CHAPTER TWO

HEKHALOT RABBATI:
THE GREATER (BOOK OF THE HEAVENLY) PALACES

INTRODUCTION

The Hekhalot Rabbati (§§ 81–121, 152–173, 189–277), the “Greater (Book of the Heavenly) Palaces,” is the longest surviving Hekhalot text. It is written in Hebrew with an Aramaic phrase or two and a few transliterated Greek words and phrases. It is built around two stories set loosely in the generation of the main players in the texts, Rabbis Ishmael, Akiva, and Nehuniah ben HaQanah, but the narratives themselves are mostly or entirely legendary. The work includes an important account of a ritual praxis for traveling (“descending”) to the divine throne room. It is also replete with merkavah hymns to be recited by various heavenly and earthly beings.

Contents

The Hekhalot Rabbati opens with a passage extolling the surpassing greatness of the descenders to the chariot (§§ 81–86, 91–93). A collection of songs of threefold holiness follows—Merkavah hymns that end by quoting the Trisagion of Isa 6:3 (§§ 94–106). Then comes a version of the Story of the Ten Martyrs, a narrative set in the time of the Roman empire but likely composed in the Geonic era, many other versions of which survive¹ (§§ 107–121). Another collection of songs of threefold holiness follows (§§ 152–169), then a description of daily worship in heaven and its ties to earthly worship (§§ 170–174, 189–197). After this we find a long account of a meeting of the mystical sages in which R. Nehuniah ben HaQanah gave them detailed instructions for accomplishing the descent to the chariot, culminating with the arrival of the adept at the throne of God, where he recites songs of praise along with the throne itself. The section closes with accounts of two tests that must be passed by the adept while crossing the sixth palace (§§ 198–259).

¹ These are collected by Reeg in Die Geschichte von den Zehn Märtyrern.
The document concludes with a collection of Merkavah hymns (§§ 268–276) and a meditation on the names of the angel Metatron (§ 277).^2

Manuscripts

Altogether I am aware of twenty-two manuscripts of the complete macroform of the *Hekhalot Rabbati* as described above, some of which contain additional material (see under redactional issues below). Ten other manuscripts contain material from the macroform.\(^3\) In addition, there are seven highly fragmentary manuscripts of the *Hekhalot Rabbati* from the Cairo Geniza (G1–G6 and GO56).

This translation is of an eclectic critical text reconstructed from the text of the seven complete manuscripts of the *Synopsis*, along with two other manuscripts that have been flagged by Schäfer as particularly important and which were collated by him in his German translation. I have collated both of these from microfilm copies provided by the Israel National and University Library.


^3^ See the lists of Boustan, *From Martyr to Mystic*, 38–47 and of Schäfer in “Handschriften,” 201–218. In addition to the eighteen complete manuscripts he lists, I have been made aware in private correspondence with Benjamin Richler of four other complete copies. Details are given in Davila, “Prolegomena,” 208 n. 1. The discussion below is based on the eighteen complete manuscripts, since little information is currently available about the other four.

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F Florence Laurenziana Plut. 44/I3, an Italian manuscript dating to the fourteenth century, which presents the macroform as §§ 81–277, 281–306, 489–495. This unit is also preceded by another copy of §§ 297–334.\(^4\) This manuscript preserves the best overall text of the *Hekhalot Rabbati* of any of the manuscripts I have examined. It has a very high density of original readings, although only a very few of these are unique original readings. It thus appears to preserve a text very close to the one that left the hands of the *Haside Ashkenaz*.

L Leiden Or. 4730, an Italian manuscript that may date to the sixteenth or seventeenth century, which presents the macroform as §§ 81–277.\(^5\) It stems from a good *Vorlage* with a high density of original readings, but it also contains a great many unique readings. Some of these unique readings are interesting in and of themselves, but few if any are original. It seems that the text has been substantially altered at some point for reasons that remain unclear.\(^6\) The

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