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A Farewell to the Merkavah Tradition

Introduction

The roots of the current scholarly discussion on the origin, aim, and content of early Jewish mysticism can be traced to the writings of “the founding father of the academic discipline of Jewish mysticism”¹ - Gershom Scholem. His studies marked in many ways a profound breach with the previous paradigm of 19th and early 20th century scholarship solidified in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement which viewed Jewish mystical developments as based on ideas late and external to Judaism. In his seminal work, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, as well as other publications,² Scholem saw his main task as clarifying the origins of early Jewish mysticism on the basis of new methodological premises, which, in contrast to the scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, approached early Jewish mysticism as a genuine Jewish movement with roots in biblical and pseudepigraphic traditions.

Scholem’s writings exhibit an impressive attempt to connect the early Jewish mystical traditions attested in some apocalyptic texts of Second Temple Judaism with the later mystical developments hinted at in mishnaic and talmudic sources about *מַעֲשֵׂה מֵרֻכְבָּה* and developed in the Hekhalot writings. It is significant that Scholem viewed all three stages of this evolution as

¹ P. Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2009) 5.

² G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941); idem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, [1960] 1965); idem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1969); idem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Quadrangle, 1974); idem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). For the complete bibliography of Scholem’s writings, see: F. Scholem and B. Yaron, “Bibliography of the Published Writings of Gershom G. Scholem,” in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom Scholem on his Seventieth Birthday* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 199–235; M. Catane, *Bibliography of the Writings of Gershom G. Scholem presented to Gershom G. Scholem on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977).

integral parts of one larger movement designated by him as the Merkavah tradition. In his view, the mystical testimonies attested in Jewish apocalyptic writings represented the initial stage in the development of this larger religious phenomenon. He thought that it was

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.³

Thus, Scholem considered rabbinic and Hekhalot developments as the consequent stages of the long-lasting history of the Merkavah tradition, the roots of which can be traced to pre-rabbinic apocalyptic circles. Scholem's grand map of the developments of Jewish mystical traditions does not remain unchallenged. Detailed criticisms of Scholem's positions were

³ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 43.

offered in the publications of Peter Schäfer,⁴ David J. Halperin,⁵ and other scholars⁶ whose critique stemmed from the earlier critical work of Johann Maier⁷ and Ephraim E. Urbach.⁸

These critical assessments often attempt to demonstrate the discontinuities and the differences between the world of Jewish apocalypticism and the world of Jewish mysticism exemplified by the rabbinic Merkavah speculations and the Hekhalot literature.

While Scholem's views about the "essential" features of rabbinic and Hekhalot development generated substantial criticism, his opinions about the main characteristics of apocalyptic traditions – influences that he then attempted to discern in later rabbinic and Hekhalot developments – have undergone considerably less scrutiny. Which is in itself paradoxical – since he was a lesser expert in apocalypticism than he was in Jewish mysticism.

⁴ P. Schäfer, "Prolegomena zu einer kritischen Edition und Analyse der Merkava Rabba," *FJB* 5 (1977) 65–99; idem, "Die Beschwörung des sar ha-panim, Kritische Edition und Übersetzung," *FJB* 6 (1978) 107–45; idem, "Aufbau und redaktionelle Identität der Hekhalot Zutarti," *JJS* 33 (1982) 569–82; idem, "Tradition and Redaction in Hekhalot Literature," *JSJ* 14 (1983) 172–81; idem, "Engel und Menschen in der Hekhalot-Literatur," in: P. Schäfer, *Hekhalot-Studien* (TSAJ 19; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1988) 250–76, esp. 258, 264–65; idem, "The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism," in: *Hekhalot-Studien*, 277–95; idem, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1992) 150–55.

⁵ D.J. Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1980); idem, "A New Edition of the Hekhalot Literature," *JAOS* 104.3 (1984) 543–552; idem, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1988) 359–63.

⁶ M. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 106–14; idem, "The Experience of the Visionary and the Genre in the Ascension of Isaiah 6–11 and the Apocalypse of Paul," *Semeia* 36 (1986) 97–111; idem, "The Practice of Ascent in the Ancient Mediterranean World," in: *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys* (ed. J.J. Collins and M. Fishbane; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1995) 123–37, esp. 126–28; A. Kuyt, *The "Descent" to the Chariot. Towards a Description of the Terminology, Place, Function and Nature of the Yeridah in Hekhalot Literature* (TSAJ, 45; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1995); M.D. Swartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 29; 153–57; 170–72; 210–12; R.S. Boustani, *From Martyr to Mystic. Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making of Merkavah Mysticism* (TSAJ, 112; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2005) 20ff; A.Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of Enochic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 238ff.

⁷ J. Maier, *Vom Kultus zur Gnosis* (Kairos 1; Salzburg: Müller, 1964) 128–146.

⁸ E. E. Urbach, "The Traditions about Merkavah Mysticism in the Tannaitic Period," in: *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem on His Seventieth Birthday by Pupils, Colleagues and Friends* (ed. E.E. Urbach et al; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 1–28 [in Hebrew].

But what were his main verdicts about the central themes of early Jewish apocalypses? In his programming opus, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Scholem reflects on these features, offering the following conclusions:

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.⁹

Scholem thus saw Ezekielian imagery of the divine Chariot as the most characteristic and unifying symbol of early apocalyptic developments and as well as the entire "Merkavah tradition." In his other work he affirms the ocularcentric¹⁰ and corporeal tenets of the "Merkavah tradition" by arguing that "the main purpose of the ascent to the Merkabah is the *vision* of the One Who sits on the Throne."¹¹ In his overwhelming vision of the Jewish mystical tradition, the divine Chariot was posited as the main conceptual icon surrounded by distinct anthropomorphic and visionary markers which intended to cement the various stages of this tradition. Although indeed the imagery of the divine Chariot was one of the paradigmatic conceptual centers of the Jewish religious tradition, as we will see later, it was not the only one. It is quite possible that this impressive imagery somehow blinded our distinguished "founding father," preventing him from discerning some other, maybe less spectacular, conceptual rivals of this ancient tradition of the theophany. Moreover it generated a certain "tunnel vision" not only for Scholem's scholarly enterprise but also more importantly for his critics and supporters. In

⁹ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 43–44.

¹⁰ The ocularcentric nature of Jewish mysticism has been noted in other studies. Thus, for example, Elliot Wolfson notes that "while the experiences related by Jewish mystics may involve other senses including most importantly hearing, there is little question that the sense of sight assumes a certain epistemic priority, reflecting and building on those scriptural passages that affirm the visual nature of revelatory experience." E.R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 5. See also E.R. Wolfson, "Imaging the Imageless: Iconic Representations of the Divine in Kabbalah," in: *Iconotopism: Turning toward Pictures* (ed. E. Spolsky; Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004) 57-68.

¹¹ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 16.

such hindered scholarly “vision” other molds of the apocalyptic symbolism became obscured and marginalized.

Here one should note that Scholem himself was not an expert in the apocalyptic traditions and he did not try to pretend to be one. His avoidance of systematic textual exploration of Jewish pseudepigraphic writings, such as various booklets of *1 Enoch*, *2 Enoch*, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, and *4 Ezra*, which he often cites in his publications, is understandable since his main area of expertise laid not in the Second Temple Judaism, but in later rabbinic developments.¹² Naturally he attempted to access and to investigate these early apocalyptic materials from the methodological perspectives and experience which he acquired through his analysis of later Jewish mystical testimonies and their symbolic worldviews. Scholem’s own methodological position in which the early pseudepigraphic mystical evidence was perceived and evaluated not on its own, but from the perspective of the later rabbinic and Hekhalot mystical developments, also remained influential in circles of his critics and supporters.

