

## SECOND LECTURE

### MERKABAH MYSTICISM AND JEWISH GNOSTICISM

#### 1

The first phase in the development of Jewish mysticism before its crystallization in the mediaeval Kabbalah is also the longest. Its literary remains are traceable over a period of almost a thousand years, from the first century B.C. to the tenth A.D., and some of its important records have survived. In spite of its length, and notwithstanding the fluctuations of the historical process, there is every justification for treating it as a single distinct phase. Between the physiognomy of early Jewish mysticism and that of mediaeval Kabbalism there is a difference which time has not effaced. It is not my intention here to follow the movement through its various stages, from its early beginnings in the period of the Second Temple to its gradual decline and disappearance. To do so would involve a lengthy excursion into historical and philological detail, much of which has not yet been sufficiently clarified. What I propose to do is to analyze the peculiar realm of religious experience which is reflected in the more important documents of the period. I do not, therefore, intend to give much space to hypotheses concerning the origins of Jewish mysticism and its relation to Graeco-Oriental syncretism, fascinating though the subject be. Nor am I going to deal with the many pseudepigraphic and apocalyptic works such as the Ethiopic Book of Enoch and the Fourth Book of Ezra, which undoubtedly contain elements of Jewish mystical religion. Their influence on the subsequent development of Jewish mysticism cannot be overlooked, but in the main I shall confine myself to the analysis of writings to which little attention has hitherto been given in the literature on Jewish religious history.

In turning our attention to this subject, we are at once made aware of the unfortunate fact that practically nothing is known

about those who espoused the oldest organized movement of Jewish mysticism in late Talmudic and post-Talmudic times, i.e. the period from which the most illuminating documents have come down to us. Like the authors of the Biblical Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, they have generally followed the practice of concealing their identity behind the great names of the past. There is little hope that we shall ever learn the true identity of the men who were the first to make an attempt, still recognizable and describable, to invest Judaism with the glory of mystical splendor.

It is only by accident that certain names from among the mystics of the later period have been preserved. Thus we hear of Joseph ben Abba who was head of the rabbinical academy of Pumbeditha around 814, and who is said to have been versed in mystical lore.<sup>1</sup> Another name which occurs with some frequency is that of Aaron ben Samuel, of Baghdad, the "father of mysteries." Although his individuality disappears behind an iridescent haze of legends there is no doubt that he was instrumental in bringing a knowledge of the mystical tradition, such as it had by that time become in Mesopotamia, to Southern Italy, and thence to the Jews of Europe.<sup>2</sup> But these are men of the ninth century, that is to say of a time when this particular form of mysticism was already fully developed and, in certain respects, even on the decline. For its classical period, approximately from the fourth to the sixth century, we are left completely in the dark as to the leading figures. It is true that we know the names of some of the Talmudic authorities of the fourth century who made a study of the secret doctrine—men like Rava and his contemporary, Aha ben Jacob—but we have no means of knowing whether they were in any way connected with the groups of Jewish gnostics whose writings are in our hands.

Palestine was the cradle of the movement, that much is certain. We also know the names of the most important representatives of mystical and theosophical thought among the teachers of the Mishnah. They belonged to a group of the pupils of Johanan ben Zakkai, around the turn of the first century A.D. There is good reason to believe that important elements of this spiritual tradition were kept alive in small esoteric circles; the writers who, at the end of the Talmudic epoch, attempted a synthesis of their new religious faith and thereby laid the foundations of an entirely new literature, appear to have received important suggestions from this quarter.

As we have seen, these writers no longer appear under their own names, but under those of Johanan ben Zakkai, Eliezer ben Hyrkanus, Akiba ben Joseph, and Ishmael the "High Priest." These authentic personages are at the same time introduced as the chief characters of their writings, the "heroes" of mystical action, the keepers and trustees of secret wisdom. Not all of this is mere romancing, but it is impossible to treat the bulk of it as authentic. A good deal undoubtedly pertains to later stages of development in which older motifs have acquired a new significance or revealed new aspects. If the roots in many cases go far back, they do not necessarily go back to these orthodox rabbinic teachers of the Mishnaic period. Subterranean but effective, and occasionally still traceable, connections exist between these later mystics and the groups which produced a large proportion of the pseudepigrapha and apocalypses of the first century before and after Christ. Subsequently a good deal of this unrecognized tradition made its way to later generations independent of, and often in isolation from, the schools and academies of the Talmudic teachers.

We know that in the period of the Second Temple an esoteric doctrine was already taught in Pharisaic circles. The first chapter of Genesis, the story of Creation (*Maaseh Bereshith*), and the first chapter of Ezekiel, the vision of God's throne-chariot (the "Merkabah"), were the favorite subjects of discussion and interpretation which it was apparently considered inadvisable to make public. Originally these discussions were restricted to the elucidation and exposition of the respective Biblical passages.<sup>4</sup> Thus St. Jerome in one of his letters mentions a Jewish tradition which forbids the study of the beginning and the end of the Book of Ezekiel before the completion of the thirtieth year.<sup>5</sup> It seems probable, however, that speculation did not remain restricted to commentaries on the Biblical text. The *hayoth*, the "living creatures", and other objects of Ezekiel's vision were conceived as angels who form an angelologic hierarchy at the Celestial Court. As long as our knowledge is confined to the meagre fragmentary material scattered across different parts of the Talmud and the Midrashim we shall probably be unable to say how much of this was mystical and theosophical speculation in the strict sense. It is a well-known fact that the editor of the Mishnah, the patriarch Jehudah "the Saint," a pronounced rationalist, did all he could to exclude references to the Merkabah,

the angelology, etc. A good deal of this material has been preserved in a second Mishnah collection, the so-called Tosefta, and it is from this and from other fragments that we are able to draw some inferences concerning the character of these speculations.

