MERKAVAHNARRATIVE:
TWO PARADIGMATIC EXAMPLES

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Merkavah, or Hekhalot literature as it is sometimes called, belongs to a body of mystical literature that developed within the spheres of influence of the Talmudic rabbis and their successors. As such, it makes some sense to read these works from the standpoint of the library left us by the Talmudic rabbis. If they are to succeed in unraveling the precise meaning of many passages, the readers of Merkavah, it will be argued here, must descend beneath the surface of the texts to expose the glow of known Rabbinic teachings. Furthermore, this literature has had a roundabout career, as a glance at the various versions of the same work shows us and we should not stop at Rabbinic literature as the only sources of inspiration. In this paper I offer plausible interpretations of two difficult passages of this literature. While virtually everyone who has dealt with the topic of Merkavah has endeavored to unlock these passages in some way or other, very few have searched the passages for detailed halakhic or haggadic erudition presumed by the writers. Nor have they searched adequately for folk motifs that might lie behind the bewildering images of these works. Furthermore, at least in the two examples I present, the style of the texts conforms to their mystical themes, in that breaking through to enlightenment is like breaking through to the complexities of the text itself and vice versa: both demand rigorous effort and strenuous preparation and both are reserved for an elite.

The Hekhalot text of Ma'aseh Merkavah [The Features of the Divine Throne] contains a rather peculiar passage. This work belongs to a corpus of mystical writings that speaks of esoteric knowledge, angelic hymns, and visionary experiences. The passage can be found in Peter Schaefer's Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur,2 Section 580.

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1 The context of the present discussion can be found in Elliot Wolfson, Through a Speculum that Shines (Princeton, 1994), pp. 116-124. Wolfson notes that the Torah revealed to the mystic refers to Bible, Mishnah, Talmud and Vision of the Chariot. This is certainly the case and can be shown by reference to the subject matter mentioned in the liturgical blessing recited at the beginning of Ma'aseh Merkavah, which refers to these various areas. See H. Basser, “The Blessings at the Beginning of Ma'asei Merkavah,” in Hebrew Studies 24 (1983), pp. 151-154.

2 Tübingen, 1981.
Said R. Ishmael: Upon hearing this tradition from R. Nehunya ben HaQanah, my teacher, I stood on my feet and asked of him all the names of the Angels of Wisdom. And on account of the question I had asked, I perceived shining in my mind as bright “as the heavenly [day-]light.”

Let us look carefully at the textual variants here and how they have been treated. The Hebrew reads KHY M-HSMYM, literally “as the days of the Heavens” but its contextual import here refers to intense light in concert with Gen. 1:5 where God calls the light “day.” In place of “as the heavenly [day-]light,” M.D. Swartz gives us “as from heaven.” This latter reading he erroneously claims agrees with the reading in two manuscripts, “ke-me-ha-shamayim” (K-M-HSMYM). The texts actually read “ki me-hashamayim (KHY M-HSMYM).” We wonder why the phrase would not be “min hashamayim” as it usually is and what the meaning here might be. For Swartz, what light from heaven is meant for comparison here? The other two manuscripts, which appear to have the original reading, say “kimei ha-shamayim (KHY M-HSMYM, i.e., as the heavenly [day-]light).”

We may note however that the reference is to Deut. 11:21 “kimei ha-shamayim al ha-aretz” as understood by Sifre Deut. Pisqa 47 which refers to the shining face of the righteous or to those who are to behold the Shekina. The experience is noted to be as “bright as divine light.” Heavenly means divine here as the rabbis often used “heaven” as way of referring to God. (Similarly, the Gospel of Matthew uses the term “Kingdom of Heaven” while the other gospels use the term “Kingdom of God.” “Heaven” thus meant “God.”) Now the biblical phrase utilized by the midrashist in Sifre Deut. 47 refers to the shining of the face on earth (al ha-aretz). So, too, we are forced to say R. Ishmael had his revelation, which made his face shine, on earth. The light marks his transcendence as earthly seeker to beholder of supernal knowledge.

Wolfson concurred too readily with I. Gruenwald, who saw such passages as intimating the mystic’s ascent and not an angel’s descent.

3 The accurate translation would be “as the days of the heavens” but the author of the piece and the midrash were speaking of intense, divine light not unlike that which shone from Moses’ face after he descended from Mount Sinai.


5 Then on p. 241 he misconstrues the readings and translates the words as “like the waters in heaven,” which is not what any Hebrew text says.

6 In comparing the Hebrew readings it is easy to see how the second yod from “kimei hashamayim” (KHY M-HSMYM) could be dropped to create “ki me-hashamayim” (KHY M-HSMYM).

7 Speculum, pp. 116-124.