We already noticed that Scholem’s approach to the apocalyptic evidence was executed through the spectacles of the “Merkavah tradition.” As a consequence Scholem’s conceptual choices of paradigmatic apocalyptic imagery which he attempted to single out from the early apocalyptic accounts – for example the symbolism of the divine “Throne” and divine “Form” and even his peculiar understanding the seer’s ascent – are all derived from the ocularcentric

¹² In relation to this Himmelfarb notes that "yet Scholem never considered the relationship between the apocalypses and the hekhalot texts in a systematic way. Although he claims the apocalypses as the first stage of merkavah mysticism, in his overview of merkavah mysticism in ch. 2 of *Major Trends*, he calls upon them only occasionally to provide parallels to passages in rabbinic literature or in the hekhalot texts. Nor is there any systematic discussion in his *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, which consists of a series of separate studies of particular passages in rabbinic and hekhalot literature in relation to the apocalypses, gnostic texts, and the magical papyri." M. Himmelfarb, "Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the Hekhalot Literature," *HUCA* 59 (1988) 73-100 at 75.

Kavod paradigm,¹³ while the traits of other conceptual trends remain remarkably absent in his catalogues of apocalyptic features. His choices of apocalyptic symbols remained very influential for his critics as well as his supporters, who were fiercely arguing whether or not to affirm or deny this visionary apocalyptic mold in later rabbinic and Hekhalot accounts.¹⁴

Because of Scholem's opinion that the divine *Kavod* was an emblematic unifying symbol of Jewish apocalypticism, the Hekhalot and the rabbinic Merkavah traditions were later scrutinized by other scholars, including Scholem's critics, again and again against the yardstick of several prophetic and apocalyptic accounts influenced by this mold of the "visionary" mysticism, while other "nonocularcentric" trends were consistently ignored. Discrepancies between apocalyptic and mystical presentations of some details of vision, ascent, and descriptions of divine and angelic manifestations have often been used by Scholem's critics as proof of the discontinuity between early Jewish apocalypses and their Hekhalot and rabbinic counterparts. Yet, if the apocalyptic texts and traditions affected by other conceptual molds would be brought into the scholarly discussion, additional links between both conceptual movements would become more clear. But what were the other conceptual molds which were alternatives or even rivals to the ocularcentric "Chariot" tradition?

¹³ The predominance of the *Kavod* paradigm finds its implicit expression in the labeling of the early Jewish mysticism as the Merkavah mysticism, or the Merkavah tradition.

¹⁴ "The suggestion of continuity between the apocalyptists and the merkavah mystics goes back to Gershom Scholem, who pointed to the similarities between the visions of the merkavah in some of the apocalypses and those of rabbinic literature and the hekhalot texts. This comparison is extremely appealing because the circles of merkavah mystics seem to provide a relatively well documented example of practices only hinted at in the ascent apocalypses. Although Scholem never developed his position on the apocalypses in any detail, he seems to have believed that the visions of the apocalypses drew on the visionary experiences of their authors ... Scholem read the hekhalot texts as reflecting visionary experience." Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 108-109.

Aural *Shem* Tradition in Early Jewish Lore

Roots of the Aural Ideology

It appears that in previous debates about the continuity or discontinuity between apocalypticism and rabbinic Merkavah and Hekhalot mystical developments, one important issue has been consistently ignored, namely, the possibility of the existence of other molds of apocalyptic imagery that were perpetuated and developed along with the ocularcentric, anthropomorphic *Kavod* mold, exemplified by the divine Chariot once beheld by the great prophet on the river Chebar.

Yet, there were indeed other apocalyptic trends that appear to have been formative in shaping later Jewish mystical currents. One of these developments was the tradition of the divine Voice or Name (*Shem*), which stood in long-lasting polemical opposition with the tradition of the divine Form. Analyzing both trends, one can see striking differences between their respective symbolical universes, one of which was connected with the visionary and the other with aural manifestations of the Divine. In climatic depictions of one of these traditions the human seers receive the vision of the divine Form, often in its anthropomorphic shape, while in the pinnacles of revelatory experience of the other trend an adept instead was predestined to hear the aniconic divine Voice. The different means of accessing heavenly realities generate two strikingly different symbolic worlds, which, at least in the beginning of their development, appear to be situated in mutual conceptual opposition. The roots of these two possibilities of describing and communicating with the Divine are already hinted at in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁵ These biblical

¹⁵ Wolfson noted that "...the tension between the iconic/visual and aniconic/aural representations of God found in these foundational documents of Judaism set the tone for subsequent visionary mystics." Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 4.

materials reveal complicated polemics for and against an anthropomorphic understanding of God. Scholars argue that the anthropomorphic imagery found in biblical materials was crystallized in the Israelite priestly ideology, known to us as the “Priestly source.” Moshe Weinfeld points out that the theology of worship delineated in the Priestly source depicts God in “the most tangible corporeal similitudes.”¹⁶ In the priestly tradition God is understood to have created humanity in his own image (Gen. 1:27) and is thus frequently described as possessing a human-like form.¹⁷ Scholars have shown that the anthropomorphism of the Priestly authors appears to be intimately connected with the place of divine habitation—the Deity possesses a human form and needs to reside in a house or tabernacle.¹⁸ Weinfeld argues that the anthropomorphic position was not entirely an invention of the Priestly tradition, but derived from early pre-exilic sacral conceptions about divine corporeal manifestations found in Mesopotamian literature.¹⁹ Scholars observe that the priestly understanding of the corporeal representation of the Deity finds its clearest expression in the conception of the “Glory of God” (כְּבוֹד יְהוָה).²⁰ This conception is always expressed in the priestly tradition in the symbolism grounded in mythological corporeal imagery.²¹ One of the paradigmatic accounts of the portrayal of the divine *Kavod* can be found in the first chapter of the book of Ezekiel, which can be seen as the manifesto of the priestly corporeal ideology. There the *Kavod* is portrayed as an enthroned human form enveloped by fire.²²

¹⁶ M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) 191.

¹⁷ Köhler and Weinfeld argue that the phrase, “in our image, after our likeness” precludes the anthropomorphic interpretation that the human being was created in the divine image. L. Köhler, “Die Grundstelle der Imago-Dei Lehre, Genesis i, 26,” *ThZ* 4 (1948) 16ff; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 199.

¹⁸ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 191.

¹⁹ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 199.

²⁰ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 200-201.

²¹ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 201.

²² Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 201.

While containing forceful anthropomorphic ideologies, the Hebrew Bible also attests to polemical narratives contesting the corporeal depictions of the Deity. Scholars have long noted a sharp opposition between the book of Deuteronomy and early anthropomorphic developments. In fact, the Deuteronomic school is widely thought to have initiated the polemic against the anthropomorphic and corporeal conceptions of the Deity, which were subsequently adopted by the prophets Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah.²³ Seeking to dislodge ancient anthropomorphism, the book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic school promulgated anti-corporeal theology of the divine Name with its conception of sanctuary (tabernacle) as the exclusive dwelling abode of God's name.²⁴ Gerhard von Rad argues that the Deuteronomic formulae "to cause his Name to dwell" (לשכן שמו) advocates a new understanding of the Deity that challenges the popular ancient belief that God actually dwells within the sanctuary.²⁵ It is noteworthy that, while the Deuteronomic *Shem* ideology does not completely abandon the terminology pertaining to the concept of the divine Glory (*Kavod*),²⁶ it markedly voids it of any corporeal motifs. Weinfeld observes that "the expression כבוד, when occurring in Deuteronomy, does not denote the being and substantiality of God as it does in the earlier sources but his splendor and greatness," signifying "abstract and not corporeal qualities."²⁷

One of the early examples of the polemical interaction between the corporeal ideology of the divine form (*Kavod*), which is often labeled in the theophanic accounts as the divine Face

²³ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 198.