Our task in this respect would undoubtedly be considerably facilitated if we could be sure that certain apocryphal works written around similar themes, such as the Book of Enoch or the Apocalypse of Abraham—to mention only some of the most outstanding—reproduce the essentials of the esoteric doctrine taught by the teachers of the Mishnah; but it is precisely here that we are left in the dark. Although an immense literature has grown up on the subject of these apocrypha, the truth is that no one knows for certain to what extent they reflect views shared by Mishnaic authorities. Be that as it may—and even granted that it may be possible to trace the influence of the Essenes in some of these writings—one fact remains certain: the main subjects of the later Merkabah mysticism already occupy a central position in this oldest esoteric literature, best represented by the Book of Enoch. The combination of apocalyptic with theosophy and cosmogony is emphasized almost to excess: “Not only have the seers perceived the celestial hosts, heaven with its angels, but the whole of this apocalyptic and pseudepigraphic literature is shot through with a chain of new revelations concerning the hidden glory of the great Majesty, its throne, its palace . . . the celestial spheres towering up one over the other, paradise, hell, and the containers of the souls.”—This is entirely correct and by itself sufficient to prove the essential continuity of thought concerning the Merkabah in all its three stages: the anonymous conventicles of the old apocalyptics; the Merkabah speculation of the Mishnaic teachers who are known to us by name; and the Merkabah mysticism of late and post-Talmudic times, as reflected in the literature which has come down to us. We are dealing here with a religious movement of distinctive character whose existence conclusively disproves the old prejudice according to which all the productive religious energies of early apocalyptic were absorbed by and into Christianity after the latter’s rise.

What was the central theme of these oldest of mystical doctrines within the framework of Judaism? No doubts are possible on this

point: the earliest Jewish mysticism is throne-mysticism. Its essence is not absorbed contemplation of God's true nature, but perception of His appearance on the throne, as described by Ezekiel, and cognition of the mysteries of the celestial throne-world. The throne-world is to the Jewish mystic what the *pleroma*, the "fullness", the bright sphere of divinity with its potencies, aeons, archons and dominions is to the Hellenistic and early Christian mystics of the period who appear in the history of religion under the names of Gnostics and Hermetics. The Jewish mystic, though guided by motives similar to theirs, nevertheless expresses his vision in terms of his own religious background. God's pre-existing throne, which embodies and exemplifies all forms of creation,<sup>9</sup> is at once the goal and the theme of his mystical vision. From the fourteenth chapter of the Ethiopic Book of Enoch, which contains the oldest description of the throne in the whole of this literature, a long succession of mystical documents of the most varied character<sup>9</sup> leads to the ecstatic descriptions of the throne-world in the tracts of the Merkabah visionaries to which we must now turn our attention. From the interpretation of the throne-world as the true centre of all mystical contemplation it is possible to deduce most of the concepts and doctrines of these ancient mystics. The following is therefore an excursion through the manifold variations on the one theme which forms their common point of departure.

The outstanding documents of the movement appear to have been edited in the fifth and sixth centuries when its spirit was still alive and vigorous. It is difficult to establish exact dates for the various writings, but everything points to the period before the expansion of Islam.<sup>10</sup> The world reflected in this literature has evoked in the mind of more than one scholar comparisons with the pattern of Byzantine society. But there is no reason for assuming that the descriptions of the celestial throne and the heavenly court simply reflect the mundane reality of the Byzantine or Sassanid court, if only because the roots of their central theme go much too far back for such an hypothesis. At the same time there can be no reasonable doubt that the atmosphere of these writings is in harmony with contemporary political and social conditions.

All our material is in the form of brief tracts, or scattered fragments of varying length from what may have been voluminous works; in addition there is a good deal of almost shapeless literary

raw material. Much of this literature has not yet been published,<sup>11</sup> and the history of many texts still await clarification. Most of the tracts are called "Hekhaloth Books," i. e., descriptions of the *hekhaloth*, the heavenly halls or palaces through which the visionary passes and in the seventh and last of which there rises the throne of divine glory. One of them, whose title, "Book of Enoch", appears to belong to a very late period, was edited in 1928 by the Swedish scholar Hugo Odeberg.<sup>12</sup> Of still greater importance than this book are the so-called "Greater Hekhaloth" and "Lesser Hekhaloth". The Hebrew text of both tracts is available unfortunately only in very corrupt editions<sup>13</sup> which still await a critical edition as much as a translation. If this task were undertaken, a good deal of light would be thrown on a startling and remarkable chapter in the history of ancient Gnosticism. In the present context, with our chief interest restricted to the ideas of the mystics who were the authors of these writings, there is no room for a discussion of the rather intricate questions connected with the probable origin and composition of these texts. My own views on this subject are rather different from the very scholarly interpretation put forward by Odeberg.

The so-called "Third Book of Enoch," which Odeberg attributes to the third century, appears to me to belong to a later period than the "Greater Hekhaloth."<sup>14</sup> The latter in their turn come after the "Lesser Hekhaloth," the oldest text available to us,<sup>15</sup> in which Rabbi Akiba appears as the principal speaker. The texts of the "Greater Hekhaloth", with Rabbi Ishmael as the speaker, are made up of several different strata. They even include a compilation of materials—particularly in chapters 17 to 23—which go back in part to the second century; but in their present form, including certain apocalyptic revelations, they can hardly have been edited before the sixth. Generally speaking, these documents reflect different stages of development, although some of them may have coexisted with others. A good deal of precious old material is whirled along in this stream; not a few allusions to ideas apparently common in these circles have no meaning for us. But what interests us chiefly, the spiritual physiognomy and the religious mentality of these groups, is clear and understandable enough.

In this connection one important point is to be noted: the most important of these old tracts and compilations, such as the "Greater"

and "Lesser" Hekhaloth, are precisely those which are almost entirely free from the exegetical element. These texts are not Midrashim, i.e. expositions of Biblical passages, but a literature *sui generis* with a purpose of its own. They are essentially descriptions of a genuine religious experience for which no sanction is sought in the Bible. In short, they belong in one class with the apocrypha and the apocalyptic writings rather than with the traditional Midrash. It is true that the vision of the celestial realm which forms their main theme originally proceeded from an attempt to transform what is casually alluded to in the Bible into direct personal experience; similarly, the basic categories of thought which appear in the description of the Merkabah are derived from the same Biblical source. But for all that, one meets here with an entirely new and independent spiritual and religious mood; only in the later stages of the movement, probably corresponding with its gradual decline, do the writings show a return to exegesis for its own sake.

