

A Close examination of the concept of mysticism in Jewish literature and the Apostles  
Paul and John addressing the mystical parallelism primarily in the Mystical Union.

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## Table of Contents

Thesis Statement: A Close examination of the concept of mysticism in Jewish literature and the Apostles Paul and John addressing the mystical parallelism primarily in the Mystical Union.

I.	Introduction	1
II.	The Meaning of Mysticism	
	A. What is Mysticism?	4
	B. What is the origin of mysticism?	6
	C. What is the goal of mysticism?	8
III.	Jewish Mysticism.	8
	A. <i>Bereshit</i> and Creation	11
	1. <i>Sefer Yetzirah</i>	13
	B. <i>Hekhalot</i> and the Godly Measurements	19
	1. <i>Shi'ur Qomah</i>	21
	C. Obscurity of the <i>Merkavah</i>	26
	1. <i>Ma'aseh Merkavah</i>	31
IV.	Christian Mysticism	36
	A. Gospel of John	41
	B. Paul	43
V.	Mystical Union	
	A. Jewish Union	46
	1. Jewish Prayer	47
	2. Jewish Contemplation	49
	B. Christian Union	51
	1. Christian Prayer	55
	2. Christian Contemplation	56
VI.	Comparative Aspects of Mysticism	
	A. Reasons for focusing on the <i>Sefer Yetzirah</i> , <i>Shi'ur Qomah</i> , and <i>Ma'aseh Merkavah</i>	59
	B. The Application of the <i>Ma'aseh Merkavah</i>	60
	C. Key Aspects in Jewish and Christian Mysticism	62
Appendices		
	Sepher Yetzirah	65
	Shi'ur Qomah	72
	Ma'aseh Merkavah	75
Works Cited for Thesis		
		81

## I. Introduction

Throughout the history of Judaism and Christianity, there have been those individuals who were not satisfied with traditional religious practice(s) of drawing near to the presence of God. Thus, many individuals throughout history have searched for a more intimate and meaningful way for a relationship between oneself and his Creator. The search for a union with God has been expressed in many ways and those who were convinced that it could not be brought about by intellectual or rational means gave rise to various mystical groups and sects. Religious mysticism, especially Jewish mysticism, from its very beginnings has required knowledge that is a secret 'tradition' and by its very nature difficult to impart to those chosen adepts.<sup>1</sup> This has led to small elite groups of religious scholars who have imparted the knowledge to their followers.<sup>2</sup>

Mysticism has come to be perhaps the most ambiguous term in religious terminology. It is the sense of spiritual and/or mystical symbolism, allegory, and the search for spiritual truth and wisdom through the union with God. Mysticism originated from the Hellenistic period and refers to the mysteries of ancient Greece. In the later Hellenistic period, mysticism came to represent the direct experience or apprehension of the Divine Reality. During this period, Jewish Christian writers engaged in speculation about the

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<sup>1</sup> An individual who has acquired metaphysical and mystical knowledge. One who is a religious mystic.

<sup>2</sup> The quantity of sources for early Jewish mysticism is somewhat limited and the sources that do exist are dated. This leads me to believe that the topic of Jewish mysticism has not received enough scholarly attention, especially in recent times. What is even less researched is the comparative aspect of early Jewish and Christian mysticism with regard to the concepts of mystical union and ascent of the mystical adept. As a *Mekubal* ("one who has received"), I have studied Jewish mysticism for many years. Due to the lack of sources, I have used my rabbinical training in the mystical Zohar and Hasidic Tanya for some of the information in Section III Jewish mysticism.

nature of God and his action in the world. Based on Neoplatonic ideas, these writers reasoned that God was able to have contact with humankind through divine interaction. Thus, the goal of mysticism is the state or condition in which the human soul is in union with God.

The desire for humankind to have an intimate relationship with God is the basic premise of Jewish mysticism. Thus, Jewish mysticism endeavors to transform God into a religious consciousness that reflects a 'real' experience. Therefore, the quest for a union with God results in the mystical awareness of God and the secret hidden path that leads to Him and focuses on the idea of God as a 'living' Divine being who manifests Himself in creation, revelation, and redemption. Thus, the goal of Jewish mysticism is the elimination of the concept of God as 'untouchable' and 'unknowable' and distant through spiritual symbolism in the mystical literature and Divine revelation in the human soul. Through the discovery of the secret hidden path, the human soul can unite with God and experience the Divine presence of God.

The word 'mysticism' is a relatively recent term in Christianity. During the early church, 'mystical theology' was the generally accepted term that describes the ascent of the soul and the union with God. Mystical theology is at the very core and essence of Christianity and its very beginnings of the early church. The mystical belief, in early Christianity was appropriated from Jewish mysticism. The Christian experience of a transcendent and ineffable God extended to the person of Christ has its roots in Jewish and Christian apocalypticism. Mystical theology is not directly described or taught in the New Testament, and it is far less obvious than in the Old Testament. We are fortunate to

have early references to a 'Christian' mystical experience in Paul's letters and the writings of John.

The general history of mysticism employed the expression *unio mystica* (mystical union) for the fundamental experience of the mystical unification with God. The essence of the Jewish mystical union is the immediate contact with God gained from the fundamental experience of the inner self. Thus, it is the ascent of the soul to the celestial Divine Throne where the soul obtains an ecstatic view of the glory of God and the secrets of His heavenly realm. Whereas, the Christian concept of the mystical union can be defined as the search for and experience of an intimacy (oneness) with God through Jesus Christ. The experience is thought of as the soul's return (an ascent) to God. Christianity refers to the Incarnation of God, as the *descent* into the world so that God may give the human soul communion (union).

What binds together early Jewish and Christian writings commonly seen to contain "mystical elements" has to do with the desire on the part of the adept to "know" or to experience God. Mystical Jewish writings such as the *Sefer Yetzirah*, *Shi'ur Qomah*, and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* are treatises reflecting a desire for a relationship with God.

The intermingling of the personal and the collective is distinctive of Christian mysticism. This characteristic of collectivism was prevalent in all early Christian adepts. Whereas, with early Jewish adepts you have little or no intermingling or collectivism. The mystery of the Incarnation in the Gospel of John is the doctrine that distinguishes Christian mysticism from Jewish mysticism. The activities of prayer and contemplation leading to a mystical union with God are the same mystical experience whether Jewish or Christian. Christian adepts accomplished communion through belief in Jesus and the

communion with God in faith and love and community as versus a 'direct' union as experienced by Jewish adepts.

## II. The Meaning of Mysticism

### A. What is Mysticism?

Mysticism is a word that we find in many books that relate to religious experience. In today's religious community, mysticism is an obscure term and conveys a less than precise meaning. It has come to be perhaps the most ambiguous term in religious terminology. In today's thinking, mysticism has the sense of spiritual and/or mystical symbolism, allegory, soul provoking, and in some degree a form of superstition.

Generally speaking, mysticism is the search for spiritual truth and wisdom through the union with the Divine. Mysticism is the way to return to our source of being (creation) and to eliminate the experience of alienation. Thus, mysticism is closely connected with and inseparable from religious consciousness. Humankind is aware of the distance between oneself and God and the only way to cross this gulf is by revelation and prayer. From a psychological aspect, mysticism is the direct consciousness or experience of God. A religious life connected with a 'personal' relationship with God, that is first-hand experience with God, represents the acceptance of the belief and/or practice in God.<sup>3</sup>

Mysticism is not a religion, but an important component in all-practicing religions. Mysticism represents a level of consciousness that results in a need for one to have a direct relationship with God through the transcendence of the human soul. The

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<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Underhill, The Mystics of the Church. (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1988), 9–10.

