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23 Two Powers in Heaven... Manifested

Introduction

In recent decades there has been an increased scholarly interest in rabbinic and Hekhalot testimonies pertaining to the so-called two powers in heaven controversy.¹ Scholars often argue about the importance of these rabbinic debates for understanding the origins of early Jewish mysticism or even the roots of early Christology. While previous studies provide many valuable insights about these portentous conceptual developments, they consistently ignore one important aspect found in these accounts, namely, the striking contrast between the theophanic attributes of the first power, represented by God, and the details of the second power's epiphany, epitomized by Metatron. Yet, it appears that in the aforementioned accounts one can detect a peculiar tension between the two theophanic traditions: one, audial or auricularcentric, applied to the deity, and the other, visionary or ocularcentric, applied to the great angel. Thus, the second power, often represented by Metatron, is depicted with the distinctive attributes of the visionary trend, while God's presence is portrayed through peculiar aural symbolism, namely, through the conception of the heavenly voice.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore more closely these differences in theophanic descriptions found in the two powers in heaven accounts. Before we

1 On the two powers in heaven controversy see D. Boyarin, "Two Powers in Heaven; or, the Making of a Heresy," in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, eds. H. Najman and J. H. Newman, JSJSup 83 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 331–70; idem, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religions (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); idem, "Beyond Judaisms: Metatron and the Divine Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism," *JSJ* 41 (2010): 323–65; N. Deutsch, *Guardians of the Gate. Angelic Vice Regency in Late Antiquity*, BSJS 22 (Leiden: Brill, 1999); A. Goshen-Gottstein, "Jewish-Christian Relations and Rabbinic Literature—Shifting Scholarly and Relational Paradigms: The Case of Two Powers," in *Interaction Between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art, and Literature*, eds. M. Poorthuis, J. Schwartz, and J. Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 15–44; P. Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); A. F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*, SJLA 25 (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

Note: It is a great privilege to offer this chapter for a volume honoring Professor Gabriele Boccaccini, a scholar from whom I have learned so much.

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proceed to a close analysis of the rabbinic and Hekhalot specimens related to the two powers in heaven debates, a short introduction into the biblical theophanic traditions is necessary.

Ocular and Aural Paradigms of the Divine Presence

In the Hebrew Bible the deity often appears in an anthropomorphic shape. Such anthropomorphic symbolism comes to its most forceful expression in the Israelite priestly ideology, known to us as the Priestly source, wherein God is depicted in “the most tangible corporeal similitudes.”² Elliot Wolfson remarks that “a critical factor in determining the biblical (and, by extension, subsequent Jewish) attitude toward the visualization of God concerns the question of the morphological resemblance between the human body and the divine.”³ Indeed, in the biblical priestly traditions the deity is understood to have created humanity in his own image (Gen 1:27) and is therefore frequently described as possessing a humanlike form.

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” (כְבוֹד יְהוָה).⁴ This conception is always expressed in the Priestly tradition in the symbolism grounded in mythological corporeal imagery.⁵ The visible manifestation of the deity establishes a peculiar “visual” or “ocularcentric” theophanic mode that becomes influential in some biblical and apocalyptic depictions of God. One paradigmatic account of the portrayal of the divine *Kavod* is found in the first chapter of the book of Ezekiel, where the *Kavod* is portrayed as enthroned in human form enveloped by fire.⁶ The *Kavod* thus becomes an emblematic symbol of the theophanic ideology that postulates visual apprehension of the divine presence.

While containing forceful anthropomorphic ideologies, the Hebrew Bible also attests to polemical narratives contesting the corporeal depictions of the deity and offers a different conception of the divine presence. Scholars have long

² M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 191.

³ E. R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 20.

⁴ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 200–01.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

noted a sharp opposition of the book of Deuteronomy and the so-called Deuteronomistic school to early anthropomorphic developments.⁷

The Deuteronomistic school is widely thought to have initiated the polemic against the ocularcentric anthropomorphic conceptions of the deity, which were subsequently adopted by the prophets Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah.⁸ Seeking to dislodge ancient anthropomorphism, the book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic school promulgated an anticorporeal aural ideology of the divine Name,⁹ with its conception of the earthly sanctuary as the exclusive dwelling abode of God's Name.¹⁰ In the Deuteronomistic ideology, apparitions of the deity are often depicted through nonvisual, aural symbolism of the divine Voice. Tryggve Mettinger asserts that "by way of contrast, the Deuteronomistic theology is programmatically abstract: during the Sinai theophany, Israel perceived no form (*temuna*); she only heard the voice of her God (Deut 4:12, 15). The Deuteronomistic preoccupation with God's voice and words represents an auditive, non-visual theme."¹¹

It appears that this polemical stand between aural and ocular modes of apprehension and expression of the divine presence continued to exercise its influence in later rabbinic and Hekhalot accounts, including materials connected with the two powers in heaven controversy, wherein one can detect a peculiar tension between the visual and aural renderings of the "second power" and God. We should now proceed to a close analysis of these polemical developments.