The descriptions given to the contemplation of God's "Glory" and the celestial throne employ a terminology which has varied in the course of the centuries. In the period of the Mishnah, reference is usually made to a theosophic "Study of the Glory" or an "Understanding of the Glory";<sup>10</sup> we even find the curious term "Employment of the Glory," in connection with Rabbi Akiba, who was found worthy of it.<sup>11</sup> Later, the Hekhaloth tracts usually speak of the "Vision of the Merkabah."<sup>12</sup> The sphere of the throne, the "Merkabah," has its "chambers,"<sup>13</sup> and, later on, its "palaces" — a conception foreign to Ezekiel and the earlier writers generally. According to an Aggadic tradition from the fourth century, Isaac had a vision on Moriah, at the moment when Abraham was about to perform the sacrifice, in which his soul perceived the "Chambers of the Merkabah."<sup>14</sup> At different times the visionary experience was also interpreted differently. In the early literature, the writers always speak of an "ascent to the Merkabah," a pictorial analogy which has come to seem natural to us. The "Lesser Hekhaloth"<sup>15</sup> emphasize this "ascent", and the same term recurs in a few out-of-the-way passages of the "Greater Hekhaloth,"<sup>16</sup> and in the introduction to the "Book of Enoch". But for reasons which have become obscure, the whole terminology had in the meantime undergone a change—it is difficult to say exactly when, probably around 500. In the "Greater Hekhaloth," which are of such importance for our

analysis, and from then on in almost all the later writings, the visionary journey of the soul to heaven is always referred to as the "descent to the Merkabah." The paradoxical character of this term is all the more remarkable because the detailed description of the mystical process nonetheless consistently employs the metaphor of ascent and not of descent. The mystics of this group call themselves *Yorde Merkabah*, i. e. "descenders to the Merkabah" (and not "Riders in the Chariot," as some translators would have it),<sup>28</sup> and this name is also given to them by others throughout the whole literature down to a late period. The authors of the "Greater Hekhaloth" refer to the existence of these *Yorde Merkabah* as a group with some sort of organization and identify them in the usual legendary fashion with the circle of Johanan ben Zakkai and his disciples. Since the "Greater Hekhaloth" contain Palestinian as well as Babylonian elements—the earliest chapters in particular bear unmistakable traces, in their subject-matter as well as their style, of Palestinian influence—it is not inconceivable that the organization of these groups did indeed take place in late Talmudic times (fourth or fifth century) on Palestinian soil. As a matter of ascertained fact, however, we only know of their existence in Babylonia, from where practically all mystical tracts of this particular variety made their way to Italy and Germany; it is these tracts that have come down to us in the form of manuscripts written in the late Middle Ages.

To repeat, we are dealing with organized groups which foster and hand down a certain tradition: with a *school* of mystics who are not prepared to reveal their secret knowledge, their 'Gnosis,' to the public. Too great was the danger, in this period of ubiquitous Jewish and Christian heresies, that mystical speculation based on private religious experience would come into conflict with that "rabbinical" Judaism which was rapidly crystallizing during the same epoch.<sup>29</sup> The "Greater Hekhaloth" show in many and often highly interesting details<sup>30</sup> that their anonymous authors were anxious to develop their 'Gnosis' within the frame-work of Halakhic Judaism, notwithstanding its partial incompatibility with the new religious spirit; the original religious impulses active in these circles came, after all, from sources quite different from those of orthodox Judaism.

One result of this peculiar situation was the establishment of



certain *conditions of admission* into the circle of the Merkabah mystics. The Talmudic sources already mention certain stipulations, albeit of a very general character, in accordance with which admission to the knowledge of theosophical doctrines and principles is made conditional on the possession of certain moral qualities. Only a "court president" or one belonging to the categories of men named in Isaiah III, 3 is found worthy of obtaining insight into the tradition of Merkabah mysticism. Chapter 13 of the "Greater Hekhaloth" lists eight moral requisites of initiation. In addition, however, we find physical criteria which have nothing to do with the moral or social status of the acolyte; in particular the novice is judged in accordance with physiognomic and chiromantic criteria—a novel procedure which appears to have been stimulated by the renaissance of Hellenistic physiognomics in the second century A.D.

Apart from being a criterion for the admission of novices,<sup>28</sup> physiognomy and chiromancy also figure in Hekhaloth mysticism as a subject of esoteric knowledge among the adepts. It is therefore not surprising that several manuscripts have retained a sort of introduction in the form of a chiromantic fragment<sup>29</sup>—incidentally the oldest chiromantic document known to us, since no Assyrian or Graeco-Roman texts of this kind have been preserved.<sup>30</sup> This preamble to the other Hekhaloth books interprets the significance of the favorable or unfavorable lines of the human hand, without reference to astrology but on the basis of a fixed terminology which to us is frequently obscure. One is perhaps justified in regarding the appearance of these new criteria as a parallel to the growth of neo-Platonic mysticism in the Orient during the fourth century. (It is characteristic of this period that Jamblichus, in his biography of Pythagoras—a book which throws a good deal more light on the period of its writing than on its subject-matter—asserts that entry into the Pythagorean school was conditional upon the possession of certain physiognomic characteristics.<sup>31</sup>) The above mentioned fragment, in which the angel Suriyah reveals to Ishmael—one of the two principal figures of our Hekhaloth tracts—the secrets of chiromancy and physiognomy, has a title taken from Isaiah III, 9: *Hakkarath Panim*, i. e. "perception of the face," and in fact this passage from Isaiah first received a physiognomic interpretation in the fourth century, as a Talmudic reference to the subject shows.<sup>32</sup>

## 3

Those who passed the test were considered worthy to make the "descent" to the Merkabah which led them, after many trials and dangers, through the seven heavenly palaces, and before that through the heavens, their preparation, their technique, and the description of what is perceived on the voyage, are the subject-matter of the writings with which we are concerned.