Objective of Mysticism is an intimate or mystical union with God. To obtain this mystical union requires living a devotional and contemplative life through prayer, ritual purification, and contemplation. Thus, by living a righteous life any one can strengthen the soul to achieve a union with God.<sup>4</sup> However, the application of mysticism should not be considered the same as a religious experience, although the practice of mysticism is closely related. A great deal of the mystical experience is significantly religious. Mystical experiences are clearly theistic with a true basis in God. And mysticism is dualistic in that the distinction between the individual and God is maintained.

There are two principal ways of perceiving the religious significance of mysticism. The first is indirect and inferential. It takes the form of reported mystical experience, that is a widely shared experience as a premise and derives an interpretative conclusion from the mystical experience. The second way to derive religious significance from a mystical experience is the intellectual aspect. Individuals believe that as a result of the mystical experience, knowledge and revelation are acquired from the mystical experience. In many cases, individuals develop strong convictions from these mystical experiences. Whereas, those individuals who are adepts at the esoteric aspect of mysticism, experience a strong and significant mystical experience. Normally, these powerful convictions are generated by the experience itself, in those individuals who have had that experience, and not in those individuals who have only the reports of such experiences.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, mysticism as a quest for spiritual truth and wisdom is experiencing a

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Smith, *An Introduction to Mysticism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 3–5.

<sup>5</sup> Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. (New York: Oxford Press, 1995), 599–600.

renewed interest and understanding and a mood of anticipation that existed in the early church in today's religious community. This mood represents in part a feeling of alienation that many individuals are experiencing in our current society resulting in the need to have an intimate relationship (mystical union) with God.

B. What is the origin of mysticism?

Mysticism, as we know it today, is from the Hellenistic period and refers to the mysteries of ancient Greece. The term is probably derived from the Greek word *muein* (to close the lips or eyes) implying that devotees were secretly initiated into a mysterious underground cult that worshipped the Earth Mother. Included in these mysteries, were ceremonies consisting of purification through bathing with initiation and admission into the more advanced stages probably involving a communal meal and a sacred marriage. In the later Hellenistic period, mysticism took on a different meaning, and came to represent the direct experience or apprehension of the divine Reality.<sup>6</sup>

According to historical tradition, the end of Jewish prophecy occurred during the period of the Second Temple when the prophetic figures ceased to appear. During this period, Jewish Christian writers engaged in speculation about the nature of God and his action in the world. Based on Neoplatonic ideas, these writers reasoned that God was able to have contact with humankind through divine interaction. Such a notion of divine interaction was later expanded by rabbinic scholars who portrayed such encounters through intermediaries under various terms such as *Metatron*, *Chomah* and *Shekhinah*.

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<sup>6</sup> Dan and Lavinia Cohn-Sherbok, Jewish & Christian Mysticism An Introduction. (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), 2.

In conjunction with Neoplatonic thinking, the Jewish focus was on Divine interaction on the speculation and process of creation. Probing beneath the surface of the Biblical text, rabbinic thought formulated hidden theories about God's emanation resulting in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, a treatise on the cosmological creation of unknown origin. There God is depicted as creating the universe by 32 mysterious paths consisting of 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet together with the ten *Sefirot*. The Hebrew alphabet is divided into various groups, each with their own creative function. According to the text, the ten *Sefirot* are the molds into which all things are initially cast and they constitute form rather than matter. The 22 letters, on the other hand, are viewed as the prime cause of matter. According to this cosmology, God is completely transcendent, and the visible world is the result of Divine emanation. Thus, *Sefer Yetzirah* can be seen as endeavor to balance the seemingly contradictory concepts of Divine immanence and transcendence. Furthermore, cosmological reflection during the early rabbinic period was also accompanied by a parallel interest in interpreting the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the Divine Chariot (*Merkavah*) in the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel. It was the aim of rabbinic scholars to become *Merkavah* 'riders' so that they would be able to comprehend the heavenly secrets hidden within the Biblical text. Through such study, the devout mystical adept believed they could free themselves from the chains of bodily existence and enter *Pardes* (Paradise). These devout mystical adepts believed they could attain the highest degree of spiritual insight. Such study was not simply an academic discipline; rather, it provided a means whereby human souls could make a heavenly ascent.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cohn-Sherbok, 2-4.

C. What is the goal of mysticism?

The goal of mysticism is a state or condition in which the human soul is in union with God. The reason being that one is called to his creation (origin) or to realize his self-realization. The need to have union with the Divine is the essence of the 'ascent of man' to remove the distance and to experience the revelation of God's divine nature. This 'direct' experience is equivalent to a revealed religion.

To achieve the goal of Divine union requires stages/processes that are necessary to follow in order to achieve an individual unity with God. They are prayer, ritual purification, and contemplation. As a way to exercise contemplation, one may fast, hyperventilate, mediate, seek ecstasy and/or autosuggestion. As the process continues, one experiences a metamorphosis in that a shift is experienced from the profane to religious veneration. Yet, the ultimate goal of mysticism is the conscious awareness of an evolving spiritual nature through spiritual union. The result of mysticism is not the solitary salvation of the individual but the 'transformation of humankind' through individuals.

III. Jewish Mysticism.

That human beings desire an intimate relationship with God is the basic premise for the founding of Jewish mysticism. The proposition being that through the discovery of the secrets that will define the hidden path one can establish a oneness (union) with God. Thus, Jewish mysticism endeavors to transform God into a religious consciousness that reflects a 'real' experience for humankind. The result of humankind's experience is the transformation of Jewish values in terms of mystical values. Therefore, the quest for the union with God results in the mystical awareness of God and the secret hidden path

that leads to Him and focuses on the idea of God as a ‘living’ Divine being who manifests himself, to humankind, in creation, revelation, and redemption.

Jewish mysticism manifests the hidden mystical way of the *Torah*, *the Talmud*, and the *Midrash* and seeks the *chomah* (wisdom) of the spirit. It also seeks to reconcile God’s choice of the Jewish people, and the trials and tribulations throughout Jewish history (e.g. the Exodus). Thus, Jewish mysticism as reflected in the Jewish culture addresses the personal sufferings, as well as, the sufferings of all the Jewish people.

The goal of Jewish mysticism is the elimination of the concept of God as ‘untouchable’ and ‘unknowable’ and distant through spiritual symbolism in the mystical literature and Divine revelation in the souls of humankind. Through the discovery of the secret hidden path, humankind can unite with God and experience the Divine presence of God. Thus, the soul becomes the vehicle through which humankind can experience the Divine presence of God. In this way, creation, revelation, and redemption to mention only a few of the more important religious conceptions are given a different meaning through the direct contact between humankind and God. This is the characteristic feature (goal) of the mystical experience.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the history of Judaism and the Jewish people, there have been those individuals who were not satisfied with traditional religious practice to approaching God. Thus, many individuals throughout history have searched for a more intimate and meaningful way for a relationship between humankind and his Creator. The search for a union with God has been expressed in many ways and those who were convinced that it could

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<sup>8</sup> Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism. (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 7-13.

not be brought about by intellectual or rational means gave rise to the various groups, or sects of Jewish mysticism. From its very beginnings, Jewish mysticism has required knowledge that is a secret 'tradition' and by its very nature difficult to impart to those chosen adepts. This has led to small elite groups of religious scholars who have imparted the knowledge to their followers.

As a whole, both Jewish mysticism and traditional Judaism, believes that the Bible is the source of all spiritual truth. Thus, spiritual truth can be revealed to individuals either as revelation through contemplation, or it can be ascertained from a mystical interpretation of the Biblical and ancient texts based on Scripture. Throughout the history of Jewish mysticism there has existed the tension between the inclination to arrive at spiritual truth by an esoteric system of hermeneutical interpretation of Biblical and *Talmudic* text as mystical symbols, revelations of celestial powers, intuitive reflection as versus reading Biblical text, as the source, for spiritual truth.