Aher's Vision of Metatron

One of the crucial testimonies pertaining to the two powers in heaven controversy is a passage found in the treatise Hagigah of the Babylonian Talmud, in which a

⁷ Ian Wilson discerns that scholars usually trace the introduction of such an ideology to particular historical events such as "the centralization of the cult, the loss of the ark from the northern kingdom, or the destruction of the temple." I. Wilson, *Out of the Midst of the Fire: Divine Presence in Deuteronomy*, SBLDS 151 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 6–7.

⁸ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 198.

⁹ For the reconstruction of the ideology of the divine Name in Deuteronomy and other biblical materials see S. Richter, *The Deuteronomistic History and the Name Theology: lesakken semo sam in the Bible and the Ancient Near East*, BZAW 318 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 26–39.

¹⁰ Tryggve Mettinger observes that, in the *Shem* theology, "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*, ConBOT 18 (Lund: Wallin & Dalholm, 1982), 124. See also Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 193.

¹¹ Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 46.

rabbinic seer, Elisha ben Abuya or Aher, became misled by the appearance of the great angel Metatron. B. Hag. 15a¹² unveils the following tradition:

Aher mutilated the shoots. Of him Scripture says: Suffer not thy mouth to bring thy flesh into guilt. What does it refer to?—He saw that permission was granted to Metatron to sit and write down the merits of Israel. Said he: It is taught as a tradition that on high there is no sitting and no emulation, and no back, and no weariness. Perhaps,—God forbid!—there are two divinities! [Thereupon] they led Metatron forth, and punished him with sixty fiery lashes, saying to him: Why didst thou not rise before him when thou didst see him? Permission was [then] given to him to strike out the merits of Aher. A Bath Kol went forth and said: Return, ye backsliding children—except Aher. [Thereupon] he said: Since I have been driven forth from yonder world, let me go forth and enjoy this world. So Aher went forth into evil courses.¹³

Numerous interpretations of this enigmatic passage have been previously offered. But what has been often neglected in these scholarly probes is the striking contrast in theophanic portrayals of the first power and the second power. It appears that in the aforementioned textual unit, appearances of Metatron and God are clearly depicted through two different sets of theophanic details belonging respectfully to the ocular and aural paradigms of the divine presence. Thus, Metatron is depicted with the distinctive features of the emblematic symbol of the ocularcentric trend—the Ezekielian Chariot, while the “true” deity is portrayed through the peculiar aural symbolism, namely, through the conception of the heavenly Voice.

First, we should draw our attention to the features of Metatron’s epiphany. The “divine” attribute that clearly puzzles Aher in the Hagigah’s passage is the angel’s sitting, a motif that invokes here the memory of the divine Seat—a pivotal feature of the Ezekielean Chariot.¹⁴ Yet, curiously, the *vision* of Metatron’s sitting in heaven is not corrected by the alternative *vision* of the “true” Chariot,¹⁵ but

¹² On various manuscript versions of b. Hag. 15a, see P. Alexander, “3 Enoch and the Talmud,” *JSJ* 18 (1987): 40–68; C. R. A. Morray-Jones, “Hekhalot Literature and Talmudic Tradition: Alexander’s Three Test Cases,” *JSJ* 22 (1991): 1–39.

¹³ I. Epstein, *The Babylonian Talmud. Hagiga* (London: Soncino, 1935–1952), 15a.

¹⁴ Reflecting on Aher’s encounter with Metatron, Daniel Boyarin argues “that it was the combination of sitting, suggesting the enthronement ... which leads to the idea of Two Sovereignities.” Boyarin, “Beyond Judaisms,” 350. In the same vein, Daniel Abrams earlier noted that “the heavenly enthronement or ‘sitting’ of Metatron, which was apparently a sign to Elisha that Metatron was himself divine, supports this understanding of Elisha’s heresy.” D. Abrams, “The Boundaries of Divine Ontology,” *HTR* 87 (1994): 294.