²⁴ Tryggve Mettinger observes that the concept of God in the *Shem* theology is "...strikingly abstract.... God himself is no longer present in the Temple, but only in heaven. However, he is represented in the Temple by his Name...." T.N.D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth. Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies* (Coniectanea Biblica. Old Testament Series, 18; Lund: Wallin & Dalholm, 1982) 124. See also Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 193.

²⁵ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 193.

²⁶ This tendency towards polemical reinterpretation of the imagery of the rival paradigm is also observable in the *Kavod* tradition, which uses the symbolism of the divine voice and other aspects of the *Shem* symbolism.

²⁷ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 206.

(*Panim*), and the incorporeal theology of the divine Name may be seen in Ex 33, where, upon Moses' plea to behold the divine *Kavod*, the Deity offers an aural alternative by promising to reveal to the seer his name:

Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory (כבודך)." And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name (ויקראתי בשם), the Lord, in your presence... but," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

This account appears to highlight the opposition between visual and aural revelations, focusing on the possibility of encountering the Divine not only through the form, but also through the sound. One mode of revelation often comes at the expense of the other—the idea hinted at in Ex 33 and articulated more explicitly in Deut 4, "You heard the sound of words, but saw no form (לֹא רָאִיתָ)." Scholars point to a paradigm shift in Deuteronomy's switch of the revelatory axis from the visual to the aural plane.²⁸ In this new, theo-aural, as opposed to theophanic, understanding, even God's revelation to Moses on Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19, an event marking a vital nexus of the visual anthropomorphic paradigm, becomes now reinterpreted in terms of its aural counterpart. Deut 4:36 describes the Sinai theophany as a hearing of the divine Voice: "Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you; and on earth he let you see his great fire and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire." Here the revelation is received not in the form of tablets, the media that might implicitly underline the corporeality of the Deity, rather "the commandments were heard from out of the midst of the fire... uttered by the Deity from heaven."²⁹ This transcendent nature of the Deity's revelation that now chooses to manifest itself as the formless voice in the fire eliminates any need of its corporal representation in the form of the anthropomorphic Glory of God.

²⁸ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 207.

²⁹ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 207.

The depiction of the Deity's activity and presence as the voice in the fire thus becomes one of the distinctive features of the *Shem* ideology.³⁰ As Tryggve Mettinger rightly concludes, "it is not surprising that the Name of God occupies so central a position in a theology in which God's words and voice receive so much emphasis."³¹

The Aural Trend in Jewish Apocalypticism

Although many early Jewish apocalypses were influenced by the anthropomorphic *Kavod* ideology, the aural *Shem* mold continued to exercise its formative influence on Jewish apocalypticism. One of the early apocalypses that demonstrates the conceptual impact of this tradition is the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, a Jewish work probably composed in Palestine in the early centuries of the Common Era.

The theophanic language manifested in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* reveals marked similarities with the currents reflected in the Deuteronomic and the Deuteronomistic materials.³² Already in chapter eight, which marks a transition to the apocalyptic section of the work and narrates the patriarch's response to the divine call in the courtyard of Terah's house, the divine presence is depicted as "the voice of the Mighty One" coming down in a stream of fire.³³ This

³⁰ The classic example of this imagery can be found in the Deuteronomistic account of God's appearance to Elijah on Mount Horeb in 1 Kings 19:11-13: "He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'"

³¹ Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 124.

³² The affinities with the Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic materials can also be seen in the implicit and explicit connections between the vision of Abraham and Moses' Sinai encounter. In this respect David Halperin notes that the author of *Apoc. Ab.* "... gives us several clues that he is modeling Abraham's experience after Moses' at Sinai. The most obvious of these is his locating the experience at Mount Horeb, the name that Deuteronomy regularly uses for Sinai." Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, 109-110.

³³ *Apoc. Ab.* 8:1: "The voice (*глас*) of the Mighty One came down from heaven in a stream of fire, saying and calling, 'Abraham, Abraham!'" A. Kulik, *Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha: Toward the Original of the Apocalypse of Abraham* (TCS, 3; Atlanta: Scholars, 2004) 16; B. Philonenko-Sayar and M. Philonenko,

self-disclosure of God in the formless “voice” (Slav. *глас*) rather than some angelic or divine form becomes the standard description adopted by the author(s) of the apocalypse to convey manifestations of the deity.³⁴

The divine voice appears continually in the narrative. More notably, in *Apoc. Ab.* 9:1 the voice of "the primordial and mighty God" commands Abraham to bring sacrifices, and in chapter 10 it appoints the angel Yahoel as a celestial guide of the exalted patriarch.

This angelic figure can be seen as one of the decisive symbols for understanding the overarching theological thrust of the pseudepigraphon. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* defines him as the mediation of "my [God] ineffable name (*неизрекомаго имени моего*)."³⁵ Even apart from this explanation of the guide's spectacular office, the peculiar designation Yahoel (*Иаоиль*) in itself reveals unequivocally the angelic creature as the representation of the divine Name. It is no coincidence that in the text, which exhibits similarities with the Deuteronomic *Shem* theology, the angelic guide of the protagonist is introduced as the Angel of the Name. Scholars have previously noted the formative role of the figure of the Angel of the Name (or the Angel of YHWH) in the conceptual framework of the Deuteronomic and the Deuteronomistic *Shem* ideologies. According to one of the hypotheses, the figure of the Angel of the LORD (or the Angel of the divine Name) found in the Book of Exodus constituted one of the conceptual roots of the *Shem* theology. Tryggve Mettinger observes that "it appears that when the

L'Apocalypse d'Abraham. Introduction, texte slave, traduction et notes (Semitica, 31; Paris: Librairie Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1981) 54.

³⁴ See, for example, *Apoc. Ab.* 18:2: "And I heard a voice (*глас*) like the roaring of the sea, and it did not cease because of the fire." Kulik, *Retroverting the Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 24; Philonenko-Sayar and Philonenko, *L'Apocalypse d'Abraham. Introduction, texte slave, traduction et notes*, 76.

³⁵ Kulik, *Retroverting the Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 17; R. Rubinkiewicz, *L'Apocalypse d'Abraham en vieux slave. Édition critique du texte, introduction, traduction et commentaire* (Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego: Źródła i monografie, 129; Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1987) 128; Philonenko-Sayar and Philonenko, *L'Apocalypse d'Abraham. Introduction, texte slave, traduction et notes*, 58.

Deuteronomistic theologians choose *shem*, they seized on a term which was already connected with the idea of God's presence. Exod 23:21 tells us how God warned Israel during her wanderings in the desert to respect his angel and obey his voice, 'for my name in him.'³⁶

The identification of divine manifestation with the Voice or the Sound in *Apoc. Ab.* underlines the importance of praise as a parallel process of the aural expression of creation in relation to its Creator. The authors of the text also seem to view the praising of God as a mystical praxis that in many ways mirrors the visionary praxis of the *Kavod* paradigm. Scholars have previously observed the importance of aural invocation, or "calling upon," in the *Shem* paradigm that had come to function there as an act of actualization of the presence of God.³⁷

Time and again the angel Yahoel is presented as a faithful adept of this mystical praxis of praise. The text defines him as the Singer of the Eternal One (*Apoc. Ab.* 12:4). He is exceptional both as a practitioner and as an instructor of this "aural mysticism," conveying the teachings of the praxis to various types of God's creatures, earthly as well as celestial. In *Apoc. Ab.* 10:8-9 he is described as the celestial choirmaster of the *Hayyot*.³⁸ He also serves as the liturgical instructor for Abraham, teaching him how to participate in heavenly liturgy.³⁹

The nexus of the aural *Shem* ideology is, without a doubt, manifested in *Apoc. Ab.* 18, where the story describes the adept's entrance into the celestial Throne room. The most striking detail in the description of the divine Throne in this chapter, which radically differs from the Ezekielian account, is that at the climactic moment of the hero's encounter with the divine

³⁶ Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 124-125.

