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Yahoel and Metatron

Aural Apocalypticism
and the Origins of Early Jewish Mysticism

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emblematic representations of the divine mysteries. If it is indeed so, Yahoel's role in controlling these entities puts him in a very special position as the distinguished experts in secrets, who not only reveals the knowledge of esoteric realities but literally controls them by taming the *Hayyot* and the Leviathans through his power as the personification of the divine Name.

Yahoel as Sar Torah

In Jewish tradition, the Torah has often been viewed as the ultimate compendium of esoteric data, knowledge which is deeply concealed from the eyes of the uninitiated. In light of this, we should now draw our attention to another office of Yahoel which is closely related to his role as the revealer of ultimate secrets – his possible role as the Prince of the Torah or Sar Torah.

The process of clarifying this obscure mission of Yahoel has special significance for the main task of this book, which attempts to demonstrate the formative influences of the aural ideology found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* on the theophanic molds of certain early Jewish mystical accounts.

In the past, scholars who wanted to demonstrate the conceptual gap between apocalyptic and early Jewish mystical accounts have often used Sar Torah symbolism to illustrate such discontinuity between the two religious phenomena. They have pointed to two different spatial dynamics present in the respective corpora, namely, an ascent of the adept to heaven in early Jewish apocalypses, and the adjuration of the Prince of the Torah in early Jewish mystical accounts. Both mystical practices had allowed their adepts eventually to acquire the knowledge which they were seeking, but the modes of acquisition appear to be strikingly different. In one instance, the adept ascends to heaven in order to obtain the esoteric knowledge, while in the other the angelic revealer of such knowledge descends to the practitioner situated on earth. The motif of the adjurations of Sar Torah and the alleged absence of such practice in early apocalyptic accounts thus played a very important role in dismantling Scholem's grand scheme of the Jewish mystical tradition. Scholem's most vocal critics argued that the adjuration of Sar Torah in Jewish mystical accounts exhibits a striking contrast to the dynamics of the heavenly ascents found in apocalyptic literature. Thus, for example, Peter Schäfer maintains that "the purpose of the adjuration is clear. It is to bring the angel down to earth in what is, in effect, a reverse heavenly journey: instead of the mystic ascending to heaven, the angel descends to earth to carry out the mystic's wishes."¹⁶⁸ Indeed, in many apocalyptic accounts the seers are traversing realms, ascending to heaven in order

¹⁶⁸ P. Schäfer, "The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism," in: *Hekhalot-Studien* (TSAJ), 19; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988) 277–95 at 282. On this see also D. J. Halperin, "A New Edition of the

to receive revelations. In these upper regions they then become initiated by the angelic figures, like Uriel of the early Enochic booklets of *1 Enoch* or Vrevoil of *2 Enoch*. Yet, in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* one encounters not only the ascent tradition but also the angelic descent motif that appears to be reminiscent of the Hekhalot accounts. Although the later chapters of the pseudepigraphon, where Abraham is initiated by the deity in secrets in the upper heaven, can be viewed as in agreement with the traditional apocalyptic blueprint, earlier chapters of the apocalyptic portion seem to depart from this conduit. There, the angel descends to teach the adept the peculiar subjects that the mystics of the Hekhalot literature will later receive from their angelic instructors.

The important question, however, remains whether Yahoel is indeed envisioned as Sar Torah in the Slavonic apocalypse. Several features of this enigmatic angelic servant appear to point in this direction. The first important detail is that the whole account of Yahoel's communication with the human adept is permeated by themes of Moses' reception of the Torah on Mount Sinai. The great angel's instruction, as in the story of Moses' reception of the Law, lasts 40 days,¹⁶⁹ during which the adept is nourished on the words of Yahoel. Many scholars have previously suggested that Abraham's supernatural feeding is reminiscent of Moses' nourishment on the divine *Shekinah* during his reception of the Torah on Mount Sinai. At the end of Abraham's nourishing ordeals, at the pinnacle of the angelic instruction, the seer and his celestial guide arrive at Horeb, another name for Sinai in some biblical accounts. All these details might hint at Yahoel's role as the angelic Master of the Torah who transmits the knowledge of this peculiar revelation in modes familiar to the readers of the paradigmatic Mosaic account.¹⁷⁰

Hekhalot Literature," *JAOS* 104 (1984) 543–552 at 549–551; Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 150–157; Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 95–114; Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 8–9.

