocalypticism, as it was manifested in early Enochic literature, to the matrix of early Jewish mysticism as it became manifest in rabbinic Merkabah and Hekhalot materials. The articles gathered in this volume intend to illustrate this transitional character of the Slavonic pseudepigraphic evidence by exploring the theophanic and angelological imagery found in 2Enoch, the Ladder of Jacob, the Slavonic version of 3 Baruch and other pseudepigraphical texts preserved in Slavonic. It appears that the theophanic and angelological developments found in these documents occupy an intermediary stage between Second Temple Apocalypticism and Hekhalot mysticism and thus exhibit its own distinctive, one might say 'proto-Hekhalot,' mystical mold. (—page 105)

2009


The major divisions of this 685-page volume could form three books:

PART I  THINGS INTO WHICH ANGELS LONG TO LOOK: APPROACHING MYSTICISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE JEWISH APOCALYPTICSES (Christopher Rowland)

PART II  DIVINE NAMES, CELESTIAL SANCTUARIES, AND VISIONARY ASCENTS: APPROACHING THE NEW TESTAMENTS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MERKAVAH TRADITIONS (Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones)

—includes “A Version of Hekhalot Zutarti” (see below, § B)

PART III  THE BODY OF GLORY: APPROACHING THE NEW TESTAMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SHIUR KOMA TRADITIONS (Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones) (see notes below, § F. Shi’ur Qomah)


“Many scholars have dealt with Merkavah mysticism and its ramifications for classical rabbinic Judaism … as well as with the origins of the Kabbalah in the Book Bahir, but very few have paid full attention to the evidence of the Hebrew Bible, the apocalyptic literature, Qumran, and Philo. It is this gap between the Hebrew Bible and Merkavah mysticism that the present book wishes to address in a systematic and reflective manner.” (ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS—page XI)

In his introduction, Schäfer surveys previous research on the forerunners of Merkavah mysticism, in particular the studies of Gershom Scholem and Rachel Elior (see above, 2004 • The Three Temples). He commences with Ezekiel (CHAPTER 1), then to the Enoch literature and related material (CHAPTERS 2 and 3). The section on Qumran (CHAPTER 4) addresses “Communion with Angels” while the section on Philo (CHAPTER 5) concentrates on “The Ascent of the Soul.” CHAPTER 6, “The Rabbis I,” takes up the “Cycle of Seven Stories” from the Tosefta (the four who entered pardes, Ben Zoma on the upper and lower waters, etc.); “The Rabbis II” (CHAPTER 7) discusses the Merkavah passages in YERUSHALMI and BAVLI (the same Haggadah sections discussed by Halperin—see above, 1980 • Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature). CHAPTER 8 treats “The Merkavah Mystics,” focusing, in particular, on Hekhalot Zutarti. CHAPTER 9 offers Schäfer’s conclusions and observations.
The *Hekhalot* Corpus

The number of *hekhalot* texts in translation has grown, though very slowly, over the years. Alas, here we enter directly into the question of what *is* and what *is not* a member of the *hekhalot* family; the canons offered by various scholars differ. For instance, Schäfer’s *Synopse* includes some items which many commentators find dubious, namely, THE SWORD OF MOSES and *Seder Rabba di Bereshit*. One well-known text, THE VISIONS OF EZEKIEL, while almost always included on lists of *hekhalot* texts, is clearly of a character different from the so-called “core group.”

Discussions regarding which texts belong to the *hekhalot* canon have progressed along several lines:

1. Texts which have long been counted among the *hekhalot* are now thought not to belong, for example, THE VISIONS OF EZEKIEL.
2. Magical works, such as THE SWORD OF MOSES and *Sefer ha-Razim*, are being drawn closer to the *hekhalot*.
3. Some works are being wholly reconsidered in that they might not be works at all but rather of one genre or another, as, for instance, the *Shi’ur Qomah* and *Sar Torah* texts.

As mentioned already, even the titles of these “books” are late inventions which have become conventions, used even by the scholars who refute their validity.