³⁷ Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 125.

³⁸ *Apoc. Ab.* 10:8-9: "I am a power in the midst of the Ineffable who put together his names in me. I am appointed according to his commandment to reconcile the rivalries of the Living Creatures of the Cherubim against one another, and teach those who bear him [to sing] the song in the middle of man's night, at the seventh hour." Kulik, *Retroverting the Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 18.

³⁹ *Apoc. Ab.* 17:5-7: "And he said, 'Only worship, Abraham, and recite the song which I taught you' ... And he said, 'Recite without ceasing.' And I recited, and he himself recited the song." Kulik, *Retroverting the Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 22-23.

Chariot⁴⁰— which also curiously appears to be missing a rider —the text does not give any indications of the presence of the anthropomorphic Glory of God, which in Ezekiel 1:26 is described as כַּמְרֹאֶה אָדָם דְּמוֹת. Instead of the Ezekielian anthropomorphic extent, the adept encounters the now familiar Voice in the midst of fire surrounded by the sound of the *qedushah*:

While I was still standing and watching, I saw behind the Living Creatures a chariot with fiery Wheels. Each Wheel was full of eyes round about. And above the Wheels there was the throne which I had seen. And I was covered with fire and the fire encircled it round about, and an indescribable light surrounded the fiery people. And I heard the sound of their *qedushah* like the voice of a single man. And a voice came to me out of the midst of the fire.... (*Apoc. Ab.* 18:12-19:1).⁴¹

David Halperin previously noticed the paradigm shift in this portentous passage from the visual plane to aural plane when he observed that “Ezekiel’s phrase ‘like the appearance of a man,’ becomes, in a concluding sentence, that plainly draws on the end of Ezekiel 1:28, ‘like the voice of a man.’”⁴² He further summarizes the aural proclivities of the *Apocalypse of Abraham* by saying that “the author of the apocalypse surrounds the *merkabah* with angelic chant.”⁴³

The account of the seer’s presence in the Throne room, permeated with the *Shem* ideology, once again underlines the importance of aural practices, including angelic liturgy. In their portrayals of the Living Creatures (the *Hayyot*) and the Wheels (the *Ophannim*), the authors accentuate their role by praising the Deity:

And as the fire rose up, soaring higher, I saw under the fire a throne [made] of fire and the many-eyed Wheels, and *they are reciting the song*. And under the throne [I saw] four *singing* fiery Living creatures. (*Apoc. Ab.* 18:3).⁴⁴

⁴⁰ The importance of the Chariot imagery here indicates that the *Apocalypse of Abraham* might not represent a pure mold of the *Shem* theology, but rather contains the paradoxal mixture of *Kavod* and *Shem* traditions. Yet, notwithstanding the many allusions to Ezekiel 1 in the depiction of the throne room in chapters 18 and 19 of the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, scholars highlight a radical paradigm shift in the text’s description of the Deity, noting “a deliberate attempt ... to exclude all reference to the human figure mentioned in Ezekiel 1.” Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, 86-87.

⁴¹ Kulik, *Retroverting the Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 24.

⁴² Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, 108.

⁴³ Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, 108.

⁴⁴ Kulik, *Retroverting the Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 24.

Thus, instead of emphasizing the role of the *Hayyot* as the foundation of the Throne, which in the formative account found in the Book of Ezekiel holds the divine Presence/Form, the Slavonic apocalypse stresses the praising functions of the Living Creatures depicted as “singing the divine Presence.”

As has been shown, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* offers a complex mix of the *Kavod* and *Shem* conceptual developments where promulgation of the theology of the divine Name and the praxis of the divine Voice becomes linked with the theophanic imagery from the Priestly source, Ezekiel, various booklets of *1 Enoch* and some other Second Temple accounts. The consequences of this polemical encounter between two important revelatory trends appear to have exercised lasting influence on both traditions. The developments found in the Slavonic apocalypse should not be interpreted simply as a rejection of anthropomorphic theism through the aural paradigm of the divine Name. Rather, they should be seen as an adaptation of the Merkabah imagery into the framework of this aural paradigm that has led to the construction of a new symbolic universe⁴⁵ in which two trends can coexist with each other.⁴⁶ This synthesis is intriguing and might provide important insights for understanding the character of later Jewish mystical developments where the traditions about the divine Form and the divine Name appear to undergo creative conflation.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ This new symbolic universe manifests itself, for example, in the depiction of the throne room with its paradoxal imagery reflecting the visual and the aural traditions.

⁴⁶ The synthetic nature of adaptations taken place in the Slavonic pseudepigraphon has been noticed previously by other scholars. Thus, John Collins observes that the *Apocalypse of Abraham* “belongs to the same general period of *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch* and shares some of their concerns about theodicy. In place of the deuteronomic tradition, which informs these books, however, the mystical tendency of the early Enoch books is taken up here.” Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 225.

⁴⁷ Elliot Wolfson reflects on such developments by noting “that the tension of aniconism, on the one hand, and visualizing the deity, on the other, is an essential component of the relevant varieties of Jewish mystical speculation.” Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 5.

Aural Features of the Hekhalot Literature and Their Connections with Aural Apocalyptic Traditions

It is time to turn our attention to later Jewish mystical texts. Although a thorough and systematic analysis of the connections between the apocalyptic *Shem* traditions and their conceptual counterparts in the rabbinic Merkavah speculations and the Hekhalot accounts should be left to the efforts of scholars of these Jewish mystical trends, a preliminary glimpse into these connections will be made in this investigation. The purpose of this section of our study is to offer brief insights into the aural proclivities of the Hekhalot literature, which, in our opinion, are deeply rooted in the apocalyptic mold of the *Shem* tradition found in early Jewish works such as the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.

Manifestations of the Deity

In our study we already learned that the main dissimilarity between the *Kavod* and the *Shem* ideologies was their different ways of conveying the divine presence: in one tradition the adept received a vision of the divine form while in the other tradition – this kind of theophany was markedly missing and instead its aural counterpart was given in the form of the divine voice or other audial manifestations. Keeping in mind these theophanic developments, let us turn our attention to the conceptual world of Hekhalot mysticism. Analyzing descriptions of an adept's theophanic experience in the Hekhalot accounts, Peter Schäfer offers the following remark:

The first surprising result of an examination of the texts is that the ascent accounts say almost nothing at all about what the mystic actually sees when he finally arrives at the goal of his wishes. The reader, who has followed the adept in his dangerous and toilsome ascent through the seven palaces, and whose expectations have been greatly raised, is rather disappointed.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ P. Schäfer, "The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism," in: idem, *Hekhalot-Studien*, 277–95 at 285.

Schäfer's remark is important for our study since it draws attention to the striking feature of the theophanic descriptions found in some of the Hekhalot writings where in the apex of the heavenly journey the apparition of the deity's human-like form is missing.

Schäfer notices that these reformulations are intentional and constitute a deliberate strategy of the authors or editors of the Hekhalot accounts. In relation to this he notes that ...