¹⁵ The polemical stand against the ocularcentric representation of the deity is also underlined by Aher’s own reaction, namely, his doubt and his postulation about a possibility of the “two authorities in heaven.” In other words, he does not merely succumb to the anthropomorphic replica of the deity in the form of Metatron, but he doubts it.

instead by an apparition of the divine Voice (בַּת קוֹל), which is understood in our passage as the true manifestation of God.¹⁶ Scholars also often detect the anthropomorphic overtones of the ocularcentric paradigm in Aher's statement, according to which "on high there is no sitting and no emulation, and no back, and no weariness." Thus, reflecting on this tradition, Alan Segal notes that "the rabbis are determined to refute the whole idea of heavenly enthronement by stating that such things as 'sitting' and other anthropomorphic activities are unthinkable in heaven."¹⁷ Philip Alexander also points to the anthropomorphic ocularcentric dimension of Aher's utterance, stating that the list suggests that "God and the angels are without body parts or passions."¹⁸

Furthermore, some scholars also point to possible theophanic connotations in Elisha's statement by arguing that each element of Aher's list appears to refer to a verse that describes theophanic attributes of the deity. Thus, Daniel Boyarin suggests that "each of the elements in the list refers to a verse: thus, for standing, we find Num 12:5, where the verse reads: 'And YHWH came down on a column of cloud and stood in front of the Tent.' ... The crux, 'back,' is now neatly solved as well. Referring to the back of God that Moses allegedly saw (Exod 33:23), the text denies the literal existence of that as well."¹⁹

The Aher episode has also survived in the Hekhalot materials. In a Hekhalot version of the Aher story reflected in *Merkavah Rabbah* (*Synopse* §672), one finds the already familiar tension between ocularcentric and aural traditions:

They said: When Elisha descended into to the chariot, *he saw* (רָאָה), with reference to Metatron, that he was given authority for one hour in the day to sit down and to write the merits of Israel. He said: The sages have taught: "On high there is no standing and no sitting, no jealousy and no rivalry, no pride and no humility." He conceived the thought that perhaps there are two authorities in heaven. At once He brought Metatron outside the curtain and struck him sixty times with blows of fire. And they gave Metatron authority to burn the merits of Elisha. There went out a heavenly voice and it said: Repent, returning sons (Jer 3:22), except for the Other One.²⁰

16 On heavenly Voice conceptions in rabbinic and Hekhalot materials, see D. Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 71, 75, 108–31, 168–69; idem, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision*, TSAJ 16 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 14, 34–35, 202–04, 257, 375; Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 191, 194; J. R. Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation: Major Texts of Merkavah Mysticism*, SJJTP 20 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 116, 144, 203, 205, 229, 240, 399.

17 Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, 61.

18 Alexander, "3 Enoch and the Talmud," 60.

19 Boyarin, "Beyond Judaisms," 347.

20 P. Schäfer, with M. Schlüter and H. G. von Mutius, *Synopse zur Hekhaloth-Literatur*, TSAJ 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981), 246; Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 203.

Another Hekhalot version of Aher's episode found in 3 Enoch 16:1–5 (*Synopse* §20), now uttered from Metatron's mouth, still fashions the same contrast between the corporeal characteristics of the great angel and the auricular depiction of the deity:

At first I sat upon a great throne at the door of the seventh palace, and I judged all the denizens of the heights on the authority of the Holy One, blessed be he. I assigned greatness, royalty, rank, sovereignty, glory, praise, diadem, crown, and honor to all the princes of kingdoms, when I sat in the heavenly court. The princes of kingdoms stood beside me, to my right and to my left, by authority of the Holy One, blessed be he. But when Aher came to behold the vision of the chariot and set eyes upon me, he was afraid and trembled before me. His soul was alarmed to the point of leaving him, because of his fear, dread, and terror of me, when he saw me seated upon a throne like a king, with ministering angels standing beside me as servants and all the princes of kingdoms crowned with crowns surrounding me. Then he opened his mouth and said, "There are indeed two powers in heaven!" Immediately a divine voice came out from the presence of the Shekinah and said, "Come back to me, apostate sons—apart from Aher!" Then Anafiel YHWH, the honored, glorified, beloved, wonderful, terrible, and dreadful Prince, came at the command of the Holy One, blessed be he, and struck me with sixty lashes of fire and made me stand to my feet.²¹

In comparison with the testimonies about Aher's apostasy found in b. Hag. 15a and Merkavah Rabbah (*Synopse* §672), 3 Enoch's account of Metatron's demotion becomes embellished with additional theophanic symbolism.