Using the lists of *hekhalot* given by a number of contemporary scholars, below is a reference outline of sources on various *hekhalot* titles, erring in favor of inclusion.
The “Core Group” of *Hekhalot* Texts

§ numbers given in braces { … } are section numbers from *Synopse zur Hekhalot Literature* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1981—see note †† on page 2)

A. *Hekhalot Rabbati* [THE GREATER PALACES] (HR) {§§ 81-306}

Translations:
HR chapters 1-30, translated in the early 1940s by Morton Smith from an unpublished edition prepared by G. Scholem and C. Wisurowski; my transcription of this is now online at
2. HR chapters 15-29, prepared by Lauren Grodner, in David R. Blumenthal’s *Understanding Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1978), where it is referred to as “Pirkei Heikalot.”
3. HR chapters 1, 2, and 16-26, in Aryeh Kaplan’s *Meditation and Kabbalah* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1982).
6. HR chapters 5 and 6 {§§ 107-121} (*The Story of the Ten Martyrs up to the First Apocalypse*), “annotated translation” = APPENDIX C of Ra’anan Abusch’s dissertation, FROM MARTYR TO MYSTIC (listed above: 2005 • Boustan).

References to HR throughout the following:
- Gruenwald. AMM.
- Schäfer. HMG.
- Kuyt. DESCENT.
- Lesses. POWER.

See also
- Boustan, Ra’anan S. “Rabbi Ishmael’s Priestly Genealogy in Hekhalot Literature,” in *Paradise Now*.
- Wolfson. SPECULUM, chapter 3.

Often appended to HR in manuscripts is “The Book of the Great Name” {§§ 489-495}. For an introduction and translation, see Michael D. Swartz, “The Book of the Great Name,” in *Judaism in Practice from the Middle Ages through the Early Modern Period [PRINCETON READINGS IN RELIGIONS]*, edited by Lawrence Fine (Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press,
2001. Portions are also translated by Ihthamar Gruenwald in *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism*, pages 267-270.

**B. Hekhalot Zutarti [THE LESSER PALACES] (HZ) {§§ 335-374, 407-419}**


> The version of HekhZ that follows includes all of the material included by both Schäfer and Elior (§§ 335-374 and 407-419) plus § 375 (included by Elior but not by Schäfer) and the Akiva ‘postscript’ (422-424). § 347 (MS. Munich 40 only), where the copyist has mistakenly repeated the first words of § 337, is disregarded.

Owing to the redactional complexity of the HekhZ macroform, it cannot be claimed that this version represents an ‘original’ or ‘authoritative’ text of HekhZ. Schäfer’s contention that no such text ever existed is basically correct. It is therefore necessary to take account of the different sources and layers of literary activity found in the manuscripts, including the distinctive literary tradition represented by passages of MS. New York. It can, however, be said that the materials included in this version are the basic ingredients of the early HekhZ literary tradition, that they were amalgamated with each other in something like this form during the early centuries of the common era, and that at least some of the materials preserved in this collection must be very old indeed.

Many important passages of HZ are given in Halperin’s FACES and Schäfer’s *Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (§ HEKHALOT ZUTARTI, pages 282-306). In *Transparent Illusion*, Morray-Jones’ analyzes in detail two sections of HZ: the “ancient midrash…which includes the water vision episode” (§§ 407-412) in CHAPTER THREE, and the “throne midrash” (§§ 368-375) in CHAPTER EIGHT, section 2.

References: FACES, AMM, HMG, DESCENT, POWER, Scholem’s *Jewish Gnosticism*.

**C. Sefer Hekhalot [BOOK OF PALACES] = Hebrew Book of Enoch = 3 Enoch (3E) {§§ 1-80}**

Translations:


The back cover of Lumpkin’s *Books of Enoch* claims that “[u]ntil now, the Hebrew Book of Enoch has not been available to the general public since 1928,” showing no knowledge of either the 1973 Krav reprint of Odeberg or of Alexander’s translation within Charlesworth’s *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (1983)—which contains all three “Books of Enoch” with full scholarly treatment, pages 5-315. Lumpkin’s version of 3E is a slight reworking of Odeberg’s translation and notes.
References: AMM, HMG, POWER, and the following articles by P. S. Alexander:


Refer also to the articles in PARADISE NOW (see above, pages 13-14) by Rebecca Lesses and Daphna Arbel.

Further, see Schäfer’s Origins of Jewish Mysticism, § 3 Enoch (pages 315-327).

D. Merkabah Rabba [The Great Chariot] (MR) {§§ 655-708}

There are a few paragraphs of MR translated in Appendix One of Janowitz’ Poetics of Ascent (noted above) and Cohen’s Shi‘ur Qomah (see below: F. Shi‘ur Qomah).

With MR, we come to the first of many texts on which there is very little in English. We must turn to Schäfer’s HMG, Kuyt’s outline in DESCENT, and Lesses’ references in POWER.

