This paper analyzes a brief hymnic composition that praises R. Ishmael ben Elisha the High Priest for his special abilities to enter the heavenly realm and learn its hidden secrets. This Hebrew hymn expands upon the role that R. Ishmael’s visionary powers and high priestly lineage play within the post-talmudic work *The Story of the Ten Martyrs.* I show that this composition adopts and adapts the specific language and imagery that are used to describe the redemptive function of the High Priest (*kohen gadol*) in the earliest extant liturgies for the Day of Atonement from Late Antiquity. In particular, in the Yom Kippur liturgy, the high priestly ritual of communal expiation brings about a state of collective atonement that pre-figures the messianic age. I argue that by appropriating the messianic idiom of the Yom Kippur liturgy the hymn to R. Ishmael underscores the redemptive function of its protagonist’s visionary experience and subsequent martyrdom. In addition, I suggest that the generative role that the synagogue liturgy played in shaping rabbinic martyrrological discourse has important implications for our understanding of the relationship between the late antique synagogue and the rabbinic academy. In my view, the social and ideological gap between

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1 I would like to express gratitude to my cherished, new colleagues at the University of Minnesota, Andrea Berlin and Bernard Levinson, for their astute advice on this paper. Their personal warmth and professional support have smoothed the transition to my new academic home. See R. Abusch, ‘Rabbi Ishmael’s Miraculous Conception: Jewish Salvation History in Anti-Christian Polemic’, in A.H. Becker and A.Y. Reed, eds, *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Tübingen 2003, 307-343. For the text of the martyrology, I use G. Reeg, ed., *Die Geschichte von den Zehn Märtyrern*, Tübingen 1985. For my present purposes, I am not concerned with the *historicity* of rabbinic traditions concerning R. Ishmael’s priestly lineage (e.g., tHal. 1:10; bKet. 105b; bGit. 58a; bHul. 49a). In his encyclopedic study of R. Ishmael, G.G. Porton finds no basis for crediting these traditions (*The Traditions of Rabbi Ishmael*, 4 vols, Leiden 1982, 4:212-214). But compare M. Hirschman, *Torah for the Entire World* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv 1999, esp. 114-149.
these institutions was not as great as many have recently wished to argue.²

Despite being set during the Roman ‘persecutions’ of the second century CE, The Story of the Ten Martyrs as a literary composition dates to Byzantine-period Palestine (circa sixth to seventh century CE).³ This work embeds the individual martyrological units of which it is composed within a single, unifying narrative framework.⁴ The punishment meted out to the ten martyred sages is not attributed to their individual guilt or even to the immediate political circumstances of the persecution, but is explained as the direct consequence of the crime committed by Yoseph’s brothers when they sold him into slavery (Gen. 38). Their deaths are thus understood to serve as expiation for the original national sin committed by the progenitors of the tribes of Israel. As the scion of a high priestly family, R. Ishmael plays a particularly central role in this narrative of communal sin and vicarious atonement. The ideology of self-sacrifice in the martyrology concentrates on the image of the heavenly altar upon which R. Ishmael’s angelic double, the heavenly High Priest Metatron, sacrifices the souls of the righteous martyrs who offer their lives on behalf of their community (Ten Martyrs, I-IX.20.1-5).

Before proceeding, I cite the R. Ishmael hymn here in full:

אשימ עין שראווה כאושרי בניו של חidebar הולך והשים את ראשו והוסיף את ראשו ו_hopא
שנודת אשה אשירה כדי שתשחק מה אשתו וה mesma את זה ולהתפשות בכל אשה
בר אושר נשחקת אשירה לี้ ישמעל שכנף כל Happy is the eye that has beheld these things! Happy is the man who merited this (vision)! Blessed is the mother who bore him! Happy is the womb in which he grew! Happy are the breasts from which he nursed! Happy the father who begot him and taught him Torah! Happy the eye that has glimpsed him! Happy the arms that

⁴ Reeg, Geschichte, 33f.