... the editors of the Hekhalot literature do not trouble themselves with communicating the contents of any such a vision - whether or not there is one. I do believe, however, that this lack of communication does not result from some inability or timidity on the part of the authors or editors, let alone from the loss of some crucial passages in the course of the manuscript transmission; rather, I hold that our authors' or editors' reticence with regard to the visionary aspect of the ascent experience - or, to be more precise, regarding not just any kind of visionary aspect (since the Hekhalot literature is clearly full of "visual elements") but the peak of this visionary experience, namely, the vision of God on his throne - is part of their deliberate editorial strategy and hence their message: they do not want to emphasize the vision of God as the climax of the mystic's ascent⁴⁹

In his other work, Schäfer further affirms this tenet of Hekhalot literature's symbolic world by saying that "the 'content' of the vision according to the Hekhalot literature – [is] not the image and features of God on his throne but the inclusion of the mystic in the heavenly liturgy."⁵⁰ The absence of "the image and features of God," which represent the familiar markers

⁴⁹ Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 341-342.

⁵⁰ Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 341. In his other work he observes that "the information the texts provide concerning what the successful *yored merkavah* actually sees indeed is disappointing..." Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 153. Other distinguished scholars of early Jewish mystical accounts also noticed this peculiarity in conveying of the manifestations of God. Thus, Ithamar Gruenwald observes that "in fact, the idea that humans and angels alike are unable to see God is also stressed several times in the Hekhalot literature. Despite the daring modes of expression in that literature, the direct physical encounter with God is generally ruled out. The mystics whose experiences are described in the Hekhalot literature expect to see 'the King in (all) His beauty,' but when it comes to a face-to-face meeting with God, one repeatedly hears of what is and should be done in order to avoid the damaging consequences of the experience." I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Second, Revised Edition; Leiden: Brill, 2014) 130. On this topic see also I. Chernus, "Visions of God in Merkavah Mysticism," *JSJ* 13 (1982) 123–146; I. Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism: Studies in Apocalypticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism* (New York: Lang, 1988) 108ff; R. Elior, "The Concept of God in Hekhalot Mysticism," in: *Binah, Studies in Jewish Thought II* (ed. J. Dan; London: Praeger, 1989) 97–120; Kuyt, *The "Descent" to the Chariot*, 5; D. Arbel, *Beholders of Divine Secrets: Mysticism and Myth in the Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature* (Albany: SUNY, 2003) 27-28.

of the *Kavod*'s revelatory mode, in fact is so distinctive in the Hekhalot accounts that it empowers some scholars to label Hekhalot's mode of presentation of the deity as "apophatic."⁵¹

These scholarly observations are important for our study. If indeed evading the portrayal of God's Form on the Throne is a part of the deliberate theological strategy of the Hekhalot authors, it calls to mind some aforementioned traditions reflected in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. There, the text's adept, in the apex of his visionary experience, was also denied a vision of the divine Form on the Throne. It is also significant that while in both accounts the adepts are denied access to the vision of the divine form, some other features of the visionary paradigm, or in Schäfer's expression "visual elements" are still present. The language of the ocularcentric trend thus is not completely abandoned, although the teleological apex of the visionary encounter – God's anthropomorphic manifestation – is markedly absent. In view of these conceptual constellations, it appears that in the Hekhalot accounts, as well as the *Apocalypse of Abraham*,⁵² one encounters a creative mix of the *Kavod* and *Shem* paradigms.⁵³

In the aforementioned scholarly reflections another important idea is found. Thus, Peter Schäfer repeatedly draws his attention to the fact that, instead of emphasizing the vision of God as the climax of the mystic's ascent, the Hekhalot materials are "more interested in his becoming

⁵¹ Thus, Schäfer notes that "One may call this a clear case of 'apophaticism,' as Philip Alexander suggests (private communication)...." Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 341.

⁵² In light of the connections between the visionary and aural praxis, it is intriguing that veneration of the Deity is described in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* through the paradoxical formulae of seeing/not seeing: "He whom you will see (*ego же узршу*) going before both of us in a great sound of *qedushah* is the Eternal One who had loved you, whom himself you will not see (*самого же не зршу*)." (*Апoc. Ab.* 16:3). Kulik, *Retroverting the Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 22. Philonenko-Sayar and Philonenko, *L'Apocalypse d'Abraham. Introduction, texte slave, traduction et notes*, 70.

⁵³ Schäfer notices this paradoxical mix of vision and audition in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, saying that "in fact, the entire narrative in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* is a graphic dramatization of the enigmatic phrase that opens Gen. 15: "the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision (*ba-mahazeh*)," with its apparent tension between the spoken word and the seen vision, in other words, between an audition and a vision." Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 87.

part of the liturgical performance in heaven.”⁵⁴ While Schäfer’s analysis does not delve into the interrelationships between the visual and aural paradigms or their conceptual origins, his remark suggests the possibility of the exchange of one praxis for another, namely, the substitution of the visionary routine that beholds the image and features of God for the aural practice of the mystic’s inclusion in the heavenly liturgy.⁵⁵

This paradigm shift substitutes the visual practice of seeing the divine Form with the aural, “liturgical” praxis, and evokes the *Apocalypse of Abraham*’s depiction of the patriarch’s experience in the heavenly Throne Room. As one remembers, there the adept also participated in liturgical communion with the angels.

While the “visual” characteristics of the divine manifestation are subdued or even silenced in some Hekhalot writings, these accounts, very similar to the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, appear to be offering some aural portrayals of the deity. Thus, speaking about the adept’s participation in the heavenly liturgy, Schäfer suggests that the deity’s presence (which in the visionary paradigm is often depicted as His Face) might itself be manifested through this celestial liturgical event. He argues that “the ‘stormy’ heavenly occurrence reflected on God’s

⁵⁴ Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 342. In relation to Schäfer’s comments Elliot Wolfson notes that “in the course of criticizing Scholem’s view on the centrality of the visionary experience, Schäfer marvels at the fact that the ascent accounts say almost nothing about what the mystic actually sees when he arrives at the throne of glory. It is wrong to deduce from this, however, that the vision is not part of the culminating stage in the ascent. I think Schäfer is absolutely right in pointing out that a prime reason for the ascent is the participation of the adept in the liturgy of the heavenly court. Indeed, the *yeridah la-merkavah* (entry to the chariot) that follows the ascent to the seventh palace is fundamentally a liturgical act. But—and here is the critical point—participation in the angelic choir arises precisely in virtue of the mystic’s entry to the realm of the chariot and consequent vision of the enthroned glory. One cannot separate in an absolute way the visionary and liturgical aspects of this experience; indeed, it might be said that in order to praise God one must see God. The magical and liturgical elements are a legitimate part of the diverse textual units that make up this corpus, but they should not overshadow the position assumed by the ecstatic vision.” Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 117. See also E.R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) 555.

⁵⁵ Not speaking directly about the conceptual origins or the nature of the *Shem* conceptual trend, Schäfer in his other studies nevertheless appears to intuitively affirm its influence on a significant portion of Hekhalot materials by stating that “‘God is his name’ is the message; large sections of the Hekhalot literature can be read as a theology of the name.” Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 165.

countenance is none other than the heavenly liturgy. The liturgy of the angels is a cosmic event in which God participates as a partner.”⁵⁶

Other features of Hekhalot literature also seem to point to the possibility of the aural manifestations of the deity. One such symbolic expression involves the peculiar references to the deity’s garments. *Hekhalot Rabbati* §252 portrays the deity as being clothed in the “embroideries of song.”⁵⁷ This tradition of investiture with praise or song can be understood as an aural counterpart to the clothing metaphors in the *Kavod* visionary trend where the divine form is enveloped in the attire known as the *Haluq* (חלוק), an attribute that underlines the anthropomorphic nature of the divine extent. It is noteworthy that in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* the Deity is also enveloped in the sound of angelic praise, a description that once again reaffirms the aural ideology of the Slavonic apocalypse:

And he [Yahoel] said to me, "Remain with me, do not fear! He whom you will see going before both of us in a great sound of *qedushah* is the Eternal One who had loved you, whom himself you will not see." (*Apoc. Ab.* 16:2-4).⁵⁸

In relation to the aural traditions present in early Jewish mystical testimonies,⁵⁹ we should note that in the Hekhalot literature, as well as in the Merkavah rabbinic speculations, one can find repeated references to the imagery of the heavenly Voice.⁶⁰ These manifestations of the

⁵⁶ Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 164.