Gruenwald’s chapter on MR in AMM begins with a description of material which probably does not belong to it, namely, a portion of the Sar ha-Panim (ShP, Prince of the Presence, or Countenance) {§§ 623-639}. Peter Schäfer treats ShP as an independent text in “Die Beschworung des Sar ha-Panim: Kritische Edition und Übersetzung” (The Adjuration of the Prince of the Countenance: Critical Edition and Translation), originally in Frankfurter Judaische Beiträge, vol. 6 (1978); reprinted in Schäfer’s Hekhalot-Studien. Of course, Schäfer’s translation is in German, but all is not lost. The same text has been put into English twice.

- by Michael Swartz in Scholastic Magic (described above, page 8) on pp. 136-142.

Further, Lesses discusses ShP in numerous places and outlines its contents in POWER, pp. 415-17.

E. Ma‘aseh Merkabah [Work of the Chariot] (MM) {§§ 544-596}

Translations:

- Janowitz, Naomi. The Poetics of Ascent.
- Swartz, Michael. Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism.
- Dan, The Heart and the Fountain, CHAPTER 2:
  §§ 554-555 (= Janowitz’ Section 6; Swartz’ pages 231-233)
  §§ 583-586 (= Janowitz’ Sections 24-26; Swartz’ pages 242-243)

References: Along with the two books listed under “Translations,” which both offer an analysis of the text, see AMM, HMG, POWER, and Daniel Abrams, “Ma‘aseh Merkabah as a Literary Work: The Reception of the Hekhalot Traditions by German Pietist and Kabbalistic Reinterpretation,” in Jewish Studies Quarterly, Volume 5, No. 4 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1998). Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones translates a passage from MM (Scholem’s
Gnosticism...APPENDIX C: § 6 / Schäfer's Synopse §§ 544-45) in his article “The Temple Within” (in PARADISE NOW, page 161).

F. Shi'ur Qomah [MEASURE OF THE HEIGHT {of the Divine Body}] (SQ)

David Halperin suggests (FACES, p. 364) that SQ “probably ought to be considered a generic term for materials describing God’s organs rather than a single texts.” Martin S. Cohen (in his book listed below) holds out for SQ’s having been an independent, freestanding work, complete with a lost urtext looming in back of the extant versions. SQ has been included here in the “Core Group” because nearly all of the texts already discussed contain SQ material: HR, HZ, 3E, and MR.

Translators:

This translation is online at the WORK OF THE CHARIOT site: http://www.workofthechariot.com/TextFiles/Translations-ShirQoma.html

References: Scholem’s Jewish Gnosticism and Mystical Shape of the Godhead (New York: Schocken Books, 1991). Further, see:
- Morray-Jones, Christopher R. A. THE BODY OF GLORY: APPROACHING THE NEW TESTAMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SHIUR KOMAH TRADITIONS, which is Part III of The Mystery of God (see above, 2009 • Rowland/Morray-Jones)
- Schäfer’s Origins of Jewish Mysticism, § SHI’UR QOMAH (pages 306-315)
Texts Associated with the *Hekhalot* Corpus

The texts listed in the following set are those which are usually included in summaries and lists of *hekhalot* literature.

G. *Re'uyot Yehezkiel* [VISIONS OF EZEKIEL] (RY)

Translations:
- Halperin, David. FACES: Chapter VIII, § A.

References: The best source for information on RY is Halperin’s FACES.

H. *Masekhet Hekhalot* [TREATISE OF THE PALACES] (MH)

Gruenwald’s chapter (AMM) on MH begins with these encouraging words: “*Masekhet Hekhalot* is the most frequently published Hekhalot text we have.” Alas, this comment reflects the state of the text in Hebrew, though there are two German translations: (i) by August Wunsche in *Aus Israelis Lehrhallen* III (1909); and (ii) by Klaus Herrmann, *Massakhet Hekhalot: Edition, Übersetzung und Kommentar* [TEXTE UND STUDIEN ZUM ANTIKEN JUDENTUM, 39], Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1994. There is also a French translation by Nicolas Sed within his “Deux documents sur la kabbale: Le Commentaire sur le Sepher Yesirah de Moise ben Nahman et le Traite des Heykalot,” in *Documents oubliés sur l’alchimie, la kabbale et Guillaume Postel*, offerts, a l’occasion de son 90e anniversaire, a François Secret par ses eleves et amis, “Scientific editor”: Sylvain Matton (Geneva: Librarie Droz, 2001).