Unlike in b. Hag. 15a and *Synopse* §672, where Metatron's sitting position is explained through his role as the celestial scribe, whose function is to write down the merits of Israel,²² here the great angel is portrayed as the enthroned celestial ruler and arbiter, commissioned to judge "all the denizens of the heights on the authority of the Holy One." The passage provides further details about Metatron's celestial court and its entourage in the form of "the princes of kingdoms," specifically mentioning that "he sat in the heavenly court." In 3 Enoch, therefore, Aher encounters not merely a scribe who has a seat, but the enthroned vice-regent, surrounded with the stunning retinue of the crowned princes.²³ In this respect it is not coincidental that the notorious list that postulates that there is no sitting

²¹ P. Alexander, "3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of) Enoch," in: *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols., ed. J. H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983–1985), 1.223–315 (268); Schäfer et al., *Synopse*, 10–11.

²² b. Hag. 15a: "He saw that permission was granted to Metatron to sit and write down the merits of Israel"; *Synopse* §672: "he was given authority for one hour in the day to sit down and to write the merits of Israel."

²³ Alexander, "3 Enoch and Talmud," 65; Morray-Jones, "Hekhalot Literature and Talmudic Tradition," 30.

in heaven is not mentioned here, since other, more exalted qualities of Metatron clearly take priority over this previously decisive attribute.²⁴

Further, Metatron's interaction with his "courtiers" in the form of the "princes of kingdoms," on whom he heaps "greatness, royalty, rank, sovereignty, glory, praise, diadem, crown, and honor," is reminiscent of God's actions in relation to the great angel earlier in the story. Metatron, thus, not only acquires the distinctive theophanic qualities himself, he now, like God, is able to impose them on other subjects.

Aher's perception of Metatron also undergoes striking revisions in Sefer Hekhalot's version of the story. First, the nature of mystical experience as ocular experience is emphasized in 3 Enoch 16 through the phrase "Aher came to behold the vision of the chariot and set eyes upon me (בצפיית המרכבה ונתן עיניו בי)." In contrast, both b. Hag. 15a and Merkavah Rabbah (*Synopse* §672) simply state that he saw (ראה).

A second significant detail is Aher's unusual reaction to Metatron's epiphany. Metatron reports that Aher "was afraid and trembled before me. His soul was alarmed to the point of leaving him because of his fear, dread, and terror of me." Both b. Hag. 15a and Merkavah Rabbah do not mention such a dramatic response from the infamous seer. Yet, this reaction enhances the ocularcentric trust of Metatron's epiphany by linking it to the memory of biblical and pseudographical accounts that attempt to portray seers overwhelmed with fear during their encounters with the divine Form. The seer's fear, therefore, like in many other Jewish materials, serves here as the mirror of the theophany.²⁵ Furthermore, Metatron's ocularcentric profile in 3 Enoch is also enhanced through his remarkable apotheosis that occupies 10 chapters of this work.²⁶

²⁴ Yet, the memory of this important attribute has not been forgotten in 3 Enoch, since in the course of demotion Anafiel places Metatron in a standing position: "Then Anafiel YHWH... made me stand to my feet." Alexander notes that "3 Enoch makes no mention of the teaching that there is 'no sitting, no rivalry, no neck, and no weariness' in heaven, but 'sitting' in its almost literal sense clearly plays an important part in its version of the story." Alexander, "3 Enoch and Talmud," 64.

²⁵ On fear as a human response to theophany see J. C. VanderKam, *From Revelation to Canon: Studies in Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 343; J. Becker, *Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament*, AnBib 25 (Rome: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 22.

²⁶ The conceptual steps of Metatron's elevation into the rank of the ocularcentric "second power" are truly monumental in 3 Enoch. The story of his exaltation begins in Chapter 6, where Anafiel YHWH removes Enoch from the mid of humankind and transports him to heaven in the fiery chariot. In Chapter 7, Enoch-Metatron is installed near the throne of Glory. In the following Chapter 8, he is endowed with the totality of divine knowledge heaped upon him by the deity himself. Chapter 9 describes the cosmic enlargement of Metatron's body and

Similar to the enhancement of the second power's theophanic profile, the aural and aniconic features of the first power, represented by God, also are boosted. Thus, in 3 Enoch the "true deity" becomes even more aniconic and bodiless than in b. Hag. 15a and *Synopse* §672, wherein it appears that God himself punishes Metatron with sixty fiery lashes. In 3 Enoch, however, this role is now openly assigned to another angelic power in the form of Anafiel YHWH.