Thus, at the core of Jewish mysticism are mystical symbols. *Kabbalists* (traditionalists) claim that spiritual truth cannot be expressed by words. Words denote only what the human senses or intellect experience. If spiritual truth is beyond human sensory or logical perception, then how can a language of words express spiritual truth? Yet the Bible is written in words, and divinely inspired, and these words must contain Divine truth. To *Kabbalists*, Biblical words do not symbolize mystical truth. Mystical symbolism is essentially beyond the language of words. God gave the Scriptures as a 'lexicon' of mystical symbolism that only the *Kabbalist* can understand and thus obtain Divine spiritual truth.

Throughout its history, Jewish mysticism developed in small esoteric circles of *Kabbalists* who lived with their secrets far from the center of contemporary culture and were not the central element in the Jewish religious culture. Mystical literature developed mainly in these closed esoteric circles whose works remain unknown to the general religious community. Although, the *Kabbalists* were an integral part of the Jewish cultural world, they developed their own literary genre consisting of *Hekhalot* (palaces, halls) and *Merkavah* (Chariot) literature that differed from the standard *Talmudic–Midrashic* literary forms.

The early Traditionalists (*Kabbalists*) appear in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. Their goal was the practice of ascension (*yeridah la merkavah* paradoxically “descent to the Chariot”) where the *Kabbalists* attempted to ascend on the Chariot (*Merkavah*) through the seven heavens and the seven celestial palaces in order to reach the throne of glory with ministering angels around the Divine Throne. Thus, the *Hekhalot* literature is intensely visual, describing in detail the celestial realm, palaces/chambers and God’s Divine Presence.<sup>9</sup>

#### A. *Bereshit* and Creation

Closely associated with the *Merkavah* (“Chariot”) are mystical accounts about creation (*Ma’aseh Bereshit* “Account of Creation”) that are based on the hidden meanings of Genesis I. The most important and oldest of these mystical treatises that describes the process of creation is the *Book of Creation* (*Sefer Yetzirah*) dated probably from the second century C.E. with the first commentaries appearing in the 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Wigoder, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 559–60.

*Sefer Yetzirah* was probably written in Palestine by a devout Jew with leanings toward mysticism, whose aim was speculative and magical rather than ecstatic.<sup>10</sup>

According to mystical cosmology of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, God created the universe by 32 mysterious paths of wisdom consisting of 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, together with the ten *Sefirot*:

He [God] drew them, hewed them, combined them, weighed them, interchanged them, and through them produced the whole creation and everything that is destined to come into being.<sup>11</sup>

*Merkavah Bereshit* was regarded in the Talmudic period as belonging to esoteric lore, and the *Mishnah* (*Hagigah* 2:1) states that “The forbidden degrees [Lev. 18:6ff] may not be expounded before three persons, nor the Story of Creation [Genesis I] before two. . .” Also, in the *Talmud*, the view about esoteric lore was of a secretive nature:

The laws of *forbidden relations* may not be expounded in the presence of three persons, nor the *Story of Creation* in the presence of two, nor [the work of] the *Chariot* in the presence of one, alone unless he is a Sage and understands of his own knowledge. Whosoever speculates upon four things, a pity for him! He is as though he had not come into the world, [to wit], what is above, what is beneath, what before, what after. And whosoever takes no thought for the honour of his maker, it were a mercy if he had not come into the world.

*Bavli Hagigah* 11:b<sup>12</sup>

The interpretation of the first verse of Genesis was the subject of a discussion between Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel on the account of creation. The former maintained that the heavens were created first, and then the earth while Bet Hillel maintained the opposite opinion (*Genesis Rabbah* I:XV). By the time of Simeon b. Yohai, a disciple of

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<sup>10</sup> Cecil Roth, ed., *Encyclopedia Judaica*. vol. 16 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishers, Inc., 1971), 783–6.

<sup>11</sup> Cohn–Sherbok, 30.

<sup>12</sup> J. Rabbinowitz, trans. *Hebrew–English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*. vol. 8 (*Mo‘ed*) (London: The Soncino Press, 1984).

Rabbi Akiva, the need to disregard the prohibition against cosmogonical speculation was limited to the acceptance of the simultaneous and sole creation of heaven and earth. The intention (act of creation) is affirmed by Biblical passages. For example, in Psalm 33:6 “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth” emphasizes that creation needed no action but merely the word of God. The best known expression of this belief is “With ten words was the world created” (Avot 5:1).

The central subject of *Sefer Yetzirah* is cosmology and cosmogony (a form of *ma’aseh bereshit* “account of creation” in a speculative form) written in a clearly mystical genre. The *Sefer Yetzirah* has a strong link with Jewish thought concerning divine wisdom (Hebrew “*chomah*”) and this is evident from the very beginning of the work with the declaration that God created the world by means of “32 secret paths of *chomah*.” In the context of the book, *sefirot* is used simply to mean “numbers” instead of the Hebrew “*misparim*.” The author may be alluding to metaphysical principles to the stages in the creation of the world. Furthermore, in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the author employs expressions that are specific to *Merkabah* mysticism. The description of the *hayyot* (“living creatures”) who carry the Throne of Glory in the chariot (Ezekiel 1) and prostrate themselves before God’s throne.<sup>13</sup>

#### 1. *Sefer Yetzirah*

*Sefer Yetzirah* has nothing in common with the other cosmogonical works in Jewish ancient literature. One possibility for this is that the book was a result of the

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<sup>13</sup> Roth, 16:782–3.

spiritual zeal of a lone religious believer who authored the Jewish ancient mystical literature. However, the author in his zeal, chose a unique approach, and formulated a book with terminology that is not used elsewhere, in order to express his spiritual environment. Thus, due to the unique terminology, the majority of the book cannot be adequately understood nor explained. As a result, there have been some abstract interpretations that are difficult to challenge and difficult to prove.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* deserves a foremost place in the ranks of Jewish creativity for expressing its spiritual daring and its great influence on many individuals. The author, after an examination of the basic assumptions of Jewish mystical thought felt it necessary to reexamine the basic assumptions of Jewish mystical thought and to follow his own individual path without taking into account the fact that hallowed rabbinic sources followed different paths. I am sure that the author believed that he was revealing hidden and profound *gnosis* of God's creation of the world. I believe that the opening sentence of *Sefer Yetzirah* extensively expresses the feelings of the author:

בשלשים ושתים נתיבות פליאות חכמה  
 חקק יה יהוה צבאות אלהי ישראל אלהים  
 חיים ומלך עולם אל שדי רחום וחנן רם ונשא שוכן  
 עד וקדוש שמו מרום וקדוש הוא וברא את עולמו  
 בשלשה ספרים בספר וספר וספור:

Translated as: *With 32 mystical paths of Wisdom; engraved Yah the Lord of Hosts the God of Israel the living God; King of the universe El Shaddai Merciful and Gracious High and Exalted Dwelling in eternity; Whose name is Holy — He is lofty and holy; And e created His universe with three books with text with number and with communication.*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah The Book of Creation*. (Boston: Weiser Books, 1997), 5.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* is the oldest and most mysterious of all the mystical writings of Hebrew systematic speculative thought. No other single treatise of such a small size (approximately 2,500 words, and lacks representation from a particular school) has had such a large influence is difficult to comprehend. As far as the authorship is concerned, scholars are totally dependent on traditions. Probably, the author of *Sefer Yetzirah* was a lone thinker (or Rabbi) without disciples of a particular school. Furthermore, it took hundreds of years after the author wrote the *Sefer Yetzirah* for it to become influential.<sup>15</sup>

Initially interpreted as a philosophical treatise by the earlier commentators. Commentaries first appear in the 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E. with the text itself quoted as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Also, there are references to the work appearing in the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. while traditions regarding its use attest to its existence in Biblical times. Careful analysis indicates that the *Sefer Yetzirah* is a meditative text with strong magical overtones. This position is supported by the earliest *Talmudic* traditions, which indicate the magical inkling for use in creating living creatures (*Golem* “a mystical android”). For a treatise on speculative thought, mysticism, and magic is unparalleled.<sup>16</sup>

The *Sefer Yetzirah* consists of six chapters that may be divided into four sections composed of brief statements with few quoted Biblical verses that present the author’s argument, without explanation or substantiation. In particular, the first chapter employs an imposing and solemn vocabulary that is close to that of the *Merkavah* literature.<sup>17</sup> The

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph Dan, *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism*. (Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1993), 198–9.

