AMULETS AND ANGELS:
VISIONARY EXPERIENCE IN THE TESTAMENT OF JOB
AND THE HEKHALOT LITERATURE

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1. Introduction

In Jewish texts from late antiquity, visionary or transcendent goals are often accomplished through ritual techniques that are also used for healing or protection, as we see from an examination of two disparate sets of texts, the Testament of Job and the Hekhalot literature. The Testament of Job is a retelling in Greek of the book of Job, dated by various scholars to the 1st century B.C.E. or C.E., and stemming perhaps from Egypt. In this rewriting of the biblical story, Job gives his three daughters three shimmering cords that God had given him to heal him from his afflictions. When they bind these cords on themselves, Job’s daughters are transformed—they become “heavenly-minded” and begin to speak in the tongues of angels. These cords are called, among other things, a *phylakterion*—a protective amulet. The Hekhalot

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1 I first met Betsy Amaru during the 1998–1999 academic year, when I was doing research in Jerusalem with a Lady Davis Fellowship. I encountered her in the Judaica Reading Room of the Jewish National and University Library at Givat Ram, and came to know her through lunchtime conversations with the “library crew.” Subsequently we became colleagues, and neighbors, for the following year at Vassar College. My final revisions of this paper for publication in this volume honoring Betsy are also being conducted in the Judaica Reading Room in the summer of 2006, where I continue to enjoy her company among the “library crew.”

texts are complex Jewish visionary and ritual literature, written largely in Hebrew, dated to the 4th–8th centuries C.E., and stemming from Roman Palestine and Sassanian Babylonia. In the Hekhalot literature, the mystic who wishes to “descend to the Merkabah” must show “seals” (hotamot), composed of divine and angelic names, to the angelic guardians of each successive hekhal (palace), finally reaching the seventh hekhal where he gazes upon “the King in His beauty” and joins the angels and the Throne of Glory in their heavenly liturgy of praise.

The Hekhalot texts also give instructions for adjurational rituals to call angels down from heaven to gain divine revelation, which also involve “sealing” oneself for protection during the ritual.

At first glance, it does not appear appropriate to compare T. Job and the Hekhalot literature directly, because of the distinct differences between them in language, dating, and genre. A closer reading, however, reveals a whole series of interesting similarities and differences between them. In order to make the comparison more comprehensible, a third term is also necessary—the rituals found in the Greco-Egyptian ritual papyri (conventionally referred to as the “Greek Magical Papyri”). They

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3 The Merkabah is the divine chariot described in Ezekiel 1, and is another name for the final goal attained by the mystic when he enters the seventh hekhal.