One can see that, in comparison with b. Hag. 15a and *Merkavah Rabbah*, in *Sefer Hekhalot* the contrast between the visual, corporeal stand of the second power and the aural, aniconic profile of the first power reaches its ultimate form. While scholars often argue that the scene of Metatron's demotion in 3 Enoch represents a later interpolation of an "orthodox editor,"²⁷ the methodological framework articulated in this study provides new evidence that Metatron's demotion was not a "reactive" development, but rather an "initiating" endeavor, which in its turn provoked the facilitation of Metatron's exaltation.

The accounts of Metatron's elevation (Chapters 6–15) and demotion (Chapter 16) are thus additionally interconnected through the already mentioned figure of Anafiel YHWH, who appears in the beginning of Enoch–Metatron's exaltation in Chapter 6 and then at the end of his demotion in Chapter 16, thus cementing this textual block as a single unit. Such arrangement again reaffirms that the Aher episode does not represent an interpolation but constitutes an integral conceptual part of this *Hekhalot* macroform. Positioning the Anafiel YHWH, whose lofty designation, like Metatron, includes the Tetragrammaton, in the

his acquisition of gigantic wings, the metamorphosis that turns him into a celestial creature. In Chapter 10, the deity makes a throne for his new favorite agent, spreading over his distinguished seat "a coverlet of splendor." Metatron then is placed by the deity on his seat. Further, in Chapter 11, God reveals to the great angel all the mysteries of the universe, and in Chapter 12 he endows Metatron with a glorious robe and a crown, and names him as the Lesser YHWH. In Chapter 13, Metatron's crown is decorated with the letters of the Tetragrammaton. In Chapter 14, Metatron is crowned and receives homage from the angelic hosts. In Chapter 15, which immediately precedes Aher's story, the reader learns about the dramatic metamorphosis of Metatron's body into the celestial extent.

²⁷ H. Odeberg, *3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch* (New York: KTAV, 1973), 86; Alexander, "3 Enoch," 1.268; 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), 338; J. R. Davila, "Of Methodology, Monotheism and Metatron: Introductory Reflections on Divine Mediators and the Origins of the Worship of Jesus," in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus*, eds. C. C. Newman, J. R. Davila, and G. S. Lewis, JSJSup 63 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 16–17; P. Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 130–31.

beginning and at the end of Metatron's story, also provides an important "authorial" guarding framework, which once again underlines the polemical thrust of the composition.²⁸

The Story of the Four Rabbis Who Entered Pardes

For the purposes of our study it will be instructive to draw our attention to another cluster of rabbinic and Hekhalot materials that is closely associated with the two powers in heaven controversy, namely, the story about the four rabbis who entered Pardes, since these accounts often constitute the immediate context of Aher's vision of Metatron.

Some scholars argue that the earliest specimen of this story about the four rabbis is attested in Tosefta. T. Hag. 2.3–4 unveils the following tradition:

Four entered the garden [Paradise]: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, the Other [Elisha], and Aqiba. One gazed (הִבְטִיחַ) and perished, one gazed (הִבְטִיחַ) and was smitten, one gazed (הִבְטִיחַ) and cut down sprouts, and one went up whole and came down whole (עָלָה בְשָׁלֹוֹם). Ben Azzai gazed and perished. Concerning him Scripture says, Precious in the sight of the lord is the death of his saints (Ps 116:15). Ben Zoma gazed and was smitten. Concerning him Scripture says, If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, lest you be satiated with it and vomit it (Prov 25:16). Elisha gazed and cut down sprouts. Concerning him Scripture says, let not your mouth lead you into sin (Qoh 5:5). R. Aqiba went up whole and came down whole. Concerning him Scripture says, Draw me after you, let us make haste. The king has brought me into his chambers (Song of Songs 1:4).²⁹

This story again appears to exhibit a polemic against ocularcentric ideology, a tendency that again has consistently escaped the attention of almost all modern exegetes of this passage.³⁰ It portrays four adepts who entered the mysterious

²⁸ Anafiel's unique mediatorial status as Metatron's virtual double is hinted at in several Hekhalot passages. On these traditions see J. Dan, "Anafiel, Metatron and the Creator," *Tarbiz* 52 (1982): 447–57 [Hebrew]; Deutsch, *Guardians of the Gate*, 45.

²⁹ J. Neusner, *The Tosefta. Translated from the Hebrew with a New Introduction*, 2 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 1.669.