<sup>16</sup> As Kaplan states, “Equally mysterious is the meaning of this book. If the author meant to be obscure, he was eminently successful. It is only through the most careful analysis, studying every word with its parallels in Biblical and Talmudic literature, that its haze of obscurity begins to be penetrated.” Aryeh Kaplan *Sefer Yetzirah The Book of Creation*. (Boston: Weiser Books, 1997), IX–XI.

<sup>17</sup> Roth, 16:782.

first chapter introduces the *sefirot* (basic concept of existence) at great length. After this, there is no mention whatsoever regarding the *sefirot* in subsequent chapters. Chapter two provides a general discussion about the letters of the Hebrew alphabet that is central to the teachings of the *Sefer Yetzirah* in a meditative context. Also, introduced are the five phonetic families: (1) Gutturals (2) Labials (3) Palatals (4) Linguals and (5) Dentals with the division of the “Mothers”, “Doubles”, “Elementals”, and “Finals”. There is no apparent reason or application given for this division. Included also, are the 231 gates, that is, the number of ways in which two different letters of the Hebrew alphabet can be connected. Neither the phonetic families nor the *gates* are mentioned again in the text. Chapters three to five discuss the three divisions of the letters, the mothers, doubles, and elementals.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, an interesting aspect of Chapter six is verse 6:7, linking the *Sefer Yetzirah* to Abraham as its possible author. From this verse, it is evident that the secrets of *Yetzirah* had been revealed to Abraham and by means of these secrets he discovered the existence of God. Moreover, it was through this verse that Abraham understood the existence of God and arrived at a belief in Him before the giving of the *Torah*. Following is verse 6:7 of the *Sefer Yetzirah*:

And when Abraham our father, may he rest in peace, looked, saw, understood, probed, engraved and carved, He was successful in creation, as it is written, “And the souls that they made in Haran” (*Genesis* 12:5). Immediately there was revealed to him the Master of all, may His name be blessed forever, He placed him in His bosom, and kissed him on his head, and He called him, “Abraham my beloved” (*Isaiah* 41:8). He

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<sup>18</sup> These are related to the universe, soul, and year representing a fairly detailed astrological system with no hint of a meditative context. Finally, Chapter six appears to have no clear connection. Chapter six introduces the concepts of the imaginary axis (around which heaven rotates), cycle (*Galgal* “king over time), and heart in the Soul (like a king in battle). Chapter six, by far, contains the most difficult and obscure statements. Aryeh Kaplan *Sefer Yetzirah The Book of Creation*. (Boston: Weiser Books, 1997), XI–XII.

made a covenant with him and with his children after him forever, as it is written, “And he believed in God, and He considered and He considered it righteousness” (*Genesis 15:6*). . . And He bound the 22 letters of the *Torah* to his tongue and He revealed to him His mystery. . .<sup>19</sup>

Abraham understood by the power of his perception and through divine revelation, the way the world was created, and thus he understood that there was one creator. In the wake of his understanding, God made a covenant with him and his children after him forever. Thus, the *Sefer Yetzirah* is a review of the process that Abraham went through to believe in the one God.<sup>20</sup>

The central subject is cosmology and cosmogony written in a clearly mystical character. It is evident from the beginning of the book, with the declaration that God created the world by means of “32 secret paths of *chomah*” that there is a link to the Jewish concept of divine wisdom (*chomah*). Thus, the foundations of all creation are established through the 32 paths, defined as the “ten numbers (or stages of creation) without actuality” and the “22 elemental letters” of the Hebrew alphabet are represented as the foundations of all creation. In ancient times, the number “0” was unknown with reference to the numbers 1 to 10 in the context of the *sefirot*. The use of numbers (*sefirot*) may refer to the stages in the creation of the universe. The idea of numbers in cosmogony is also used in the *Mishnah*. The Tractate *Avot*, in the *Mishnah*, states “With ten sayings was the world created.” The reference is to Genesis I where ten times it states, “and God said” alluding to the fact that in the beginning there was no world. Thus, the ten times God spoke, resulting in the creation of the universe. From this one can deduce that by

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<sup>19</sup> Kaplan, 255.

<sup>20</sup> Dan, 203.

combining the powers of the Hebrew letters with the numbers (the thirty–two secret paths of *chomah*), God created the world out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, this is not an explanation, but a formulation that seeks to find the truth regarding the way that the universe was created. Thus, whoever knows the secret of the thirty–two paths of *chomah* can participate in the process of creation.<sup>21</sup>

In Kabbalistic literature, the ten *Sefirot* is generally a reference to the theory of emanation, although the *Sefer Yetzirah* does not mention that the first *Sefirot* itself emanated from God and was not created by Him as an independent action. The text is ambiguous about the mystical emanation and order. At least the first four *Sefirot* emanate from each other. The first is the spirit (the essence) of the Living God. The author uses *ru'ach* with its dual meaning of abstract spirit and air or ether. From the primal air God created, or “engraved” upon it, the 22 Hebrew letters; from the primal waters, the cosmic chaos; and from the primal fire, the Throne of Glory and the hosts of the angels. Thus, “all the beings in the strata of the cosmos: in the world, in time, and in man’s body (the text uses the world, year, and soul) came into existence through the interconnection of the 22 Hebrew letters and especially by way of the 231 gates.” With the gates representing the combinations of the letters into groups of two representing the roots of Hebrew verbs–based on two consonants as versus the trilateral consonants. Thus, every living thing contains these linguistic elements and exists by their power.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Dan, 201–2.

<sup>22</sup> Roth, 16:782–4.

## B. *Hekhalot* and the Godly Measurements

The earliest phase in the development of Jewish esotericism and mysticism themes is to be found in Talmudic and early Geonic period (3<sup>rd</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> Centuries C.E.). The first theme involves descriptions of visionary heavenly ascents through the even divine palaces (“*Hekhalot*”). The second theme features meditations, prayers, and interpretations of the divine Chariot (“*Merkavah*”).<sup>23</sup>

The *Hekhalot* and *Merkavah* genres occupy an extremely important place in the development of *Hekhalot* literature. The use of the term *Hekhalot* literature may give the impression of a cohesive corpus of writings with a distinct homogeneous tradition with a unified body of work having one spiritual approach. Just the reverse, the *Hekhalot* and *Merkavah* genres consist of anonymous and mystical treatises, each of which includes various literary genres and diverse traditions.<sup>24</sup> *Hekhalot* literature contains a wealth of material that is found nowhere else. The focus is ascension through the celestial palaces to the vision of God’s divine Throne. The *Hekhalot* literature deals mainly with the mystical interpretation, in an esoteric manner, of Ezekiel’s vision, reflecting the tradition known in the *Mishnah* by the term *Ma’aseh Merkavah* (“The Account of the Chariot,” from Ezekiel’s vision of the Divine Chariot in the Book of Ezekiel). The purpose of the *Ma’aseh Merkavah* is the ascent and the vision of the One Who sits on the Throne, “a likeness as the appearance of a man upon it above” Ezekiel 1:26. It is distinctively diverse with much complexity and contradictory notions of God, angels, and human beings.

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<sup>23</sup> *Merkavah* refers to the “Divine Throne” described in Daniel 7, Isaiah 6, and Ezekiel 1. The term *Merkavah* does not appear in Ezekiel 1, but in rabbinic literature the expression “*Ma’aseh Merkavah*” is used to reference the hidden interpretation of Ezekiel 1.