⁵⁷ "Ornamented King, garlanded with ornamentation, adorned with embroideries of song." J.R. Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation: Major Texts of Merkavah Mysticism* (SJJTP, 20; Leiden: Brill, 2013) 134.

⁵⁸ Kulik, *Retroverting the Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 22.

⁵⁹ On the aural trends in later Kabbalistic materials see M. Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000) 355, n. 72; idem, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005) 76ff.

⁶⁰ On the heavenly Voice imagery in these materials, see Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature*, 71, 75, 108-131, 168-169; idem, *The Faces of the Chariot*, 14, 34-35, 202-204, 257, 375; Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 191, 194; Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 116, 144, 203, 205, 229, 240, 399.

heavenly Voice are surrounded by the set of familiar aural markers reminiscent of the Deuteronomic developments, as well as traditions found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.⁶¹

Finally, it is also noteworthy that the features of other celestial beings, especially those who are situated in close proximity to the theophanic abode of the deity, are also affected by the aural symbolism. Here, like in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the aural features of the immediate divine retinue and the “furniture” of God, including the Living Creatures of the Throne (the *Hayyot*) and even the Throne itself, implicitly reaffirm the aural nature of the divine manifestation. Scholars previously noted striking aural symbolism that accompanies such descriptions. For example, reflecting on the imagery found in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, Schäfer notes: “Yet a description of the king on his throne is not given now. Rather, a hymn follows, to be exact, the hymn which the throne of glory itself recites daily before God.”⁶² All subjects and even “items” of God’s abode are thus drawn into the overwhelming aural praxis of the celestial liturgy, and even the deity’s seat is not able to escape the urgency of this routine.⁶³

This is very similar to the conceptual developments found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* where the classic “visionary” markers of the Throne Room are also substituted for the aural ones. Thus, for example, the *Hayyot* of the throne, rather than holding the divine presence, are depicted as singing *qedushah*.

⁶¹ Thus, David Halperin points to the possible Deuteronomic roots of the *בת קול* symbolism: “... what led the storytellers to their choice of miracles? ... Deuteronomy stresses the fiery character of the revelation (especially in chapters 4-5). God at Sinai, like the angel in the *merkabah* stories, speaks ‘from the midst of the fire’ (Deuteronomy 4-5).” Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, 16.

⁶² Schäfer, “The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism,” 286.

⁶³ Cf. *Hekhalot Rabbati* §94: “Rejoice, rejoice, throne of glory! Chant, chant, seat of the Most High! Cry out, cry out, lovely furnishing by which wonder after wonder is accomplished! Make the King who see upon you happy indeed!” Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 57; *Hekhalot Rabbati* §251: “When he stands before the throne of glory, he opens and he recites the song that the throne of glory sings every single day.” Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 133.

The Adept's Aural Praxis

We already noted that in some Hekhalot accounts the depiction of the deity and other celestial agents are surrounded with familiar aural markers, prominent also in early Jewish apocalyptic works affected by the *Shem* paradigm. A similar mold of this tradition also plays an important role in the description of the mystical adept's practices found in Hekhalot literature. It appears that the protagonists of these mystical accounts are never able to close their mouths or to shut their ears from the overarching aural praxis. Indeed the aural imagery permeates Hekhalot accounts that describe their heroes as singing songs, chanting chants, praising praises, voicing angelic and divine names, uttering adjurations, reciting texts, and praying prayers. We also learn that many of these practices are shared between humans and the heavenly citizens, angelic and divine beings, who are also forever predestined to participate in these aural routines.

These aural practices come to their pinnacle in the protagonists' participation in the celestial liturgy – the culmination of the adepts' experience in heaven, which sometimes serves as the aural counterpart to the vision of the divine Form. The aim of the heavenly journey thus becomes “not so much the vision of God on his throne, but more so the participation in the cosmic praise.”⁶⁴ This aural praxis appears to be so overwhelming that Peter Schäfer even suggests we call it a *unio liturgica*.⁶⁵

The adept's participation in the celestial liturgy also plays an important role in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. In that text there is a similar emphasis on liturgical praxis of the patriarch when the great angel-choirmaster teaches the adept how to participate in the heavenly

⁶⁴ Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 164.

⁶⁵ “I have proposed that for this experience we employ the phrase *unio liturgica*, liturgical union or communion, in contrast to the misleading phrase *unio mystica*, or mystical union, of the adept with God. This liturgical union of the mystic with the angels and, to a certain degree, also with God (occurring during the angels' and the mystic's joint praise of God) is one of the most important characteristics shared by the Hekhalot literature and the ascent apocalypses.” Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 341.

liturgy.⁶⁶ It is also noteworthy that in another Slavonic apocalypse, *2 Enoch*, a text profoundly affected by the ocularcentric apocalyptic mold, the seer teaches the angels to participate in the liturgy, though he himself is not depicted as participating in this liturgical praxis. In the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, in contrast, the adept sings along with the angels—first with the heavenly choirmaster, Yahoel, and then with the Living Creatures of the divine Throne.⁶⁷

These developments and their similarities to the Hekhalot materials have been previously noted by many scholars. Peter Schäfer summarizes these scholarly efforts, noting that “it is obvious, and has been noticed by Scholem and others, that some of the distinctive characteristics of the *Apocalypse of Abraham* are amazingly close to those of the Hekhalot literature.”⁶⁸

He further adds that “the closest parallel between the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and the Hekhalot literature consists in the importance that is attached to the participation of the visionary in the heavenly liturgy - the transformation that the visionary undergoes through this participation.... Although the *Apocalypse of Abraham* does not go as far as the Hekhalot literature, the similarity between both texts cannot be overlooked.”⁶⁹

The Adept's Aural Ascent

⁶⁶ Scholars have noticed that the aural praxis of the visionary also occupies an important place in other early apocalypses. Thus, Himmelfarb notes that “the significance of singing the song of the angels in the apocalypses is made clear in the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, where the visionary's ability to join the angels in their song shows that he has achieved a status equal to theirs.” Himmelfarb, “Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the Hekhalot Literature,” 93.

⁶⁷ *Apoc. Ab.* 18:1-3: “<And> while I was still reciting the song, the edge of the fire which was on the expanse rose up on high. And I heard a voice like the roaring of the sea, and it did not cease because of the fire. And as the fire rose up, soaring higher, I saw under the fire a throne [made] of fire and the many-eyed Wheels, and they are reciting the song. And under the throne [I saw] four singing fiery Living Creatures.” Kulik, *Retroverting the Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 23-24.

⁶⁸ Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 92.

⁶⁹ Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 92.

It is possible that in early Jewish mysticism the aural praxis encompasses not only the content of the heavenly liturgy in which the adept is privileged to participate, but also the very ways how he reaches heaven. With respect to this possibility, Peter Schäfer suggests that "the new function of prayer is especially dear in those [Hekhalot] macroforms in which prayer is both the means and the goal of the heavenly journey. The *yored merkavah* executes the heavenly journey through prayer to participate in the heavenly liturgy."⁷⁰

An understanding of the peculiarities of the adept's ascent is important for our study of the aural mold of some Hekhalot accounts and their connections with early apocalyptic materials. In order to better understand these portentous links, we should now direct our attention to the peculiarities of the patriarch's ascent in the Slavonic apocalypse.