³⁰ Yet, some scholars have previously noticed such a stance against "ocularcentric" traditions. In his analysis of the Story of the Four, Alon Goshen Gottstein notes the polemics against the visionary praxis. He observes that "the editor's point is basic: visionary activity is a form of uncontrolled pleasure seeking, and whoever tries it is doing something other than studying Torah. The sages who engage in visionary activity therefore contradict their own teaching." A. Goshen Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha ben Abuya and Eleazar Ben Arach* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 56.

garden. The experience of three adepts, represented, respectively, by Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, and Elisha ben Abuya (Aher), is portrayed as negative and unfavorable. One of them died, another “was smitten,” and the third became a heretic. It is noteworthy that their praxis in the garden is rendered in distinctively ocular-centric formulae, which involves the term *הִבֵּט*³¹—all three of them “gazed” or “peered.”³² It appears not to be coincidental that in all three instances, when reference to visionary praxis is made, it repeatedly coincides with negative results: “...one gazed (*הִבֵּט*) and perished, one gazed (*הִבֵּט*) and was smitten, one gazed (*הִבֵּט*) and cut the shoots...”

Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, and Elisha ben Abuya thus belong to the chain of practitioners of the same ocular paradigm, as their approach to the divine presence is repeatedly defined through the formulae of “gazing.” Yet, in the case of the adept who ended his experience positively and favorably (Rabbi Akiba), the visionary praxis of “gazing” is not mentioned, and the corresponding terminology is not applied.

A similar contrast between the ocular terminology applied to the first three visionaries and a lack of such terminology in relation to an exemplary adept—R. Akiba—is attested in other versions of the story found in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds,³³ Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah, and Hekhalot literature.³⁴

Furthermore, a textual unit that follows immediately the story of the four who went into Pardes in Tosefta also appears to exhibit a polemical attitude against ocularcentric praxis. T. Hag. 2.5 reads:

To what is the matter to be compared? To a royal garden, with an upper room built over it [to guard it]. What is [the guard’s] duty? *To look, but not to feast his eyes from it.* And they further compared the matter to what? To a platoon passing between two paths, one of fire

³¹ On various occurrences of this term in rabbinic literature see D. Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 93; P. Schäfer, *Hekhalot-Studien*, TSAJ 19 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 241, n. 50.

³² David Halperin notices that in rabbinic literature *הִבֵּט* “is used for examining an infant; for peering into a pit (to examine a fetus thrown there); for the crowd’s straining to catch a glimpse of the scarlet cloth hung inside the Temple vestibule; for peeping into other people’s windows; for God’s gazing down upon His people’s suffering.” He argues that the closest English equivalent to *הִבֵּט* is “to peer.” Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, 93. In relation to the Hekhalot tradition, Peter Schäfer observes that “few passages in the Hekhalot literature combine *hetzitz* with an object that relates to the Merkabah: God’s robe, his beauty, and the vision of the Merkabah.” Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 198.

³³ For comparisons pertaining to the Tosefta and the Talmud accounts, see Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, 86–87.

³⁴ See y. Hag. 77b; b. Hag. 14b; Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 1:27; Hekhalot Zutarti (*Synopse* §338); and Merkabah Rabbah (*Synopse* §671).

and one of ice. [If] it turns to this side, it will be smitten by fire, [and if] it turns to that, it will be smitten by ice. Now what should a person do? He should go right down the middle, and not turn either to this side or to that.³⁵

Here again one can see a distinctive polemical stance that attempts to challenge visual praxis. In the parable from t. Hag. 2.5, such an attitude appears to be rendered through the phrase “to look, but not to feast his eyes from it.” Reflecting on this passage, David Halperin notices that the Tosefta’s passage distinguishes between two types of visual praxis: “looking” and “feasting one’s eyes.”³⁶

Although, traditionally, scholars have considered the versions of the Pardes account, reflected in the Tosefta and Talmuds, as the earliest specimens of this tradition, there are researchers³⁷ who argue that such priority should be given instead to the Hekhalot renderings of the Story of the Four, which in their opinion are stratigraphically earlier and can be placed at the latest in the early fourth century CE.³⁸ Hekhalot Zutarti (*Synopse* §§338–348) and other parallels³⁹ offer the following rendering of the familiar account:

35 Neusner, *The Tosefta*, 1.669–70.

36 Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature*, 93.