<sup>24</sup> Vita Daphna Arbel *Beholders of Divine Secrets: Mysticism and Myth in the Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature*. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2003), 8–9.

Each treatise may be viewed as an anthology of different traditions and subject matters. All the treatises present, in a distinctive language and vocabulary, several particular features, that reach a level of explicit literary formulation. The mystical accounts claim the existence of an alternative realm of ultimate reality that stands beyond the physical phenomenological world. Seen from a specific religious perspective, this sphere is classified in terms such as the “Heaven of heavens”, the “King’s palaces”, or “God’s *Merkavah*” (chariot). These traditions, likewise, acknowledge an inner contemplative process of attaining the absolute achieved by human seekers. This experience is depicted as visionary contemplative journeys out of this world to celestial realms.

Cosmological concepts, magical and supernatural traditions, accounts of visionary ascents and descents to the celestial world, descriptions of angelic beings, adjurations, and theosophical speculations concerning the nature of God, his appearance and the measurements of His divine body (*shi‘ur qomah*), are several of the central topics that the *Hekhalot* literature introduces.<sup>25</sup>

These treatises exhibit features not found elsewhere, such as the use of the term *hekhalot* for the celestial and divine halls and realms, the ecstatic ascent and descent of these celestial realms and palaces, and the emphasis on direct individual experience rather than on the exegesis of canonical texts. Furthermore, the texts show address concern for the soul and the mystical vision with instructions on how to avoid the dangers represented by the angelic guardians and celestial gatekeepers.<sup>26</sup> The treatise *Shi‘ur*

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<sup>25</sup> On the different traditions in *Hekhalot* and *Merkavah* literature see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 43–73.

<sup>26</sup> R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 315.

*Qomah* (The Measurement of the Height [Body]) is the first Hebrew mystical work and the most recondite treatise dedicated to a description of God using exaggerated anthropomorphic images. Ancient mystics used the *Shi'ur Qomah* as the target for their ascendance from the heavens and palaces until they reached the seventh palace in the seventh heaven. There they confronted God, the Creator who was seated on His Throne of Glory surrounded by angels and a profusion of Divine power.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the use of the extreme anthropomorphic images of God is not to imply that God himself possesses a physical form, but only that a form may be ascribed to God, i.e., the *guf ha-Shekhinah* (“the Body of the Divine presence”). Furthermore, the descriptions in the *Shi'ur Qomah* are based on the passages in Song of Songs (5:10–16).<sup>28</sup>

#### 1. *Shi'ur Qomah*

*Shi'ur* is not Biblical Hebrew but may be related to the Hebrew term *sha'ar* ‘measure’ as in Genesis 26:12 where the phrase *me'ah she'arim* may be translated as ‘one hundred fold.’ Even more difficult to define is *Qomah*. In Biblical Hebrew, *Qomah* is from the Hebrew verb *qum* (‘to rise’ ‘get up’ ‘stand up’ ‘arise’ or ‘height’ either as a person, Ezra 13:18; a tree in 2 Kings 19:23; or more commonly as a building, in Genesis 6:15). Yet, the context of the treatise refers to body parts and not to the property of a body part such as height. Thus, it is more appropriate to refer to the term ‘body’.<sup>29</sup> It is the only treatise in Jewish literature, before the Middle Ages, that addresses the ‘likeness’ of God. The expressions used in the *Shi'ur Qomah* are at the core of ancient Jewish mys-

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<sup>27</sup> Wigoder, 333.

<sup>28</sup> Roth, 10:502.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Samuel Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism*. (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1983), 77.

ticism with the *Shi'ur Qomah* becoming an integral part of Jewish mysticism more than fifteen centuries ago. The *Shi'ur Qomah* is probably circa second century C.E., and attributed to Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. Mystics of all generations have used the terms and symbolism of the Godhead in all areas of mystical thought. Thus, the *Shi'ur Qomah* represents one of the major sources in Jewish mysticism and the *Hekhalot* literature.

The influence of the *Shi'ur Qomah* has a direct link with the *Merkavah* adept. The end of the *Merkavah* journey is the vision of the Throne of God and of the Divine Presence (as in Ezekiel 1:26) of Him who sits upon the Divine Throne. Thus, “the *Shi'ur Qomah* is abundant with anthropomorphic descriptions and measurements of God’s limbs in the figure of a man with the measurements of the most minute parts of God’s head given.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, a critical point in the history of Jewish religion, how one explained “in God’s image” became the most striking and significant dividing line between Hellenistic rationalistic philosophical terminology and Jewish mystical symbolism.

The core of the *Shi'ur Qomah* consists of a series of three lists. The first, is a list of God’s body parts, “the sole of His foot, His right heel, His left heel, His right hip, His left hip, His neck, His head, His beard, His nose, His tongue, the breadth of His forehead, the iris in His eye, the white in His eye, His shoulder, His fingers, the plasmas of His hands, the crown on His head, His cheeks, etc.” The second list is the names of God consisting of odd letter combinations without rational meaning. The third list contains the measurements (*shi'utim*) of God that give the work its name, *Shi'ur Qomah*. The unit for

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<sup>30</sup> Gershom Scholem, Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition. (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965), 36-7.

measurements is ten million *parsa'ot* (Persian miles) with many multiples and additions. For example, His neck is 130,000,800 *parsa'ot* with His fingers each 150,003,000 *parsa'ot* long. The measures given for the several limbs may have contained some sort of numerical symbolism that can no longer be reconstructed.<sup>31</sup> The height of the Creator is given as 236,000 parasangs, based on a numerological interpretation of Psalm 147:5 as “the height of our Lord is 236.” The measurement transcends any possibility of visualization and cannot really have been intended to indicate any concrete measurements.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the *Shi'ur Qomah* treatise is a listing of the body parts of the lofty figure of God with the details of the names of these parts, and the measurement of God in giant units of ten million *parsa'ot*.

Section E from the *Sefer Haqqomah*, Oxford MS. 1791 manuscript provides insight into the conversion of the measurements:

But he said to me the calculation [105] of the parasangs. How much is their measure? Each parasang is four mils, and each mil [106] is ten thousand cubits, and each cubit is three zeratot. And His zeret [107] fills the entire universe, as it is stated [in Scripture]: Who measured the waters with the hollow of His hand, and the skies, with His zeret, [108] gauged, etc.

Section E of the manuscript offers a variety of supernal measurement conversions into earthly terms. First is the *parasang* which is translated as a Persian mile with the equivalent of about three quarters of a mile in English translation. The *mil* is equivalent to about 3,000 feet. It appears to be a Latin word equal to one 1,000 paces or 5,000 feet. The exact meaning here is not known. Also, the *cubit*, in rabbinic literature is either five or six

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<sup>31</sup> Dan, 65-6.

<sup>32</sup> Roth, 14:1417-8.

handbreaths (*tefahim*) with the distance being from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow or approximately eighteen inches. The *zeret* is an obscure term, it may refer to the pinky finger, or to the span of a hand.<sup>33</sup>

Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ismael, the major speakers, provide the evidence for the source of this mystical list. It starts off with the words: R' Ismael said, "I saw the King, King of kings, sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, with His legions standing before Him to His right and to His left." . . . R' Ismael said, "How high is the Holy One, blessed be He, who is more concealed than all the creatures." Near the end of the treatise, we have the following festive declaration by R' Ishmael: R' Ishmael said: "When I told this to R' Akiva, he said to me: 'Whoever knows these measurements of our Creator and the praise of the Holy One, blessed be He, who is concealed from the creatures is guaranteed the World to come. It will be good for him in this world of the good in the World to come and he will have prolonged days in this world.'" R' Ishmael said to his disciples: "I and R' Akiva are guarantors that whoever knows these measurements of our Creator and the praise of the One, blessed be He, is guaranteed the World to come, provided that he studies this work (i.e. *Shi'ur Qomah*) daily."<sup>34</sup> The implication being that the two pillars of the *Mishnah*, the greatest *Tanna'im*, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael, who along with their disciples, determined Jewish law for all future generations, declare to the reader of this treatise that not only are the contents of the work correct and indeed are God's measurements and His names, but that this information has awe-inspiring religious value,

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<sup>33</sup> Cohen, 215–6.