I. *Hekhalot* fragments, or Cairo Geniza(h) fragments (CG)

In 1968-9, Gruenwald published (in Hebrew) “New Passages from Hekhalot Literature,” in *Tarbiz*, vol. 38, no. 4; these were the newly-discovered Geniza fragments. They have been published subsequently in Peter Schäfer’s *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (see note 9 above, page 3). Beyond Gruenwald’s remarks in AMM, see FACES, DESCENT, POWER, Swartz’ *Scholastic Magic*, and Jonathan Seidel’s article, “Possession and Exorcism in the Magical Texts of the Cairo Geniza,” in *Spirit Possession in Judaism: Cases and Contexts from the Middle Ages to the Present*, edited by Matt Goldish (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003).

J. Fragments on Physiognomy, Chiromancy, and Metoposcopy

A number of these fragments have been published by Gruenwald (in *Tarbiz*, vol. 40, 1970) and Scholem (in *Sefer Assaf*, Jerusalem: 1953), in Hebrew. One fragment is discussed and translated into German by Schäfer in “Ein neues Fragment zur Metopskopie und Chiromantik” (in *Hekhalot-Studien*). Not only is there nothing of these texts in English translation, but Gruenwald (in AMM) never really gets around to detailing their contents. See Scholem’s article, “Chiromancy,” in *Kabbalah*. 

22
The list of *hekhalot* texts up to this point contains all items listed by Scholem in *Jewish Gnosticism* (pp. 5-7), plus the Genizah fragments which Gruenwald includes in his account in AMM. Gruenwald also adds

K. *Sefer ha-Razim* [BOOK OF THE MYSTERIES] (ShR)

Translation:


References:

- AMM

The following items are frequently associated with the *hekhalot* cluster:

L. *Baraita de Ma'aseh Bereshit, OR Seder Rabban di Bereshit* [TEACHING ON THE WORK OF CREATION, OR GREAT ORDER OF CREATION] (BMB) {§§ 428-467, §§ 743-820}

Translation:


References:

M. *Harba de Moshe* [SWORD OF MOSES] (HdM) {§§ 598-622, §§ 640-650}

Translation:

Reference:

N. *Ottiyot* [ALPHABET] of Rabbi Akiba (ORA)

Translations (excerpts):

O. *Sar ha-Panim* [PRINCE OF THE PRESENCE, or COUNTENANCE] (ShP) {§§ 623-639}

Refer to § D above (MR); further, see
- POWER, pp. 190-203 and numerous other references.

P. *Tosefta* to the *Targum* on Ezekiel (TE)

See Halperin’s FACES, pp. 278-283.
A Selection of Books & Articles


*Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, Volume VI, contains a substantial English Section. See the articles listed in the current paper under

- Chernus (“Pilgrimage…”)
- Goldberg (“Quotations…”)
- Grözinger (“The Names of God…”)
- Halperin (“A Sexual Image…”)
- Hayman (“Sefer Yesira…”)
- Schläuter (“The Eulogy…”)
- van Uchelen (“Tosephta Megillah III, 28…”)


Herrmann, Klaus. “Jewish Mysticism in the Geonic Period: The Prayer of Rav Hammuna Sava,” in *Jerusalem Studies Between the Disciplines: Papers in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of


Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought—see “Dan, Joseph (ed.)”


________. “Mystical Descents” in

- *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, edited by J. Collins and M. Fishbane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); and

Appendix 1: Hekhalot Literature & Magic*

With the inclusion of such items as Sefer ha-Razim, the SWORD OF MOSES, and the Sar ba-Panim material in clusters of texts associated with merkabah/hekhalot mysticism, Jewish magic takes several steps closer to the rabbinic core of these traditions. Certainly, the convenient notion of a neat separation between ascent texts and magic texts can no longer be sustained. Of late, the tendency among scholars is to dismiss such loaded terms as “magic” (a negative term—vs “theurgy” or “religion,” positive terms) and “mysticism” to concentrate on the methods and aims of Jewish, usually along with early Christian and pagan (Greco-Roman), rituals and how these reflect the mindset and beliefs of their eras. On this trend, see, for example, Rebecca Macy Lesses’ Ritual Practices to Gain Power (summary statement on pages 11-13), James R. Davila’s Descenders to the Chariot (CHAPTER 2 discusses the difficulties of the words “mysticism,” “magic,” and “shamanism”), and Naomi Janowitz’ Icons of Power (INTRODUCTION).