37 See C. R. A. Morray-Jones, *A Transparent Illusion: The Dangerous Vision of Water in Hekhalot Mysticism: A Source-Critical and Tradition-Historical Inquiry*, JSJSup 59 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 17–19; J. R. Davila, “Review of *A Transparent Illusion: The Dangerous Vision of Water in Hekhalot Mysticism: A Source-Critical and Tradition-Historical Inquiry* by C. R. A. Morray-Jones,” *JBL* 121 (2002): 585–88.

38 Analyzing Morray-Jones’s hypothesis about the priority of the Hekhalot evidence, James Davila offers the following reflection: “Morray-Jones begins in the first two chapters by recapitulating the convincing case he has made elsewhere that the recension of the story of the four found in the Hekhalot texts known as the *Hekhalot Zutarti* (§§338–39) and the *Merkavah Rabbah* (§§671–73), when cleared of obvious redactional elements from another, third-person version, preserves a first-person account that clearly takes ‘paradise’ to mean the heavenly realm and which predates the versions in the rabbinic ‘mystical collection.’ It follows that we must place this recension at the latest in the early fourth century. This early Hekhalot account did not include the warning about water, although a different version of it, the ‘water vision episode,’ appears elsewhere in the *Hekhalot Zutarti* (§§407–8), with a parallel version appearing in the *Hekhalot Rabbati* (§§258–59). In ch. 3 he argues, again convincingly, first that the latter version (in the *Hekhalot Rabbati*) is a garbled abbreviation of the former (in the *Hekhalot Zutarti*) and, second, that in manuscript New York 8128 aversion of the water vision episode has been secondarily combined with the story of the four in the *Hekhalot Zutarti* and the *Merkavah Rabbah* and that it is this combined passage that is assumed by the Babli, and not the other way around, strongly implying that the Hekhalot traditions are stratigraphically earlier. Indeed, other evidence, especially from the Qumran Hodayot, implies that the concept of hostile waters of chaos associated with the celestial temple may go back to the Second Temple period.” Davila, “Review of *A Transparent Illusion*,” 585–86.

39 *Merkavah Rabbah* (*Synopse* §§671–74).

R. Akiva said: We were four who entered paradise. One peered in (יָרָא) and died. One peered in (יָרָא) and was struck down. One peered in (יָרָא) and cut the plants. I entered safely and I went forth safely. Why did I enter safely and go forth safely? Not because I was greater than my associates, but my works accomplished for me to establish what the sages taught in their Mishnah, Your works shall bring you near and your works shall make you far away. And these are they who entered paradise: Ben Azzay, Ben Zoma, the Other, and R. Akiva. Ben Azzay peered and died. Concerning him the Scripture says, Worthy in the eyes of YHWH is the death of His pious ones (Ps 116:15). Ben Zoma peered and was struck down. Concerning him the Scripture says, Have you found honey? Eat (only) your fill, lest you become sated and vomit it up (Prov 25:16). Elisha ben Avuyah peered and cut the plants. Concerning him the Scripture says, Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin (Qoh 5:5). R. Akiva entered safely and went forth safely. Concerning him the Scripture says, Draw me after you, let us run. The King has brought me into His chambers (Cant 1:4). R. Akiva said: In the hour that I ascended on high, I laid down more markings on the entrances of the firmament than on the entrances of my house. And when I arrived at the curtain, angels of violence went forth to do me violence. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: Leave this elder alone, for he is fit to gaze at Me. R. Akiva said: In the hour, that I ascended to the chariot a heavenly voice went forth from beneath the throne of glory, speaking in the Aramaic language. In this language what did it speak? Before YHWH made heaven and earth, He established a vestibule to the firmament, to enter by it and to go out by it. A vestibule is nothing but an entrance. He established the firm names to fashion by means of it the whole world.⁴⁰

If this variant of the Pardes story, narrated by Rabbi Akiba himself, indeed represents the original version, as Christopher Morray-Jones⁴¹ and James Davila argue,

⁴⁰ Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 202–04. Schäfer et al., *Synopse*, 145.