<sup>34</sup> Dan, 67.

granting one the right to the World to come and even benefiting him in this world, provided he studies daily the measurements and names in *Shi'ur Qomah*.

In order to achieve these religious goals which should be self-evident to one who attains the mystical level and that is required knowledge of the *sodim* (“secrets”) of God one must learn God’s measurements and all the pertinent details. This is an extremist anthropomorphic position, not only because it lists God’s body parts with detail that is not found in any other source, but because it is not open to rejection or refutation like other religious sources. One cannot claim here that this is all a metaphor, that it doesn’t mean exactly what it says, because the measurements are precise and the details about their structures make it clear that the author means them to be taken literally. The *Shi'ur Qomah* is a work that grew out of roots to be found in the Song of Songs. Thus we have:

<sup>10</sup>My beloved is clear-skinned and ruddy, preeminent among ten thousand.

<sup>11</sup>His head is finest gold, His locks are curled and black as a raven.

<sup>12</sup>His eyes are like doves by watercourses, bathed in milk, set by a brimming pool.

<sup>13</sup>His cheeks are like beds of spices, banks of perfume His lips are like lilies; they drip flowing myrrh.

<sup>14</sup>His hands are rods of gold, studded with beryl; His belly a tablet of ivory, adorned with sapphires.

<sup>15</sup>His legs are like marble pillars set in sockets of fine gold. He is majestic as Lebanon, stately as the cedars.

<sup>16</sup>His mouth is delicious and all of him is delightful. Such is my beloved, such is my darling, O maidens of Jerusalem!<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Song of Songs 5:10-16 JPS.

Because Song of Songs contains a detailed description of the limbs of a lover, within the mystical circles the *Shi'ur Qomah* came to be identified with God. The *Song of Songs* became the basic *Scriptural* text upon which the doctrine of *Shi'ur Qomah* developed. An important point to keep in mind is that the *Shi'ur Qomah* treatise does not interpret the Song of Songs as allegory, but within the context of generally accepted Jewish *midrashic* interpretations. Thus, the *Shi'ur Qomah* is strictly an esoteric treatise that contains sublime and esoteric mysteries regarding God in Divine Presence upon the Divine Throne of the *Merkavah* (Chariot).<sup>36</sup>

### C. Obscurity of the *Merkavah*

The *Merkavah* (“Chariot”) is the rabbinic term for the beginning of the Book of Ezekiel. The rabbis used the term *Ma'aseh Merkavah*<sup>37</sup> (“Account of the Chariot”) to designate the elaborate speculations, discourses, and visions connected with the Throne of Glory and the Divine Chariot that bears it. Although, the word *Merkavah* does not appear in Ezekiel, it is derived from 1 Chronicles 28:18.<sup>38</sup> The *Merkavah* is the way that ancient Jewish mysticism interpreted the obscure and visionary passage in beginning of Ezekiel. The *Merkavah* occupies an exceptionally important role in Jewish mysticism and esotericism. The *Merkavah* literature was prevalent in the first and second centuries and contains a profusion of material that is found nowhere else in Jewish literature with links to the *Talmud* and *Midrashim*. The most important representatives of the mystical and theosophical thought were the teachers of *Mishnah*, with these *Mishnahic* teachers

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<sup>36</sup> Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 38–9.

<sup>37</sup> The name *Ma'aseh Merkavah* as a specific title is not to be found in any of the manuscripts, but is based on Scholem's *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* pp 101ff.

<sup>38</sup> Roth, 11:1386.

being pupils of Johanan b. Zakkai around the turn of the first century C.E.<sup>39</sup> A Large part of the literature was initially written in Palestine where the first center of *Merkavah* mysticism was formed. Thus, Palestine was the cradle of the *Merkavah* movement.<sup>40</sup>

The *Merkavah* entails all the details of the celestial world that extended through the seven palaces in the celestial realm. We have for example, angelic beings guarding and filling the *hekhalot* (palaces), with the rivers of fire flowing in front of the *Merkavah* (Chariot) and the bridges that the adepts must cross to enter the palaces. The details of the divine Chariot including the *ofan* (the divine wheels) that move through the ether. With the main purpose of the ascent to see the God on His Throne of Glory.<sup>41</sup> The pertinent passages in the beginning of Ezekiel describe more than a chariot. Beginning with a stormy wind, a huge cloud with flashing fire and in the center a gleam of amber and the figures of four creatures from the north. These fantastic creatures had four faces and each creature had four wings. Each of them had a human face [at the front], a face of a lion [on the right side], a face of an ox [on the left], a face of an eagle [at the back]. With wings that could move in the four direction of the creatures faces. As for the wheels, they gleamed like beryl with two wheels cutting through each other. The rims of the wheels were tall and frightening and covered over with eyes. Above the creatures heads was a form with an awe-inspiring gleam as of crystal was spread over the creatures heads. Over the creatures heads was a semblance of a throne appearing like a sapphire with the semblance of a human form . . . That was the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of

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<sup>39</sup> Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 41.

<sup>40</sup> Roth, 10:500.

<sup>41</sup> Roth, 10:501.

the Lord.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, chapter 10 repeats this description with important variations and chapter 43:1-4 refers back to the vision of the Presence. This is not an easy passage to understand the meaning of nor is it easy to determine what the message of the vision is supposed to convey.

Where in rabbinical literature do we find references to the *Merkavah*? Most of the references to the *Merkavah* are contained in the four versions of the same story. Reference to the *Merkavah* is in the *Mishnah Hagigah* 2:1; in the corresponding section of the *Tosefta Hagigah* 2:1-7, and in the corresponding *Gemara* to the *Mishnah* in both the Palestinian *Talmud Hagigah* 77a-d and the Babylonian *Talmud Hagigah* 11b-16a.<sup>43</sup> As mentioned earlier, in rabbinic literature, there are strict requirements about how the Divine mysteries could be communicated. We read in the *Talmud*:

The laws of *forbidden relations* may not be expounded in the presence of three persons, nor the *Story of Creation* in the presence of two, nor [the work of] the *Chariot* [*Merkavah*] in the presence of one, alone unless he is a Sage and understands of his own knowledge. Whosoever speculates upon four things, a pity for him! He is as though he had not come into the world, [to wit], what is above, what is beneath, what before, what after. And whosoever takes no thought for the honour of his maker, it were a mercy if he had not come into the world.

*Bavli Hagigah 11:b*

In reference to the synagogue tradition, the following legal discussion (although it does not directly address the *Merkavah*) does provide a reference to the *Merkavah* in its meaning. The *Mishnah* (*Meg.* 4:6) discusses the synagogue functions that may be performed by a minor, a man dressed in ragged clothing, and a blind man. Thus, a blind

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<sup>42</sup> Ezekiel 1–26 JPS.

<sup>43</sup> David J. Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature*. (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1980), 11.

man may recite the *Shema* with the Benedictions and interpret [the *Torah* reading for the congregation]. In response, many have discerned sufficiently [with their mind's eye] to expound the Chariot (*Merkavah*) [the first chapter of Ezekiel], and yet they never saw it (Talmud Meg. 24b). One may interpret this to mean that many people undertake mystical exegesis in the hopes of obtaining a vision of the *Merkavah* but not everyone succeeds. With regard to the synagogue tradition, this may be proof that the reading of the *Merkavah* was permitted by lay persons as a function of the synagogue.