Originally, we have here a Jewish variation on one of the chief preoccupations of the second and third century gnostics and hermetics: the ascent of the soul from the earth, through the spheres of the hostile planet-angels and rulers of the cosmos, and its return to its divine home in the "fullness" of God's light, a return which, to the gnostic's mind, signified Redemption. Some scholars consider this to be the central idea of Gnosticism.<sup>31</sup> Certainly the description of this journey, of which a particularly impressive account is found in the second part of the "Greater Hekhaloth,"<sup>32</sup> is in all its details of a character which must be called gnostic.

This mystical ascent is always preceded by ascetic practices whose duration in some cases is twelve days, in others forty. An account of these practices was given about 1000 A.D. by Hai ben Sherira, the head of a Babylonian academy. According to him, "many scholars were of the belief that one who is distinguished by many qualities described in the books and who is desirous of beholding the Merkabah and the palaces of the angels on high, must follow a certain procedure. He must fast a number of days and lay his head between his knees and whisper many hymns and songs whose texts are known from tradition. Then he perceives the interior and the chambers, as if he saw the seven palaces with his own eyes, and it is as though he entered one palace after the other and saw what is there."<sup>33</sup> The typical bodily posture of these ascetics is also that of Elijah in his prayer on Mount Carmel. It is an attitude of deep self-oblivion which, to judge from certain ethnological parallels, is favorable to the induction of pre-hypnotic autosuggestion. Dennys<sup>34</sup> gives a very similar description of a Chinese somnambulist in the act of conjuring the spirits of the departed: "She sits down on a low chair and bends forward so that her head rests on her knees. Then, in a deep measured voice, she repeats three times an exorcism, whereupon a certain change appears to come

over her." In the Talmud, too, we find this posture described as typical of the self-oblivion of a Hanina ben Dosa sunk in prayer, or of a penitent who gives himself over to God.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, after such preparations, and in a state of ecstasy, the adept begins his journey. The "Greater Hekhaloth" do not describe the details of his ascent through the seven heavens, but they do describe his voyage through the seven palaces situated in the highest heaven. The place of the gnostical rulers (archons) of the seven planetary spheres, who are opposed to the liberation of the soul from its earthly bondage and whose resistance the soul must overcome, is taken in this Judaized and monotheistic Gnosticism by the hosts of "gate-keepers" posted to the right and left of the entrance to the heavenly hall through which the soul must pass in its ascent. In both cases, the soul requires a pass in order to be able to continue its journey without danger: a magic seal made of a secret name which puts the demons and hostile angels to flight. Every new stage of the ascension requires a new seal with which the traveller "seals himself" in order that, to quote a fragment, "he shall not be dragged into the fire and the flame, the vortex and the storm which are around Thee, oh Thou terrible and sublime."<sup>36</sup> The "Greater Hekhaloth" have preserved a quite pedantic description of this passport procedure;<sup>37</sup> all the seals and the secret names are derived from the Merkabah itself where they "stand like pillars of flame around the fiery throne" of the Creator.<sup>38</sup>

It is the soul's need for protection on its journey which has produced these seals with their twin function as a protective armour and as a magical weapon. At first the magical protection of a single seal may be sufficient, but as time goes on the difficulties experienced by the adept tend to become greater. A brief and simple formula is no longer enough. Sunk in his ecstatic trance, the mystic at the same time experiences a sense of frustration which he tries to overcome by using longer and more complicated magical formulae, symbols of a longer and harder struggle to pass the closed entrance gates which block his progress. As his psychical energy wanes the magical strain grows and the conjuring gesture becomes progressively more strained, until in the end whole pages are filled with an apparently meaningless recital of magical key-words with which he tries to unlock the closed door.

It is this fact which explains the abundance of magical elements

in many of the Hekhaloth texts. Such *voces mysticae* are particularly prominent in the unedited texts. Already the oldest documents of all, the "Lesser Hekhaloth", are full of them; nor is this surprising, for shadowy elements of this kind, so far from being later additions or signs of spiritual decadence—a prejudice dear to the modern mind—belong to the very core of their particular religious system. This fact has been placed beyond doubt by modern research into the history of Hellenistic syncretism, where we find, in the Greek and Coptic magical papyri written in Egypt under the Roman Empire, the closest and most indissoluble union of religious fervor and mystical ecstasy with magical beliefs and practices. These magical interpolations have their proper and natural place in the texts only to the extent that magical rites were actually practised. Every secret name seemed to provide a further piece of protective armour against the demons—up to the point where the magical energy was no longer sufficient to overcome the obstacles which blocked the way to the Merkabah. This point is really the end of the movement as a living force; from then on it degenerates into mere literature. It is therefore not surprising that the tracts in our possession clearly reflect two different stages: an older one, in which the movement is still a living reality and in which, therefore, the seals and secret names occupy an important place; and a second phase, in which the process of degeneration has set in and for this very reason the study of the texts presents few difficulties. In this second stage the magical contents cease to represent a psychical reality and are gradually eliminated; in this way the old texts are gradually replaced by a new devotional literature, at once stilted and lyrical, which employs the elements of the original Merkabah mysticism. In our case, the first stage is represented by the "Greater" and "Lesser" Hekhaloth. The second includes the numerous texts of the "Midrash of the Ten Martyrs" and the "Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba,"<sup>30</sup> both of them writings which were particularly popular among the Jews of the Middle Ages.