¹⁶⁹ See also *Hekhalot Zutarti* (*Synopsis* § 424): "Whoever seeks to learn this teaching and to explicate the name with its explication must sit in fasting for forty days; and he must place his head between his knees until the fasting overcomes him." Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 241.

¹⁷⁰ The fusion of Sinai and Merkabah themes in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* might again point to its formative meaning for later Jewish mysticism, this time for the rabbinic *Ma'aseh Merkavah* accounts. Halperin notes that "we have learned from rabbinic sources about the practice of reading the Biblical accounts of the Sinai revelation and of the *merkabah* vision together in the synagogue on *Shabu'ot*. We have seen evidence from LXX that the two episodes were already linked in pre-Christian Alexandria. Now we find the author of our apocalypse using the vision of Genesis 15 as a sort of motion-picture screen on which he can project an image of the Sinai event from one angle, and an image of the *merkabah* from another. We might even go so far as to say that chapters 9–18 of the *Apocalypse of Abraham* are at least as much concerned with this combined image of Sinai-*merkabah* as they are with Abraham. What led the apocalyptist to choose Abraham's vision as the setting for his fusion of Sinai and the *merkabah*? Several motives seem to have influenced him." Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, 112. Halperin further adds that "more specifically, I suggest that certain people, nurtured on the stories of how Moses climbed to heaven and seized Torah from the angels, used these images to express and to satisfy their own yearning to have Torah made accessible to them. They imagined more recent heroes, Ishmael and Akiba and Nehuniah b. ha-Qanah,

If Yahoel in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* is indeed envisioned as Sar Torah, it is important that in our text the instruction of such an angelic agent takes place not in heaven, but on earth. Unlike Uriel in *1 Enoch* or Vrevoil in *2 Enoch*, the angelic teacher descends to provide instruction to an apprentice and to initiate him in the utmost secrets.

Another important detail is that Yahoel is depicted not only as an expert in the highest mysteries of the heavenly world and creation, but also as their “embodiment,” since, as we have already learned in this study, the great angel controls two important classes of creatures, the *Hayyot* and the Leviathans, which are often associated in Jewish mystical lore with the two fields of esoteric knowledge: the Account of the Chariot and the Account of Creation.

Another important detail of the text is an enigmatic hymn uttered by Abraham in chapter 7, the chapter which immediately precedes the descent of the great angel. It is worthy of note that Abraham’s lengthy utterance found in chapter 7 ends with striking words that seem to invite a revelation of the heavenly figure:

For who is it, or which one is it who colored heaven and made the sun golden, who has given light to the moon and the stars with it, who has dried the earth in the midst of many waters, who set you yourself among the elements, and who now has chosen me in the distraction of my mind? – Will he reveal himself by himself to us? – [He is] the God! (*Apoc. Ab.* 7:12).¹⁷¹

The last phrase, “will he reveal himself by himself to us?” is especially intriguing and can be interpreted as an adjuration.

Another important witness to the praxis of adjuration found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* is the patriarch’s hymn uttered during his ascent to heaven with Yahoel. Many distinguished scholars of Jewish mystical traditions, including Gershom Scholem and Ithamar Gruenwald, previously pointed to the striking similarities between this song and hymns found in the Hekhalot materials. The entire scope of the hymn’s function remains clouded in mystery, yet one cannot exclude that it is linked with adjuration practices, since it contains Yahoel’s name.¹⁷²

It should be noted that in the Sar Torah tradition, the Prince of Torah often assists the mystical adepts in their ascents to heaven. Here, in the Slavonic apocalypse, the great angel appears also to fulfill a similar role.

replicating Moses’ feat, and then making the results available to others through magical technique.” Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, 385. Schäfer criticizes Halperin’s position, noting that “Halperin’s interpretation . . . is inconclusive with regard to the contents. The idea that the visions of the heavenly journey of the Hekhalot mystics are inspired by the Sinai exegeses of synagogue liturgy is little more than a postulate; definitive evidence within the Hekhalot literature remains very vague.” Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 152.

