The paper will provide a succinct catalogue of the rituals described in the Hekhalot literature, with minimal analysis or commentary. Following Evan M. Zuesse, I define “ritual,” as “those conscious and voluntary, repetitious and stylized symbolic bodily actions that are centered on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences.” I use the term “praxis” here to mean an assemblage of ritual acts and, often, ascetic disciplines which is created to produce a particular outcome. The textual corpus consists of the standard macroforms of the Hekhalot literature along with some relevant fragments from the Cairo Geniza. I have omitted 3 Enoch/Sefer Hekhalot and the Massekhet Hekhalot from my analysis because the first is an ascent apocalypse, the second is a description of the celestial realm of the Hekhalot literature, and neither contains any significant accounts of rituals. I categorize
the relevant Hekhalot passages into groups: in section 1, praxes that involve recitation of adjurations, songs, prayers, or names along with other physical actions and ascetic disciplines; and in section 2, praxes involving only recitations. The praxes are broken down into further categories in each section.4

Praxes Involving Recitation and Other Actions

Ascent-Descent Praxes

These passages give instructions for praxes intended to cause the practitioner to ascend to the throne room of God, see a vision of it and sometimes participate in the events there, then return safely. For reasons that remain unclear, the visionary ascent is normally called a “descent” and the return descent an “ascent.”

The first and lengthiest of these rituals is found in Hekhalot Rabbati §§198–243, set as an instruction by R. Nehuniah ben HaQanah in a clandestine meeting with a group of disciples in a Temple chamber. The praxis involves the invocation of Suriah, Prince of the Presence, adjuring him a total of one hundred twelve times by the divine name ṬWṬRWSY’Y YHWH, counting each adjuration on a finger (§§204–205). The practitioner must pass through a gauntlet of eight angels at the entrance to each of the seven celestial palaces in order to reach the throne room of God in the seventh (§§206–212). Seven of the angels at each entrance must be adjured by name and presented with two “seals,” each consisting of a nomen barbarum, pacifying them so that the eighth may lead the practitioner on to the next entrance. In the seventh palace he is interrogated about his piety and learning and he must display “a great seal and fearsome crown” consisting of more nomina barbara, after which he is taken to the divine throne room (§§219–223, 229–237).5

The second ascent-descent praxis is given in Hekhalot Zutarti §§413–419 in a series of revelations about the heavenly ascent narrated by R. Akiva.

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4 Mentions of mundane Jewish rituals and praxes such as daily prayers or specific holidays are noted when they arise but are not analyzed in any detail.

5 Two additional praxes are described in this passage, neither of which directly involves the ascent and descent itself. The first is a banishment praxis to bring a practitioner back safely in the midst of an ascent experience (§§224–228) and the second describes the special revelation of the names of the angels and seals of the seventh palace (§§238–243). Both praxes are discussed below.