⁴¹ Thus, reflecting on the priority of rabbinic and Hekhalot accounts of the story, Christopher Morray-Jones argues that “the Hekhalot sources have preserved a version of the Pardes story—the first-person narrative in *Hekhalot Zutarti/Merkavah Rabbah* A-C—which is different from and much simpler than that found in the talmudic sources and *Canticles Rabbah*. A subsequent redactor has expanded this first-person narrative by inserting third-person materials taken from the talmudic tradition in section B, but, when this additional material is discounted, it can be seen that the hekhalot version was originally a statement by or attributed to Aqiba that he and three unnamed individuals went into Pardes, that the other three met with disaster, and that he alone went on up and came out/down safely, despite the opposition of the angels, through the merit of his deeds. ... I conclude, therefore, that the version preserved in *Hekhalot Zutarti /Merkavah Rabbah* A-C represents the original form of the Pardes story and that the redactor of the mystical collection adapted this source to suit his purpose by adding the names of the three חכמים תלמידי, thereby turning it into an illustration of *m. Hag. 2:1* ... Thus, once the priority of the hekhalot version (A and C) has been established, it is clear that the story is concerned with a visionary ascent to the heavenly temple, in the face of fierce opposition on the part of the ‘angels of destruction.’ These angels seem to be the terrifying guardians of the gateways, who are described in other passages of the hekhalot literature and will be encountered again below.” Morray-Jones, *A Transparent Illusion*, 17–19.

it is intriguing that in addition to the already familiar depictions of problematic ocular practices of the three infamous practitioners, one also encounters here a curious reference to Rabbi Akiba's own praxis, which is surrounded with peculiar aural markers. The first important detail in this respect is God's speech that protects the adept against the hostile angels. The deity *speaks* to his servants, asking them to leave Rabbi Akiba alone. The most important feature, however, is R. Akiba's own encounter with the divine presence, which is rendered in a distinctively "aural" way, namely, as the theophany of the heavenly Voice.⁴² *Synopse* §348 reports the following: "R. Akiva said: In the hour that I ascended on high I heard a heavenly voice that went forth from beneath the throne of glory and was speaking in the Aramaic language...."⁴³ In contrast to the aforementioned seers, Rabbi Akiba does not "gaze"; rather, he "hears." Furthermore, the symbolism of the divine Voice that streams from beneath the divine Seat vividly reminds us of Abraham's encounter with the divine presence in the Apocalypse of Abraham. Like in the Apocalypse of Abraham, despite the fact that the throne is mentioned, the deity's epiphany is rendered as the Voice. The auricularcentric praxis of R. Akiba⁴⁴ thus represents here a striking contrast to the aforementioned ocularcentric practices of Ben Zoma, Ben Azzai, and Aher.

The aforementioned conceptual developments detected in the Story of the Four are important for our study, since they again point to the fact that the polemical tensions between ocularcentric and aural traditions are not confined solely to the Aher episode, but also affect other materials traditionally assigned to the two powers in heaven controversy.

Conclusion

In his evaluation of Alan Segal's seminal study, "Two Powers in Heaven," written almost 40 years ago, Daniel Boyarin points out that Segal's study treated the "two powers heresy" as a phenomenon external to rabbinic Judaism.⁴⁵ Indeed, Segal viewed the underlying ideology as being foreign to the core of rabbinic

⁴² On this tradition see Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 77–78.

⁴³ Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 204.

⁴⁴ Morray-Jones compares Akiba's aural encounter with Paul's experience described in 2 Cor 12:1–12, noting that "Aqiba, like Paul, heard words when he ascended to paradise." C. Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1–12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate Part 2: Paul's Heavenly Ascent and its Significance," *HTR* 86 (1993): 265–92 (280).

⁴⁵ Boyarin, "Beyond Judaisms," 324.

orthodoxy,⁴⁶ and for him, in Boyarin's words, the problem was "to discover which of the heretical groups were actually called 'Two Powers in Heaven' by the earliest tannaitic sages."⁴⁷ Yet, Boyarin argues that this so-called heresy, like in many other instances in Judaism and Christianity, appears to represent not external, but internal development. Boyarin reminds us that "almost always the so-called 'heresy' is not a new invader from outside but an integral and usually more ancient version of the religious tradition that is now being displaced by a newer set of conceptions...."⁴⁸ For Boyarin, the "two powers controversy" thus represents "internal" development, and "it was the Rabbis who invented the 'heresy' via a rejection of that which was once (and continued to be) very much within Judaism."⁴⁹

Boyarin's methodological vision is helpful for our study, since it enables us to see an interaction between older and newer paradigms of theophanic symbolism, one connected with the divine Form and the other with the divine Voice. In this respect, the two powers in heaven debate might itself represent one of the stages in the long-lasting interaction between the aural and ocularcentric streams that receives its controversial afterlife in various rabbinic and Hekhalot contexts—a contestation that started many centuries before the story of the four rabbis who entered Pardes circulated in Jewish lore.

⁴⁶ Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, x.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁸ Boyarin, "Beyond Judaisms," 325.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 326.