The preceding two responses reflect a different attitude to the *Merkavah*. The synagogue view is one of encouragement while in the rabbinic view one of apprehensiveness. The apprehensiveness of the rabbinical view may have provided a degree of hostility to the reading/studying of the Book of Ezekiel. This apprehension was the strongest toward the latter part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> C.E. with the focal point on the period of the editing of the *Mishnah*. With the result, that “we do not know the impact on the Jewish people, that is, those who followed the rabbis.” There is some evidence that the *Amoraim* (rabbinical teachers c. 200–500 C.E.) did not take serious the *Mishnah Hagigah*. 2:1 with the result that the synagogues continued to read the *Merkavah*.<sup>44</sup>

In fact, the *Amoraim* in Babylonia, during the the 4<sup>th</sup> century envisioned the *Merkavah* as an ecstatic journey:

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- A. Four entered the garden [*pardes*]: Ben ‘Azzai, Ben Zoma, the Other [Elisha], and ‘Akiba.
- B. One gazed and perished, one gazed and was smitten, one gazed and cut down sprouts, and one went up whole and came down whole.

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<sup>44</sup> David Halperin, The Faces of the Chariot Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision. (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 9881), 23–6.

- C. Ben ‘Azzai gazed and perished.
  - D. Concerning him Scripture says, *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints* [Psalm 116:15].
  - E. Ben Zoma gazed and was smitten.
  - F. Concerning him Scripture says, *If you have found honey, eat only your enough for you, lest you be sated with it and vomit it* [Proverbs 25:16].
  - G. Elisha gazed and cut down sprouts.
  - H. Concerning him Scripture says, *Let not let your mouth lead you into sin* [Qoh. 5:5]
- 2:4
- A. R. ‘Akiba went up whole and came down whole.
  - B. Concerning him Scripture says, *Draw me after you, let us make haste. [The king has brought me into his chambers]* [Song of Songs 1:4].

*Tosefta (Hag, 2:3–4)*

This famous passage clearly refers to the real danger in the process of ascending to the ‘Garden’ (*Pardes* ‘Paradise’). If one was unworthy to see God in His beauty, the angels on both sides of the gates (to the seventh heaven) disturbed one’s senses and instantly struck them dead. The exclamation of the water probably refers to the sixth palace gate where it is thought that hundreds of thousands and millions of waves of water stormed and raved and yet, not a drop of water, only the ethereal glitter of the marble plates of the palace.<sup>45</sup>

The three examples of rabbinical literature in the previous paragraphs testifies to

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<sup>45</sup> Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 52–3.

the direction of the *Merkavah* in Jewish thought. First, many synagogues of second-century Palestine interpreted the *Merkavah* for the congregation. Second, the rabbinic tradition preached fear and apprehension regarding the expounding of the *Merkavah*. The concerns of the teachers gave rise to the speculation that the gnosis of the *Merkavah* was dangerous to the soul of the people. Finally, the teaching of the *Merkavah* stopped being a matter of Biblical study alone. It took on the characteristics of an ecstatic experience to the celestial realms.

#### 1. *Ma'aseh Merkavah*

The *Ma'aseh Merkavah* treatise is an important example of *Hekhalot* literature and of *Merkavah* mysticism, that is the visionary Jewish mysticism that flourished in Palestine and Babylonia in the second through the eighth centuries C.E. The text was first brought to the attention of scholars by Gershom Scholem in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* and *Jewish Gnosticism, Ma'aseh Merkavah, and Talmudic Tradition*. He demonstrated that *Hekhalot* texts contain some of the earliest evidence for Jewish mysticism and theurgy.

A significant aspect of the historical implications of Jewish prayer in the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is expressed by the relationship between prayer that is spoken by the worshipper as versus public prayer. To address this distinction one must understand the history of Jewish prayer. This is indicated by the destruction of the Second Temple and during the formative period of rabbinical Judaism. The Temple functioned as the central place for public prayer and the Presence of God when invoked by prayer of the priests. The formalized ritual of purity of the priests, sacrifice, and the sanctified place (the Holy of

Holies) served as the catalyst to bring God near to His people. This arrangement was at the core of the function of the Temple system.

The composers of prayer in the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* wrote after the destruction of the Second Temple and the elimination of the public Temple system that resulted in the disappearance of the Divine Presence and the sacrificial sin atonement. The establishment of the synagogue and the study of the *Torah* represent the replacement for public prayers, and sacrificial atonement as the appropriate substitute for the Temple. The composers of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, like the Qumran community who composed Sabbath Songs, who came after the destruction of the Second Temple created prayer that assured them that their worship was in accordance with the relationship of the Divine Presence (*Shekhinah*) and His celestial realm.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, prayers are meant to evoke a response – to connect the human worshipper with that of the heavenly host. Thus, prayer is central to the mystical character of *Hekhalot* literature. *Merkavah* prayer is characterized by the use of repetition of synonyms, hypnotic rhythm, and a supernatural quality. The *Ma'aseh Merkavah* prayers are seen as having specific functions: (1) some are to envision the celestial realm, (2) some are for protecting the adept from the hostile beings guarding the celestial chambers, (3) some are expressions of thankfulness to God for having spared the adept, and (4) some as expressions of the adept's duty while in the heavenly court.<sup>47</sup> Thus, from the prayer functions, it is clear that the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* prayers are not representative of characteristically spontaneous outpourings of the heart in the expectations of a

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Swartz *Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism An Analysis of Ma'aseh Merkavah*. (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1992), 28-9.

<sup>47</sup> Swartz, 23.

‘merciful’ God, nor as meaningless words to induce a mystical trance. The poetic prayer techniques employed were developed before the composition of the *Ma’aseh Merkavah* and are carefully crafted.

The prayers in the *Ma’aseh Merkavah* often follow a thematic procedural order. The prayers open with a blessing to God (*berakhah*). Following the *berakhah*, there is often a poetically majestic description that recognizes God’s creation of the heavens and earth. Followed by poetry that focuses on one aspect of the heavenly realm. At this point, many of the prayers stress the angelic praise with that of the human worshipper, leaning to the worshipper’s declaration that he will recite (*mazkir*) God’s glory or pronounce the name of God. In closing, the prayers normally will offer after an expression of praise or an extended praise passage a liturgical blessing.<sup>48</sup>

In the larger context, the *Ma’aseh Merkavah* is a compilation of three sections with narrative providing continuity. The first section is about the ascent to heaven as taken by Rabbi Akiva including his vision of the angels and the celestial realm. The second and third sections overall include rituals, incantations, invocations, and prayers for the adjuration of *Sar ha-Torah* (Prince of the *Torah*) or ‘Prince of Wisdom’ (*Sar ha-Chomah*) who is an angelic figure designated over learning and wisdom with the capability to impart the learning of *Torah*. Section four includes more prayers and an account of the vision of the heavenly realm.