¹⁷¹ Kulik, *Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha*, 15.

¹⁷² Scholem, *Major Trends*, 59–61.

Several words must be said about the conceptual roots of the descent/adju-ration pattern found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. Here, again, such conceptual developments are connected with the *Shem* ideological tendencies of the Slavonic apocalypse. It is also possible that the biblical traditions concerning the Angel of the divine Name constitute the background of the descending angel who delivers revelation to human seers.

Scholars previously noted the crucial role of the Angel of YHWH in the Deuteronomic *Shem* ideology. Already in the biblical accounts, this angelic agent descends upon the earth with various revelations. It is quite possible that in this enigmatic angelic figure one can find early biblical roots of the Sar Torah tradition. It is intriguing that later Jewish mystical traditions about Sar Torah are often connected to the Angel of YHWH traditions. As has been already demonstrated in this study, the Slavonic apocalypse weaves the Angel of the Lord tradition into the fabric of its apocalyptic story. These underlying conceptual currents dispel the aura of novelty with which some scholars of early Jewish mysticism try to envelop the Prince of Torah imagery, in an attempt to demonstrate its distinctiveness from earlier Jewish developments. The tradition of the angelic servant descending to the realm of humans, bringing his revelation to chosen human adepts thus does not represent an invention introduced by the Hekhalot authors, as Scholem's critics often attempt to postulate, but instead represents an ancient trend found in biblical and apocalyptic accounts shaped by the aural *Shem* paradigm. In this respect the figure of the Angel of YHWH found in Exodus and Deuteronomy and the figure of Yahoel in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* can be seen as the crucial landmarks of this long-lasting development concerning the angelic servant of the Torah.

The memory of these early conceptual steps might not have been completely erased in later Jewish lore. It is thus intriguing that, in some later mystical testimonies, Yahoel is depicted as the revealer of Torah to Abraham. Both Scholem and Idel draw their attention to an Ashkenazi manuscript (MS. London, British Library 752, fol. 45b), in which Yahoel is portrayed as Abraham's teacher of Torah. The manuscript discloses the following tradition ascribed to R. Nehemiah: "Yaho'el – because he was the mentor of our forefather Abraham and he taught to Abraham the entire Torah ... Yaho'el is the angel that called to our master Moses to ascend to heaven in the treatise Sanhedrin."¹⁷³ In his *Major Trends*, Scholem connects this tradition to Yahoel's role as the patriarch's instructor in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. He suggests that "in the *Apocalypse* we find Abraham being initiated into the mysteries of the Merkabah ... it is somewhat surprising to read in a manuscript originating among the twelfth century

¹⁷³ Idel, *Ben*, 208.

Jewish mystics in Germany that Yahoel was Abraham's teacher and taught him the whole of the Torah."¹⁷⁴ In his recent study, Idel reaffirms Scholem's intuitions by arguing that "it seems indeed that the Ashkenazi writer intuited or received a tradition that Metatron, the protagonist in the Talmudic discussion in its common version, is actually Yaho'el and the resort to the formula 'his name is like that of his master' fits Yaho'el better than Metatron. According to the last quotation, the role played by this angel is paramount: he introduced Abraham to the entire Torah. ..."¹⁷⁵

Furthermore, in Hasidic lore Yahoel is understood as the Prince of Torah. Idel points out that "according to an anonymous alphabetical description of angels found in a manuscript that contains material stemming from Ashkenazi Hasidism, Yaho'el is the prince of the Torah and very important in God's eyes, and very good for rescue."¹⁷⁶

Yahoel as the "Embodiment" of Torah?