To begin an approach to antique Jewish magic, refer to the following:


* A bibliography of Jewish magic, which is far more extensive than mine here (and not limited to English sources), has been prepared by Alex Jassen, Mary Gates, Jacob Rennaker, and Scott Noegel of University of Washington—online at http://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/JewishMagicBibliography.pdf. Works are divided according to period and topic.
Jewish Magic—A Selection of Sources


Ben-Amos, Dan. “On Demons,” in Creation and Re-Creation in Jewish Thought (see immediately above).


- VOLUME 1, pp. 338-55, “Wisdom of the Chaldeans”
- VOLUME 1, pp. 365-68, “A Note on a Hebrew Amulet”
- VOLUME 1, pp. 387-461, “Samaritan Phylacteries and Amulets”
- VOLUME 2, pp. 1005-38, “Two Thousand Years of a Charm against a Child-Stealing Witch”

Goldin, Judah. “The Magic of Magic and Superstition,” in Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity, edited by E. S. Fiorenza (University of Notre Dame, 1976); and


Goldmerstein, L. “Magical Sacrifices in the Jewish Kabbala,” in Folklore 7 (1896; includes a translated extract of Sefer Raziel Hamalakh).


Hirschman, Jack. The Book of Noa [TREE TEXTS: 1]. Berkeley: Berkeley/Tree, 1975 (selections, including two hymns, from Sefer Raziel).


———. “A Note on Some Jewish Assimilationists: The Angels (P. Berlin 5025b, P. Louvre 2391)” in Journal of the Ancient Near East Society, 16-17 (1984); and (idem) Studies in the Cult of Yahweh, Volume 2 (see above)

Societas Magica Newsletter, Issue 10, Spring 2003 (—online at http://www.societasmagica.org/): JEWISH MAGIC: A PERPECTIVES SYMPOSIUM, which contains the following articles:

- Swartz, Michael D. “A Magic All Its Own”
- Lesses, Rebecca. “Jewish Magic and Multiculturalism in the Ancient World”
- Kanarfogel, Ephraim. “Magic in the Rabbinic Culture of Medieval Ashkenaz”

Societas Magica Newsletter, Issue 19, Spring 2008 (—online at http://www.societasmagica.org/) which contains


Appendix 2

THE 1982 VERSION OF

Notes on the Study of Merkabah Mysticism
and Hekhalot Literature

pages 37-40

Additions from the slightly expanded version in Collected Articles on the Kabbalah,
volume 1, by D. Karr (Ithaca: KoM #5, 1985), pages 17-20, are shown in brackets.

1. Merkabah mysticism is the name of a mystical movement within
Judaism’s Talmudic and Gaonic Periods (ca. 100-1000 c. e.).
This school produced what is called the Hekhalot literature.

2. This mysticism, ma’aseh merkabah (work of the chariot), is
mentioned in the Mishna itself (in Hagigah 2:1):

   The work of creation (ma’aseh bereshit) may not be
   expounded in the presence of two or more. The description
   of the chariot (merkabah) may not be expounded even in the
   presence of one, unless he is a sage who already under-
   stands out of his own insights.
   (quoted from Lipman, Eugene. THE MISHNAH, ORAL TEACHING
   OF JUDAISM. [New York:] Schocken, 1974, p. 150)

3. Implied in this quote is that merkabah mysticism, though
   guarded, was not outside of the rabbinic tradition. One gets
   the impression that it was even thought of as the supreme
   mystery.

4. Just as the work of creation comprised mystical speculation on
   the first part of Genesis, work of the chariot comprised
   mystical speculation on, and amplification of, the first
   chapter of Ezekiel.

5. The literature of this school describes the mystical journey
   through various heavens and palaces (hekhalot) leading to the
   ultimate vision of the throne and chariot, and, in some cases,
   “the figure in the form of a man” (Ezekiel 1:26).

6. It is not the purpose of this short paper to go into detail
   about the development of the merkabah school or the contents
   of the Hekhalot texts. To a greater extent than I am capable,
   this work has already been done. My purpose is to inform the
   reader of where to look for information on the various facets
   of study pertaining to merkabah mysticism. I have limited
   myself to English sources.
7. Historical and scholarly overviews: as it is with any study in the field of Jewish mysticism, the best place to start the investigation of merkabah mysticism is in the works of Gershom Scholem. Two of his works give excellent synopses of the subject:

MAJOR TRENDS IN JEWISH MYSTICISM (1941, Schocken repr.)