The spatial dynamics of the adept's ascent in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* has puzzled generations of scholars. Scholars have often reflected on the peculiarities of the seer's progression to God's abode.⁷¹ Abraham's entrance into the divine realm unfolds in chapters 15-17. In these chapters the reader encounters intense liturgical traditions that emphasize the routine of prayer and praise. The aural praxis of the patriarch and his celestial guide Yahoel reaches an important conceptual pinnacle there, demonstrating the decisive power of prayer in breaching the boundaries between heaven and earth.

Intriguingly, the work gives scant details about Abraham's ascent through various levels of the heavens. On the contrary, in the Slavonic apocalypse the seer achieves immediate access to the upper region of heaven through his recitation of a hymn. This could be quite puzzling for a reader accustomed to the ocularcentric paradigm, with its attention to the details of the various

⁷⁰ Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 163.

⁷¹ Cf. J.C. Poirier, "The Ouranology of the *Apocalypse of Abraham*," *JSJ* 35.4 (2004) 391-408.

levels of heaven, each one containing symbolic content of its own. Indeed, the apocalyptic narratives of the *Kavod* paradigm often stress the importance of “structured” space by demonstrating the gradual progress of its visionaries through the various echelons of heaven. The progression implicitly underlines the *Kavod* ideology, since the heavens are understood as a structured house for the Deity’s Form.

In light of these conceptual peculiarities of the *Kavod* paradigm, it is not coincidental that in the auricularcentric framework of the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the long song of Abraham in chapter 17 – the audial medium of the patriarch’s ascension – serves as a striking alternative to the usual ascent-through-the-heavens pattern. Keeping in mind these conceptual developments we should direct our attention to the song of Abraham, which plays an important role in the patriarch’s transition from the lower realm to the upper realm.

Scholars have noted that this song not only assists the seer in overcoming the fiery obstacles and fear of ascending into the dwelling place of God – it actually serves as a medium of ascent. Thus, Martha Himmelfarb has suggested that “the *Apocalypse of Abraham* treats the song sung by the visionary as part of the means of achieving ascent rather than simply as a sign of having achieved angelic status after ascent.”⁷²

It is quite possible that Abraham’s song stands at the crux of the aural paradigm, challenging that of the ocularcentric trend. In this respect it is not coincidental that the song of Abraham disrupts the normative spatial dynamics, and therefore leads to the collapse of the previous topological order, which in the text coincides with the beginning of the song.⁷³ Thus, in

⁷² Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 64. Peter Schäfer disagrees with Himmelfarb on this feature of the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, offering the following comment: “Himmelfarb suggests (*Ascent to Heaven*, p. 64) that ‘the *Apocalypse of Abraham* treats the song sung by the visionary as part of the means of achieving ascent.’ This does indeed become important in the Hekhalot literature, but I do not think it plays a role here.” Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 92.

⁷³ It is necessary to bring attention to another important aural marker that occurs immediately before the patriarch’s ascent through the song: his encounter with the group of mysterious angels involved in the heavenly

the *Apocalypse of Abraham* 17:3, immediately before Abraham ascends by means of the song, the visionary reports unusual changes affecting the spatial features of his surroundings. When Abraham tries to prostrate himself, as is his wont, he suddenly notices that the surface escapes his knees: “And I wanted to fall face down to the earth. And the place of elevation on which we both stood <sometimes was on high,> sometimes rolled down.”⁷⁴ A couple of verses later in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* 17:5, the visionary reflects again on his unusual spatial situation: “Since there was no earth to fall to, I only bowed down and recited the song which he had taught me.”⁷⁵ All of a sudden, there is no ground beneath Abraham’s feet.

The accompanying angel’s behavior during the ascension is also noteworthy. In Jewish apocalyptic accounts an *angelus interpretes* normally serves as an important figure who affirms the traditional setting of the celestial topology. Thus, during a visionary’s progression, the interpreting angel usually assists the visionary by explaining the contents of the various heavens, gradually leading the seer through the divisions of the heavenly space.

But in the aural paradigm of the Slavonic apocalypse, the customary role of an *angelus interpretes* undergoes some striking revisions. Yahoel, instead of showing and explaining the contents of the various levels of heaven, prefers to teach Abraham how to be attentive to the aural means of ascent by urging the seer to participate fully in aural practices. The apocalypse unveils his repeated insistence on the details of a new ascending routine: “And he [Yahoel] said, ‘Only worship, Abraham, and recite the song which I taught you.’ And he said, ‘Recite without

liturgical praxis. *Apoc. Ab.* 15:6-7 reads: “And behold, in this light a fire was kindled [and there was] of a crowd of many people in male likeness. They were all changing in appearance and likeness, running and being transformed and bowing and shouting in a language the words of which I did not know.” Kulik, *Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 22. This tradition of the patriarch’s encounter with the angelic liturgical praxis at the outset of his own recitation of the hymn to the Deity is probably not coincidental.

⁷⁴ Kulik, *Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 22.

⁷⁵ Kulik, *Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 22.

ceasing.”⁷⁶ Here the aural theurgical praxis might itself serve as the substance of the heavenly reality. The divine presence is literally invoked or constituted by an adept’s aural praxis and actions. If the content of the practitioner’s praise is somehow connected with the aforementioned practice of the invocation of the deity, then the content of the song uttered by Abraham appears also to be noteworthy, especially its first part which is filled with divine names and attributes.⁷⁷

Because of his invocation, Abraham is transported to the highest point of the heavenly realm, God’s dwelling place, without encountering any elements that might be expected in ocularcentric visionary accounts.

A very similar tradition concerning the adept’s transportation by aural means can be observed at the end of Abraham’s vision, when he is returned at once to earth. *Apocalypse of Abraham* 30:1 reads:

And while he was still speaking, I found myself on the earth, and I said, “Eternal, Mighty One, I am no longer in the glory in which I was above, but what my soul desired to understand I do not understand in my heart.”⁷⁸

It is interesting that here, as in his paradoxical ascent, Abraham’s return to earth has an aural accompaniment. But now it is not a song performed by Abraham, but the utterance of the divine Voice.

Several scholars previously noted that the ascent through song theme found in the Slavonic apocalypse is reminiscent of some functions of songs in the Hekhalot literature.⁷⁹ These scholarly

⁷⁶ Kulik, *Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 22.

⁷⁷ Christopher Rowland and Christopher Morray-Jones note that “the hymn in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* includes an extensive recital of the attributes of God.” Rowland and Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God*, 83. Several scholars, including Gershom Scholem, have argued for parallels between the song of Abraham and the hymns found in Hekhalot literature. Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1954) 59-61. For a summary of these arguments see Dean-Otting, *Heavenly Journeys*, 252-253.

⁷⁸ Kulik, *Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 34.

⁷⁹ Thus, Ithamar Gruenwald argues that “the *Apocalypse of Abraham* is extremely important in the study of early Jewish mysticism, and from our point of view is the earliest Jewish source attributing ‘mystical’ or magical qualities to heavenly songs. In general, the songs sung by the heavenly creatures to God on His throne are considered to be songs of praise exclusively, but in this instance the song has a clear magical function. And so the question can be asked, whether this song can teach us about the nature of other angelic songs not explicitly referred

observations are important since they point to the formative significance of the apocalyptic aural traditions for the later Hekhalot developments. Yet, despite the significance of the aural ascent's traditions found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, their value in establishing conceptual bridges between Jewish apocalypticism and early Jewish mysticism remains largely neglected. Here again the consensus appears to be determined by the bulk of the ocularcentric apocalypses. These visionary accounts are often recognized as an essential template for the whole apocalyptic movement, a movement which, in some scholars' opinion, points to the dissimilarities between the "apocalyptic" ascents and their Hekhalot counterparts.⁸⁰

Conclusion

This paper attempted to draw attention to Scholem's one-sided construction of Jewish apocalypticism, a standpoint which still continues to exercise its influence on scholars of early Jewish mysticism. In this scholarly perspective the visionary mold of the *Kavod* paradigm is

to as having such a function, or whether possibly the individual, in our case, is not an indication of the rule. The silence of the apocalyptic sources on this assists us little, and we must settle for the view that the magical quality of these songs is mainly the property of the Merkavah texts. In apocalypticism it is only the *Apocalypse of Abraham* that displays that element." I. Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism: Studies in Apocalypticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism* (New York: Lang, 1988) 154.