Moreover, as in later Metatron legends, Yahoel may not simply reveal the secrets of Torah to a human adept, but possibly "embody" them, being therefore understood as the "embodied Torah." The possibility of such an office increases substantially in view of Yahoel's association with the divine Name and his role as the personification of the Tetragrammaton, since in later Metatron lore the Torah is often represented by the divine Name. Thus, in *Sefer Hekhalot* (*Synopse* § 80) and some other Hekhalot materials (*Synopse* § 397 and *Synopse* § 734), Metatron transmits to Moses the Torah in the form of the seventy names, representing the fullness of the divine Name. Reflecting on such conceptual developments, Moshe Idel points out that, in Jewish mystical lore, "the Torah is conceived of as a name of God (or a series of divine names), and the Torah is conceived of as an organism ... in this conception, the Torah at its esoteric level, like God, has the form of a human being."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 69

¹⁷⁵ Idel, *Ben*, 209.

¹⁷⁶ Idel, *Ben*, 210.

¹⁷⁷ M. Idel, "Concepts of Scripture in Jewish Mysticism," in: *Jewish Concepts of Scripture. A Comparative Analysis* (ed. B. D. Sommer; New York: New York University Press, 2012) 157–178 at 159. A more widespread view is that the Torah contains divine Names. But Idel notes that "these two notions (the Torah as containing divine names, and the Torah as a divine name), viewed together, return us to the idea that the Torah is the body of God: the individual divine names found throughout the Torah are individual limbs; when combined, these individual limbs/names form the whole body of God, which is to say, form the Torah's text, which is one long and mysterious appellation for God." Idel, "Concepts of Scripture in Jewish Mysticism," 161.

Such an understanding is pertinent for our investigation, since Yahoel is understood in our text as the anthropomorphic embodiment of the divine Name.¹⁷⁸ Idel traces the genealogy of this conception to Hekhalot and *Shi'ur Qomah* materials, arguing that “the conception of Torah as an organism grows out of earlier conceptions which emphasize that the Torah has the form or shape of a human being. This concept usually appears together with the notion of the Torah as a divine Name, and in fact these are two aspects of a single conception of Torah that the earliest kabbalists inherited from their predecessors, the heikhalot mystics.”¹⁷⁹ Idel further argues that, “in all likelihood, what stands behind the teachings of these kabbalists is a notion drawn from the *Shi'ur Qomah* literature, that the Torah – on its esoteric level – is the full height of God’s body.”¹⁸⁰

Such or similar understandings most likely served as the conceptual base for the praxis of Sar Torah adjuration in Hekhalot and *Shi'ur Qomah* traditions. Along these lines, Idel suggests that “symbolism of this sort facilitated a move from the earthly practice of studying Torah (on its overt level) to a practice through which the mystic formed contact with heavenly forms of the Torah (on its esoteric level).”¹⁸¹

Concluding this section of our study, we must acknowledge that the full range of details pertaining to the Sar Torah conceptual complex, as it is presented in later Jewish mystical testimonies, is still missing in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. Thus, for example, one cannot find in the Slavonic apocalypse any references to the practice of Torah memorization – a motif that plays a prominent role in Hekhalot literature.¹⁸² Such an absence of these crucial features of later mystical lore concerning the Prince of Torah can be explained by the rudimentary shape of Sar Torah conceptual developments in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, in which many allusions to later Jewish symbols only exist in their early apocalyptic form.

¹⁷⁸ According to Idel, in this paradigm of thought, “the Torah as God’s Name serves as an intermediary, allowing God to descend into the world. ... Here the Torah serves as an intermediary between the creator and man.” Idel, “Concepts of Scripture in Jewish Mysticism,” 172–173.

¹⁷⁹ Idel, “Concepts of Scripture in Jewish Mysticism,” 159–160.

¹⁸⁰ Idel, “Concepts of Scripture in Jewish Mysticism,” 161.

¹⁸¹ Idel, “Concepts of Scripture in Jewish Mysticism,” 162.

¹⁸² See, for example, *Synopse* § 303: “When he completes the twelve, he will go forth to all the principles of Torah that he seeks, whether to Bible or to Mishnah.” Davila, *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*, 183.