KABBALAH (1974, Meridian repr.) pp. 8-21, and article:
Merkabah Mysticism, pp. 373-6.

For a closer look at some of the topics and scholarly concerns in merkabah mysticism, see Scholem’s

JEWISH Gnosticism, MERKABAH MYSTICISM, AND TALMUDIC TRADITION (1965, Jewish Theological Seminary).

KABBALAH (as above), articles:
Meditation, pp. 369-72.
Metatron, pp. 377-81.

8. There are a few articles and one book that analyze the connections of merkabah mysticism with the rabbinic (i.e. Talmudic, etc.) tradition:

Talmudic “work of the chariot” segments are translated and introduced.

Halperin, David J. THE MERKABAH IN RABBINIC LITERATURE. (1980, American Oriental Society)
This is a close scholarly analysis of the references to merkabah mysticism in the Mishna: Hagigah 2:1, the Tosefta: Hagigah 2:1-7, the Palestinian Talmud 77a-d, and the Babylonian Talmud 11b-16a.

This takes a look at the strange case of Rabbi Simeon ben Zoma, who entered into PRDS (paradise) but came out of it “stricken.”

Four versions of the story of Yohanan ben Zakkai and the merkabah-sermon of his disciple Eleazer ben Arakh are presented and compared to demonstrate that such a story accumulates more and more detail as it passes from earlier to later versions.
9. In JEWISH Gnosticism... Scholem lists eight texts belonging to the Hekhalot literature. I shall list them here, adding one (Shiur Qoma), indicating research sources, if any exist:

a) The Visions of Ezekiel, a mystical midrash on Ezekiel 1:1, see:

Jacobs, Louis. JEWISH MYSTICAL TESTIMONIES (1977, Schocken) Chapter Three: The Riders of the Chariot and Those Who Enter the Heavenly Halls. Introduction and text of Visions...


b) The Lesser Hekhalot, possibly the oldest. In English, there are only spot translations in Scholem’s JEWISH Gnosticism... and MAJOR TRENDS...

c) The Greater Hekhalot, the best covered of the texts for our purposes. Besides spot translations (see Scholem as listed in b) there are


[Kaplan, Aryeh. MEDITATION AND KABBALAH. (1982, Weiser) pp. 41-54. Kaplan introduces the Greater Hekhalot and translates Chapters 1, 2, and 16-26.]

Schiffman, Lawrence. The Recall of Rabbi Nehuniah ha-Qanah from Ecstasy in the Hekhalot Rabbati, in AJS REVIEW vol I, 1976. In Hekhalot Rabbati, R. Nehuniah is pulled out of his ecstasy by his disciples by making him ever-so-slightly ritually impure. This tale is given scholarly treatment in Schiffman’s article.


(M. Smith has translated The Greater Hekhalot in its entirety, but it has not been published. Indeed, it exists, as far as I know, in typescript, with corrections jotted in the margins and scribbled over the text by Gershom Scholem.)

d) Merkabah Rabbah. I know of no English sources for this.
e) A titleless Hekhalot. Scholem gives a transcription of this text in Hebrew in an appendix to JEWISH Gnosticism..., but I know of no other sources for information on this.

f) Chapter on physiognomics and chiromancy, published in Hebrew by Scholem, but no English translation. See, however, Scholem’s article: Chiromancy in Kabballah.

g) Book of the Hekhalot, called also 3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch. One of the latest of the texts. Full scholarly treatment and translation of this appear in

Odeberg, Hugo. 3 Enoch or The Hebrew Book of Enoch (1928, Ktav repr. [1973])

h) The Treatise of the Hekhalot, the latest of the texts. Published, and translated into German, but not into English.

i) Shiur Qoma, a strange treatise listing the dimensions and secret names of the deity’s various members. See


For scholarly studies on Shiur Qoma, see

Loewe, Raphael. The Divine Garment and Shi’ur Qomah, in Harvard Theological Review 58 (1965)

Scholem. JEWISH Gnosticism... (as above) chapter VI: The Age of Shiur Komah Speculation and a passage in Origen.

A 14th-century commentary on Shiur Qoma by Moses b. Joshua b. Mar David of Narbonne is translated in


Shiur Qoma’s symbolism is based on the details of “the beloved” in Song of Songs 5:11-16. The basis of the dimensions given is derived from Psalm 147:5; since the phrase in that passage adds up to 236, via gematria, this is the root of Shiur Qoma’s calculations.