The dangers of the ascent through the palaces of the Merkabah sphere are great, particularly for those who undertake the journey without the necessary preparation, let alone those who are unworthy of its object. As the journey progresses, the dangers become progressively greater. Angels and archons storm against the traveller "in order to drive him out";<sup>31</sup> a fire which proceeds from his own body

threatens to devour him.<sup>41</sup> In the Hebrew Book of Enoch there is an account of the description given by the Patriarch to Rabbi Ishmael of his own metamorphosis into the angel Metatron, when his flesh was transformed into "fiery torches." According to the "Greater Hekhaloth," every mystic must undergo this transformation, but with the difference that, being less worthy than Enoch, he is in danger of being devoured by the "fiery torches." This transition through the opening stage of the process of mystical transfiguration is an ineluctable necessity. According to another fragment, the mystic must be able to stand upright "without hands and feet," both having been burned.<sup>42</sup> This standing without feet in bottomless space is mentioned elsewhere as a characteristic experience of many ecstasies; a mystical stage closely approximating to it is referred to in the Apocalypse of Abraham.<sup>43</sup>

But the most remarkable passage of all is the interpretation given already in the "Lesser Hekhaloth" of a famous fragment which is found in the Talmud and the Tosefta. This little story is included in the few pages of the Treatise *Hagigah* which the Talmud devotes to the subject of contemporary mysticism:<sup>44</sup> "Four entered 'Paradise': Ben Azai, Ben Zoma, Aher and Rabbi Akiba. Rabbi Akiba spoke to them: 'When you come to the place of the shining marble plates, then do not say: Water, water! For it is written: He that telleth lies shall not tarry in my sight'."

Modern interpretations of this famous passage, which clearly enough refers to a *real* danger in the process of ascending to 'Paradise,'<sup>45</sup> are extremely far-fetched and not a little irrational in their determination at all costs to preserve the characteristic essentials of rationalism. We are told<sup>46</sup> that the passages refers to cosmological speculations about the *materia prima*, an explanation which lacks all plausibility and finds no support in the context or in the subject-matter itself. The fact is that the later Merkabah mystics showed a perfectly correct understanding of the meaning of this passage, and their interpretation offers striking proof that the tradition of Tanaitic mysticism and theosophy was really alive among them, although certain details may have originated in a later period. The following quotation is taken from the Munich manuscript of the Hekhaloth texts:<sup>47</sup> "But if one was unworthy to see the King in his beauty, the angels at the gates disturbed his senses and confused him. And when they said to him: 'Come in,' he entered, and in-

stantly they pressed him and threw him into the fiery lava stream. And at the gate of the sixth palace it seemed as though hundreds of thousands and millions of waves of water stormed against him, and yet there was not a drop of water, only the ethereal glitter of the marble plates with which the palace was tessellated. But he was standing in front of the angels and when he asked: 'What is the meaning of these waters,' they began to stone him and said: 'Wretch, do you not see it with your own eyes? Are you perhaps a descendant of those who kissed the Golden Calf, and are you unworthy to see the King in his beauty?' . . . And he does not go until they strike his head with iron bars and wound him. And this shall be a sign for all times that no one shall err at the gate of the sixth palace and see the ethereal glitter of the plates and ask about them and take them for water, that he may not endanger himself."

Thus the text. The authenticity of the story's core, the ecstatic's vision of water, hardly requires proof. Nothing could be more far-fetched than to treat it as a *post festum* interpretation of the Talmudic passage; there is no reason whatsoever to doubt that the mystical experience of the dangers of the ascent is really the subject of the anecdote.<sup>48</sup> Similar dangers are described in the so-called "Liturgy of Mithras" contained in the great magical papyrus of Paris,<sup>49</sup> where the description of the mystical ascent shows many parallels of detail and atmosphere with the account given in the "Greater Hekhaloth."

Particularly vivid descriptions are given in the "Greater Hekhaloth" of the last stages of the ascent, the passage through the sixth and seventh gates. These descriptions, however, are not uniform but appear rather to be a compilation of various documents and traditions concerning the relevant experiences of the Merkabah mystic. The discussions between the traveller and the gate-keepers of the sixth palace, the archons Domiel and Katspiel, which take up a good deal of space, clearly date back to very early times. One of their more unexpected features is the recurrence of rudiments of certain Greek formulae and standing expressions, which the editors in Babylonia were not longer capable of understanding and apparently regarded as magical names of the divinity.<sup>50</sup> The fact that the original Merkabah mystics in Palestine prescribed the use of specific Greek formulae for certain occasions deserves special attention. It is difficult to say whether it indicates a concrete influence

of Hellenistic religion, or whether the employment of Greek words by the Aramaic-speaking Jewish mystics is merely analogous to the predilection for Hebraic or pseudo-Hebraic formulae characteristic of the Greek-speaking circles for whom the Egyptian magical papyri were written.

The idea of the seven heavens through which the soul ascends to its original home, either after death or in a state of ecstasy while the body is still alive, is certainly very old. In an obscure and somewhat distorted form it is already to be found in old apocrypha such as the Fourth Book of Ezra or the Ascension of Isaiah, which is based on a Jewish text.<sup>21</sup> In the same way, the ancient Talmudic account of the seven heavens, their names and their contents, although apparently purely cosmological, surely presupposes an ascent of the soul to the throne in the seventh heaven.<sup>22</sup> Such descriptions of the seven heavens, plus a list of the names of their archons, have also come down to us from the school of the Merkabah mystics in the post-Mishnaic period. It is precisely here that we still find an entirely esoteric doctrine. Thus for example in the "Visions of Ezekiel", which have recently become known,<sup>23</sup> Ezekiel sees the seven heavens with their seven Merkabahs reflected in the waters of the Chebar river. This form of speculation about seven Merkabahs corresponding to the seven heavens is still innocent of any mention of Hekhaloth, or chambers, of the Merkabah. Possibly both conceptions were known to different groups or schools of the same period. In any event, the second variant gradually became the dominant one.

#### 4

This idea of the seven Hekhaloth transforms the old cosmological conception of the world structure revealed during the ascent into a description of the divine hierarchy: the traveller in search of God, like the visitor at Court, must pass through endless magnificent halls and chambers. This change of emphasis, like other important aspects of the mystical system to which it belongs, appears to me to be connected with the fundamental religious experience of these mystics, namely, the decisive importance which they assigned to the interpretation of God as King. We are dealing here with a Judaized form of cosmocratic mysticism concerning the divine King (or Emperor). This form of adoration takes first place, and cosmological

mysticism is relegated to the writings concerned with the creation of the world, the commentaries to *Maaseh Bereshith*. Not without good reason has Graetz called the religious belief of the Merkabah mystic "Basileomorphism."