⁸⁰ Martha Himmelfarb expresses this scholarly standpoint in one of her studies, writing "I hope that it is now clear why those who turn to the hekhalot literature inspired by Scholem are likely to experience a certain amount of confusion. While the descriptions of the heavenly liturgy and the ceremonial before the divine throne in the hekhalot literature presuppose ascent, narratives of ascent are usually confined to two- or three-line notices. The only extended descriptions of ascent take the form of instructions. One central factor in the diminishing importance of narrative is the concentration of interest in the seventh palace. Because there is less interest in the contents of lower palaces, no one bothers to report on the visionary's passage through them. There is no doubt a close relationship between the movement away from extended narrative and the fact that so much of hekhalot literature was transmitted in small units joined to other units at a later stage. But this only pushes the question back. If extended narrative had been important to the traditions of these traditions, they would have transmitted longer units. The concentration on the seventh palace points to an important difference between hekhalot literature and the apocalypses." Himmelfarb, "Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the Hekhalot Literature," 98. From this passage one can see that, in this scholarly perspective, the visionary apocalyptic mold is considered normative, while its aural counterpart is reduced as a marginal oddity. Thus, in Himmelfarb's opinion, "for the apocalypses the words of the hymns are not important because their heroes are the great heroes of the tradition. They do not require particular techniques to achieve ascent, for they are summoned to heaven." Himmelfarb, "Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the Hekhalot Literature," 93.

considered an essential representation of early Jewish apocalypticism. In some studies of early Jewish mysticism this narrow apocalyptic “visionary” template is often compared with aural, “liturgical” features of Hekhalot literature in order to demonstrate the discontinuity between Jewish apocalypticism and Hekhalot mysticism.⁸¹

This methodological situation is puzzling since while arguing for the multicentricity of Hekhalot literature,⁸² scholars of Jewish mystical trends often deny this multicentric option for apocalypticism, seeing it as a monolithic entity shaped solely by the visionary mold rooted in Ezekiel’s account.⁸³ Even Scholem’s critics, who are tirelessly scrutinizing his research on the Hekhalot accounts, appear to be caught in this narrow and fragmented perspective of early apocalyptic tradition devised by Scholem and other scholars, which often leads them to interpret the differences between the apocalyptic visionary mold and the Hekhalot aural mode as proof of a profound gap between early apocalypticism and Hekhalot mysticism.

Yet, if the paradigmatic value of other apocalyptic molds, including accounts shaped by the auricularcentric *Shem* paradigm, were duly acknowledged, it would supply additional evidence for the close conceptual ties between early apocalyptic traditions and later Jewish

⁸¹ It is intriguing that often in these scholarly interpretations and comparisons, their authors polemicize not using the plethora of conceptual and symbolic expressions reflected in actual apocalyptic texts, but using the Scholemian understanding of these characteristics, his projections, which then are compared to the actual features of the Hekhalot texts and traditions. It represents also one of the constant features for assessing Scholem’s legacy by later critics—especially from the camp of experts in later Jewish mystical traditions who continue to meticulously scrutinize Scholem’s views on Hekhalot literature by reexamining again and again the available textual evidence, while his outdated views on apocalypticism remain a closed canon.

⁸² Thus, in his criticism of Scholem’s and Halperin’s positions, Schäfer laments that “both approaches suffer from the desire to find one explanation for the entire Hekhalot literature, which then assigns all other parts to their places, thus ignoring the extremely complex relations of the texts and the various literary layers within the individual macroform. The Hekhalot literature is not a unity and, therefore, cannot be explained uniformly.” Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 152.

⁸³ In this respect Annette Reed rightly observes that “when Scholem speculated about the relationship between the early Jewish apocalypses and the Hekhalot literature, he naturally drew on the dominant understanding of apocalypses in the scholarship of his time. Most of his contemporaries dealt with “apocalyptic” as a single phenomenon In short, the consensus on the *Sitz im Leben* of early Jewish Apocalyptic prior to the discoveries at Qumran supported Scholem’s hypothesis that the formative stages of the Rabbinic movement was infused with a visionary stream of Jewish thought....” Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of Enochic Literature*, 240-241.

mystical currents. Too often Scholem's critics analyze the "liturgical" features of the Hekhalot mysticism without recognizing that such aural mold constitutes not merely a pioneering invention of the Hekhalot authors, but rather represents an ancient conceptual trajectory, deeply rooted in biblical and apocalyptic accounts. This trend was developed in a long-standing dialogue with the Ezekielian ocularcentric paradigm and can be considered as a rival theophanic tendency of the equal symbolic power. Thus, the "*unio liturgica*" of the Hekhalot accounts does not point to discontinuities between the Hekhalot tradition and biblical and apocalyptic developments, but instead provides further proof that the mystical mold of some of the Hekhalot accounts merely represents a new stage in the development of this ancient aural trend.

However, one should also recognize the difficulties in discerning various apocalyptic molds inside of the rabbinic Merkavah and Hekhalot materials. This discernment is sometimes difficult even in early apocalyptic accounts, including the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, where the aural *Shem* trend is too often disguised in the clothes of the visual *Kavod* paradigm with its ubiquitous Chariot imagery. Moreover, some rudimentary patterns of the later aural developments present in the Hekhalot literature are still very vague in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, but they definitely foreshadow later Hekhalot developments. Better understanding of various specimens of the aural apocalyptic imagery will greatly assist the process of discerning the many symbolic features of early Jewish mystical accounts.

Finally, in light of our previous investigation, we should note that such expressions as "Merkavah Tradition" or "Merkavah Mysticism" can themselves be methodologically confusing and even, perhaps, methodologically misleading. Surrounded by the peculiar markers of the *Kavod* paradigm, the term *Merkavah*, inadvertently causes us to anticipate an encounter with an

ocularcentric conceptual mold of the mystical speculation,⁸⁴ while distracting our attention from its aural counterpart that is so crucial and widespread in the aforementioned mystical texts and traditions.

The recognition of the importance of the aural tradition in the Hekhalot literature might also have a profound impact on the long-lasting debates about the relationships between the “experiential” and the “exegetical” in early Jewish mysticism. Often the “experiential” nature of one or another mystical account is judged according to its adherence to the ecstatic visions or peculiar types of ascents, affected by a distinctive ocularcentric mold. Yet, their aural conceptual counterparts, in which the approach to and the experience of the celestial and the divine realities are executed through non-visionary means, are often interpreted as “imitations” or “surrogates” of the authentic mystical experience. In this understanding the realities associated with aural praxis are often perceived to be “exegetical substitutes,” or just “memories” of the “actual experience,” usually tied to the visionary praxis. Yet, if one assumes the equality of the aural and visionary mystical practices, then the adepts’ reading, recitation, invocation, retelling, and other aural performances became not merely imitations of the “experience” but instead the original and self-sufficient mystical praxis.

⁸⁴ This paper is not intended to deny the “visionary” element of Hekhalot literature, but rather to bring attention to its powerful conceptual counterpart in the form of the aural mold. Moreover, I believe that some Hekhalot macroforms, like, for example, *3 Enoch (Sefer Hekhalot)* are predominantly shaped by the visionary mold of apocalypticism. I have explored in depth these connections in my study of the Enoch-Metatron tradition. On this see A. Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition* (TSAJ, 107; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2005).