This point needs to be stressed, for it makes clear the enormous gulf between the gnosticism of the Hekhaloth and that of the Hellenistic mystics. There are many parallels between the two, but there is a radical difference in the conception of God. In the Hekhaloth, God is above all King, to be precise, Holy King. This conception reflects a change in the religious consciousness of the Jews—not only the mystics—for which documentary evidence exists in the liturgy of the period. The aspects of God which are really relevant to the religious feeling of the epoch are His majesty and the aura of sublimity and solemnity which surrounds Him.

On the other hand, there is a complete absence of any sentiment of divine immanence. J. Abelson has made a valuable contribution to the understanding of the subject in his "Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature," where he has devoted a particularly searching analysis to the theory of the Shekhinah, God's "immanence" or "indwelling" in the world, in the literature of the Aggadah. Quite rightly he has stressed the connection between these ideas and certain mystical conceptions which have played a part in the later development of Jewish mysticism.<sup>4</sup> But in the Merkabah mysticism with which we are dealing here, the idea of the Shekhinah and of God's immanence plays practically no part at all. The one passage in the "Greater Hekhaloth" which has been adduced as proof of the existence of such conceptions is based on an obviously corrupt text.<sup>5</sup> The fact is that the true and spontaneous feeling of the Merkabah mystic knows nothing of divine immanence; the infinite gulf between the soul and God the King on His throne is not even bridged at the climax of mystical ecstasy.

Not only is there for the mystic no divine immanence, there is also almost no love of God. What there is of love in the relationship between the Jewish mystic and his God belongs to a much later period and has nothing to do with our present subject. Ecstasy there was, and this fundamental experience must have been a source of religious inspiration, but we find no trace of a mystical union between the soul and God. Throughout there remained an almost exaggerated consciousness of God's *otherness*, nor does the identity



and individuality of the mystic become blurred even at the height of ecstatic passion. The Creator and His creature remain apart, and nowhere is an attempt made to bridge the gulf between them or to blur the distinction. The mystic who in his ecstasy has passed through all the gates, braved all the dangers, now stands before the throne; he sees and hears—but that is all. All the emphasis is laid on the kingly aspect of God, not his creative one, although the two belong together and the second, as we shall see, even becomes, in a certain perspective of this mysticism, the dominant one. True, the mysteries of creation and the hidden connection between all things existing in the universe are among the riddles whose solution is of deep interest to the authors of the Hekhaloth tracts. There are some references to them in the description of the Merkabah vision; thus the “Greater Hekhaloth” give promise of the revelation of “the mysteries and wonderful secrets of the tissue on which the perfection of the world and its course depends, and the chain of heaven and earth along which all the wings of the universe and the wings of the heavenly heights are connected, sewn together, made fast and hung up.”<sup>56</sup> But the promise is not carried out, the secret not revealed. The magnificence and majesty of God, on the other hand, this experience of the *Yorde Merkabah* which overwhelms and overshadows all the others, is not only heralded but also described with an abundance of detail and almost to excess.

Strange and sometimes obscure are the names given to God, the King who thrones in His glory. We find names such as Zoharariel, Adiriron, Akhtariel,<sup>57</sup> and Totrossiyah (or Tetrassiyah, i. e. the Tetras or fourfoldness of the letters of God’s name YHWH?<sup>58</sup>), names which to the mystics may have signified various aspects of God’s glory. In this context it is well to remember that the chief peculiarity of this form of mysticism, its emphasis on God’s might and magnificence, opens the door to the transformation of mysticism into theurgy; there the master of the secret “names” himself takes on the exercise of power in the way described in the various magical and theurgical procedures of which this literature is full. The language of the theurgist conforms to that of the Merkabah mystic. Both are dominated by the attributes of power and sublimity, not love or tenderness. It is entirely characteristic of the outlook of these believers that the theurgist, in adjuring the “Prince of Divine Presence,” summons the archons as “Princes of Majesty,

Fear and Trembling."<sup>10</sup> *Majesty, Fear and Trembling* are indeed the key-words to this Open Sesame of religion.

## 5

The most important sources for our understanding of this atmosphere are undoubtedly the numerous prayers and hymns which have been preserved in the Hekhaloth tracts.<sup>11</sup> Tradition ascribes them to inspiration, for, according to the mystics, they are nothing but the hymns sung by the angels, even by the throne itself, in praise of God. In chapter iv of the "Greater Hekhaloth," in which these hymns occupy an important place, we find an account of how Rabbi Akiba, the prototype of the Merkabah visionary, was inspired to hear them sung at the very throne of glory before which his soul was standing. Conversely, their recitation serves to induce a state of ecstasy and accompanies the traveller on his journey through the gates. Some of these hymns are simply adjurations of God; others take the form of dialogues between God and the heavenly dwellers, and descriptions of the Merkabah sphere. It would be vain to look for definite religious doctrines, to say nothing of mystical symbols, in these hymns which belong to the oldest products of synagogal poetry, the so-called *piyut*. Often they are curiously bare of meaning, and yet the impression they create is a profound one.

Rudolf Otto in his celebrated book "The Idea of the Holy" has stressed the difference between a purely rational glorification of God, in which everything is clear, definite, familiar and comprehensible, and one which touches the springs of the irrational, or the "numinous", as he calls it, one which tries to reproduce in words the *mysterium tremendum*, the awful mystery that surrounds God's majesty. Otto<sup>12</sup> has called compositions of this latter sort "numinous hymns." The Jewish liturgy, and not only that of the mystics, contains a great number of these; and from the Jewish liturgy Otto himself has drawn some of the most important of his examples. In the Hekhaloth books we have as it were a full treasure-house of such numinous hymns.

The immense solemnity of their style, the bombast of their magnificent phrases, reflects the fundamental paradox of these hymns: the climax of sublimity and solemnity to which the mystic can at-

tain in his attempt to express the magnificence of his vision is also the *non plus ultra* of vacuousness. Philipp Bloch, who was the first to be deeply impressed by the problem presented by these hymns, speaks of their "plethora of purely pleonastic and unisonous words which do not in the least assist the process of thought but merely reflect the emotional struggle."<sup>63</sup> But at the same time he shows himself aware of the almost magical effect of this vacuous and yet sublime pathos on those who are praying when, for example, hymns composed in this spirit are recited on the Day of Atonement.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps the most famous example of this kind is the litany *haadereth vebaemunah lehay olamim* which is to be found—with a wealth of variations—in the "Greater Hekhaloth" and has been included in the liturgy of the High Holidays. The mediaeval commentators still referred to it as the "Song of the Angels,"<sup>65</sup> and it is probable that it called for the deepest devotion and solemnity on the part of those who prayed. But a formal demand of this kind can hardly have been necessary, for the mighty effect of these incomparably solemn and at the same time infinitely vacuous hymns, i. e. their numinous character, can be witnessed to this day in every synagogue. No wonder that to this day this hymn is recited by many Hasidic Jews every Sabbath among the morning prayers. The following is an approximate translation of the text, which is entirely a medley of praises of God and citations of the attributes that "appertain to Him who lives eternally":<sup>66</sup>

Excellence and faithfulness—are His who lives forever  
 Understanding and blessing—are His who lives forever  
 Grandeur and greatness—are His who lives forever  
 Cognition and expression—are His who lives forever  
 Magnificence and majesty—are His who lives forever  
 Counsel and strength—are His who lives forever  
 Lustre and brilliance—are His who lives forever  
 Grace and benevolence—are His who lives forever  
 Purity and goodness—are His who lives forever  
 Unity and honor—are His who lives forever  
 Crown and glory—are His who lives forever  
 Precept and practice—are His who lives forever  
 Sovereignty and rule—are His who lives forever  
 Adornment and permanence—are His who lives forever

Mystery and wisdom—are His who lives forever  
 Might and meekness—are His who lives forever  
 Splendor and wonder—are His who lives forever  
 Righteousness and honor—are His who lives forever  
 Invocation and holiness—are His who lives forever  
 Exultation and nobility—are His who lives forever  
 Song and hymn—are His who lives forever  
 Praise and glory—are His who lives forever

This—in its original language—is a classic example of an alphabetical litany which fills the imagination of the devotee with splendid concepts clothed in magnificent expression; the particular words do not matter. To quote Bloch again: "The glorification of God is not that of the psalm, which either describes the marvels of creation as proof of the grandeur and the glory of the Creator, or stresses the element of divine grace and guidance in the history of Israel as throwing light on the wisdom and benevolence of Providence; it is simply praise of God, and this praise is heaped and multiplied as if there were a danger that some honorific might be forgotten."<sup>66</sup>

Another passage from a hymn to "Zoharariel, Adonai, God of Israel," in the "Greater Hekhaloth," runs as follows:"

His throne radiates before Him and His palace is full of  
splendor.

His Majesty is becoming and His Glory is an adornment for  
Him.

His servants sing before Him and proclaim the might of His  
wonders,

as King of all kings and Master of all masters,  
encircled by rows of crowns, surrounded by the ranks of the  
princes of splendor.

With a gleam of His ray he encompasses the sky  
and His splendor radiates from the heights.

Abysses flame from His mouth and firmaments sparkle from  
His body.

Almost all the hymns from the Hekhaloth tracts, particularly those whose text has been preserved intact, reveal a mechanism comparable to the motion of an enormous fly-wheel. In cyclical rhythm

the hymns succeed each other, and within them the adjurations of God follow in a crescendo of glittering and majestic attributes, each stressing and reinforcing the sonorous power of the world. The monotony of their rhythm—almost all consist of verses of four words—and the progressively sonorous incantations induce in those who are praying a state of mind bordering on ecstasy. An important part of this technique is the recurrence of the key-word of the numinous, the *kedushah*, the trishagion from Isaiah vi, 3, in which the ecstasy of the mystic culminates: holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. One can hardly conceive of a more grandiose proof of the irresistible influence which the conception of God's kingdom exercised on the consciousness of these mystics. The "holiness" of God, which they are trying to paraphrase, is utterly transcendent of any moral meaning and represents nothing but glory of His Kingdom. Through various forms of the prayer known as the *kedushah*, this conception has also found its way into the general Jewish liturgy and left its imprint on it.<sup>66</sup>

In spite of the last mentioned fact, it cannot be denied that this "polylogy", or verbiage, of the mystics, these magniloquent attempts to catch a glimpse of God's majesty and to preserve it in hymnical form, stands in sharp contrast to the tendencies which already during the Talmudical period dominated the outlook of the great teachers of the Law. They could not but feel repelled by it, and in the Talmud one early encounters a strong dislike for extravagant enthusiasm in prayer, much as the Sermon on the Mount had attacked the polylogy of the pagans, their effusive and wordy style. Passages like the following read like an attack on the tendencies reflected in the Hekhaloth tracts: "He who multiplies the praise of God to excess shall be torn from the world." Or: "In the presence of Rabbi Hanina, one went to the praying-desk to say the prayer. He said, 'God, Thou great, strong, terrible, mighty, feared, powerful, real and adorable!' He waited until the other had finished, then he said to him: 'Have you ended with the praise of your God? What is the meaning of all this? It is as if one were to praise a king of the world, who has millions of pieces of gold, for the possession of a piece of silver.'"<sup>67</sup>

But this resistance to an enthusiasm and a verbiage so different from the classical simplicity and rationality of the fundamental prayers of Jewish liturgy was of no avail. That much is clear not

only from the prayers and hymns of the Merkabah mystics, but also from certain important parts of the liturgy proper whose spirit reflects the influence of the *Yorde Merkabah*. Bloch was the first to point out that the community prayer in its final form, which it received in late Talmudic and post-Talmudic times, represents a compromise between these two opposing tendencies. Some of these prayers are indeed much older than was thought by Bloch, who has overlooked certain passages of the Palestinian Talmud and attributed every prayer which mentions the angels of the Merkabah to the post-Talmudic period.<sup>70</sup> But since the mystical school of the *Yorde Merkabah* is in general of much earlier origin than Zunz, Graetz and Bloch assumed and may have been in existence in Palestine during the fourth century, this fact presents no difficulty for our contention.

While the Merkabah hymns with which we are dealing hardly go back beyond the fifth century, they continue a tradition already visible in the throne mysticism and the apocalyptic of the Mishnaic period. In the Apocalypse of Abraham, whose connection with the Merkabah mysticism has also struck its English editor, G. H. Box, the patriarch who ascends to the throne hears a voice speaking from the celestial fire "like a voice of many waters, like the sound of the sea in its uproar." The same terms are used in the "Greater Hekhaloth" in describing the sound of the hymn of praise sung by the "throne of Glory" to its King—"like the voice of the waters in the rushing streams, like the waves of the ocean when the south wind sets them in uproar." The same apocalypse contains the song which Abraham is taught by the angel who guides him on his way to heaven—and this song is nothing but the hymn sung by the angels who mount guard before the Throne.<sup>71</sup> Although the attributes of God are in some cases identical with those used in Greek and early Christian prayers,<sup>72</sup> this hymn already has the numinous character described above. God is praised as the Holy Being and also as the supreme master; this is quite in harmony with the characteristic outlook of these hymns, whether sung by the angels or by Israel, in which the veneration of God the King blends imperceptibly with the conjuring magic of the adept. The presentation of the crown to God is almost the only act through which the devotee can still bear witness to the religious destiny of man.

It is characteristic of these hymns that the traditional vocabu-

lary of the Hebrew language, although by no means restricted in this field, no longer sufficed for the spiritual needs of the ecstatic eager to express his vision of God's majesty in words. This is evident from the large number of original and frequently bizarre phrases and word combinations, sometimes entirely novel creations," all bearing a decidedly numinous character, and which perhaps mark the beginning of the flood of new verbal creations to be found in the oldest classics of Palestinian synagogal poetry since the seventh century A.D. Thus, for example, the influence of the Merkabah literature on Eleazar Kalir, the outstanding master of this school, is obvious enough.

The extent to which in these circles the hymn was regarded as the original language of the creature addressing itself to its Creator, the extent, therefore, to which they had adopted the prophetic vision of a redeemed world, in which all beings speak in hymns, is clear from a brief tract called *Perek Shirah*, i. e. the chapter of the song of creation.<sup>14</sup> Here all beings are gifted with language for the sole purpose that they may sing—in Biblical words—the praise of their Creator. Originally known only among mystics, this poem gradually made its way—against violent opposition, whose motives are not clear<sup>15</sup>—into the liturgy of the daily prayers.

To sum up, it would appear that the Merkabah mystics were led by logical steps in the direction of mystical prayer, without, however, having developed anything like a mystical theory of prayer. One is perhaps justified in seeing a first step towards such a theory in the characteristic exaggeration of the significance of Israel's prayer in the celestial realm. Only when Israel has sung may the angels join in. One of them, Shemu'el, the "great archon," stands at the window of heaven as a mediator between the prayers of Israel, which rise from below, and the denizens of the seventh heaven to whom he transfers them.<sup>16</sup> The angel who bears the name of Israel stands in the centre of heaven and leads the heavenly choir with the call, "God is King, God was King, God will ever be King."<sup>17</sup> But great though the importance of prayer undoubtedly is for him, the Merkabah mystic who pours out his heart in ecstatic and spontaneous hymns seeks no mysteries behind the words of prayer. The ascent of the words has not yet substituted itself for the ascent of the soul and of the devotee himself. The pure word, the as yet unbroken summons stands for itself; it signifies nothing but what

it expresses. But it is not surprising that when the fire out of which these prayers had streamed to heaven had burned low, a host of nostalgic souls stirred the ashes, looking in vain for the spirit which had departed.

## 6

We have seen that the God of the Merkabah mystics is the Holy King who emerges from unknown worlds and descends "through 955 heavens"<sup>78</sup> to the throne of Glory. The mystery of this God in His aspect of Creator of the universe is one of those exalted subjects of esoteric knowledge which are revealed to the soul of the mystic in its ecstatic ascent; it is of equal importance with the vision of the celestial realm, the songs of the angels, and the structure of the Merkabah. According to an account given in the "Greater Hekhaloth", which one is tempted to correlate with a similar passage at the end of the Fourth Book of Ezra, it was even the custom to place scribes or stenographers to the right and left of the visionary who wrote down his ecstatic description of the throne and its occupants.<sup>79</sup> That the mystic in his rapture even succeeded in penetrating beyond the sphere of the angels is suggested in a passage which speaks of "God who is beyond the sight of His creatures and hidden to the angels who serve Him, but who has revealed Himself to Rabbi Akiba in the vision of the Merkabah."<sup>80</sup>

It is this new revelation, at once strange and forbidding, which we encounter in the most paradoxical of all these tracts, the one which is known under the name of *Shiur Komah*, literally translated, "Measure of the Body" (i. e. the body of God.).<sup>81</sup> From the very beginning, the frank and almost provocative anthropomorphism of the *Shiur Komah* aroused the bitterest antagonism among all Jewish circles which held aloof from mysticism.<sup>82</sup> Conversely, all the later mystics and Kabbalists came to regard its dark and obscure language as a symbol of profound and penetrating spiritual vision. The antagonism was mutual, for it is in this attitude towards anthropomorphism that Jewish rational theology and Jewish mysticism have parted company.

The fragment in question, of which several different texts are extant,<sup>83</sup> describes the "body" of the Creator, in close analogy to the description of the body of the beloved one in the fifth chapter of the "Song of Solomon," giving enormous figures for the length of