In Section One is the exchange between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ismael where Rabbi Akiva discusses his ascension, what he saw, and the prayers of protection and

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<sup>48</sup> Swartz, 15.

gratitude that he recited in the *Hekhalot*. The rest of Section One contains enumerative descriptions of the heavenly realm, with short testimonies to the visions that he saw, and finally, Rabbi Akiva outlines the requirements for the ascent and tells of his travels through the *Hekhalot*. Section Two contains a series of exchanges between Rabbi Nehuniah ben Ha-Qannah to Rabbi Ishmael on learning of the *Sar ha-Torah* and teachings from the Angel of the Presence (*Mal'akh ha-Panim*). The exchanges cover a wide variety of praxis such as: reciting prayers, the three names or 'letters' that Moshe wrote to Joshua as protection for oneself, the difficulty in fasting for Rabbi Ismael and the use of the powerful forty-two-letter Divine name to achieve a quick result, and instructions from Rabbi Nehuniah on protection from the fierce angels who stand behind the *Hayyot* (Creatures) "who are fiercer than all the celestial hosts" who guard the entrances to the *Hekhalot*. Section Three contains the reciting of the names of the *Sar ha-Chomah* and the enlightenment of Rabbi Ishmael after hearing of Rabbi Nehuniah's testimony on his *Merkavah* vision. Also, Rabbi Ismael meets *Zevudiel* (the Angel of the Presence) where he offers a blessing of praise and with Rabbi Nehuniah teaching him the five prayers for effectively learning the *emet* (truth) of the *Torah* that Aaron the High Priest also had known. Finally, in Section Four, which is similar to Section One in subject matter. We have two long prayers. The first is a testimony by Rabbi Akiva for seeing the *Shekhinah* and all that is done before the *Merkavah*. The second is an exchange between Rabbis Akiva and Ismael where Rabbi Akiva gives an account of how he was able to see above

the *Seraphim*<sup>49</sup> and how he was able to approach the angels without fear.<sup>50</sup>

The narrative setting of the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* contains reports from Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva and conversations between Rabbi Ishmael and his teacher Rabbi Nehuniah ben Ha-Qannah. The reports are about the visions of the Rabbi's and the prayers that made these visions possible. These reports take the form of questions and answers. Every exchange between the Rabbi's promotes either a prayer or the description of the heavenly realm. The text is routine and mechanical with no Biblical exegesis in the *Merkavah* text. In general, the narrative of the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* places it in the category of *Merkavah* mysticism literature. Also, the narrative of the prayer passages, the corresponding communities of both angels and human beings are transmuted from expressions of liturgy to active expressions for attaining the visions of the upper worlds.

The ascent<sup>51</sup> is not depicted as a detailed step-by-step event. Rabbi Ishmael, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Nehuniah are the principal characters. They claim to provide each other with the details for achieving the vision of the Divine Presence and the celestial realm. Therefore, the main purpose of these exchanges is to illustrate the power of prayer to aid the worshipper in this ascent vision and to address the master-disciple relationship or teacher and student which is the common approach in the mystical training of an adept. Thus, we have Rabbi Nehuniah teaching and reciting his vision to Rabbi Ishmael. Furthermore, the significance for the master-disciple relationship is that the master

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<sup>49</sup> The term *seraph*, whose etymology is obscure, It appears in the singular [*Seraph*]and plural [*Seraphim*] as the name of a species of serpent. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 14:1179.

<sup>50</sup> Swartz, 67–102.

<sup>51</sup> The visionary ascent of the soul to heaven is always referred to as the 'descent to the *Merkavah*. The paradoxical nature of the term is remarkable in that the description of the mystical journey consistently refers to the ascent and not the descent. The term *Yorde Merkavah* i.e. 'descenders to the *Merkavah* ' is the phrase used throughout the *Hekhalot* literature from *Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 47.

remains with the disciple and achieves a vision and recites it to the disciple. In the same story, Rabbi Ishmael believes that he can achieve similar results, and he begins his own journey reciting his vision. However, he fails to take precautions, and is rebuked by the angels and admonished by Rabbi Nehuniah.<sup>52</sup>

#### IV. Christian Mysticism

The word ‘mysticism’<sup>53</sup> is a relatively recent term in Christianity. During the early church, ‘mystical theology’ was the generally accepted term that describes the ascent of the soul and the union with God with contemplation and prayer as the major elements.<sup>54</sup> Thus, mystical theology is at the very core and essence of Christianity and its very beginnings of the early church. It lies at the root of ancient christologies, soteriologies, and the development of the Christian ritual praxis. One must remember that Christianity in its origins is an Oriental religion and it is a mystical religion. Christians are mystical, in that Christian roots are religious and are non-rational.<sup>55</sup>

The mystical belief, in early Christianity was appropriated from Jewish mysticism. After the Old Testament prophets of Israel, Judaism regarded God as transcendent and ineffable, and with God interacting with humankind through ‘spiritual messengers.’ Thus, the Christian experience of a transcendent and ineffable God extended to the person of Christ and indeed has its roots in Jewish and Christian apocalypticism. Prior to the

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<sup>52</sup> Swartz, 20–23.

<sup>53</sup> The type of religion that puts the emphasis on the immediate awareness of the relation with God, on a direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence. Rufus Jones *Studies in Mystical Religion* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1909), xv.

<sup>54</sup> Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), 335.

<sup>55</sup> Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*. (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1996), 7.

mid-second century, mystical theology was essentially a Jewish tradition. It was not until the mid-second century that it began to take on its own individuality. Mystical theology is not directly described or taught in the New Testament, and it is far less obvious than in the Old Testament.

We are fortunate to have early references to a 'Christian' mystical experience in Paul's letters. His testimony cannot be emphasized enough, it demonstrates that the first Christian-Jews believed that they were recipients of ecstatic experiences both in the form of rapture events as in Gal 1:12 and I Cor 15:8 and of celestial ascent to heaven in Paul's 2 Cor. 12:2-4. In the context of this letter, Paul implies that he knows other Christian-Jews, who boast of mystical experiences (cf. 2 Cor. 11:21-12:11). It appears that the ecstatic experience that Paul describes is fashioned after early Jewish accounts (as in Ezekiel 1) imposing Christian meaning on the older Jewish text. Thus, the New Testament depicts Jewish mystical *Hekhalot* themes of ascent through heavenly chambers; Throne visions; descriptions of spiritual beings, celestial worship, appearance of God (*Sepher Shi'ur Qomah*). Also, quite frequently in other books of the New Testament we read about visions, dreams, angels and the devil, revelations, gifts of the Holy Spirit, and belief in prophecy.

Also, one must not lose sight of the fact that the earliest Christians were faithful Jews. These early Jewish Christians sought to understand the relationship between Jesus and Jehovah. The New Testament provides evidence that the early Christians understood Jesus to be Yahweh in the flesh as in John 1:14. This identification of Christ with Yah-

weh's visible image was fundamental for the worship of Jesus and the confession that He is Lord.

Mystical theology involves the phenomena connected with the mystical knowledge of God through acts and experiences or states of the soul that cannot be produced by human application even with the aid of Divine grace. It comprises among its major themes all extraordinary forms of prayer, higher forms of contemplation, personal revelations, visions, and the mystical union as the result of these actions between God and the soul. Thus, these forms of higher contemplation result in the mystical union that can be characterized as a search for and experience of immediacy with God. Thus, humankind is not content to know about God, but rather humankind seeks for the union with God. This union, or mystical experience, with God means that humankind loses all sense of himself and is absorbed into God as one.<sup>56</sup>

This mystical joining, between humankind and God, is an intense state of awareness. Normally, the individual is in a state of ecstasy, especially if the individual is disposed to esoteric phenomena. This phenomena does not 'qualify' anyone for sainthood and does not indicate any type of spiritual or 'miracle' power. It specifically is a union with the soul of humankind and the Absolute. It does imply a metaphysical conception of God and represents a mystical path to attainment with God. The fundamental aspect of the metaphysics of Christian mysticism are based on Greek rationalistic metaphysics formulated by Plato, and 'Christianized' by Plotinus. Thus, God in Greek Hellenistic

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<sup>56</sup> Andrew Louth, The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition From Plato to Denys. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), xv.

thought is represented as the “Absolute Reality”, “Perfect Form” with no potential of change and in early Christian thought as the absolute monotheistic God.<sup>57</sup>

Mystical union is the transforming experience of the unity of humankind’s soul with the Absolute. This union between humankind’s soul and the Divine Presence represents the highest realm of the mystical union obtained through the contemplative path. Such a union represents the supreme and most genuine elevation of the human soul as it reaches an association with, or at least a living awareness of God. The mystical association is accompanied by a heightened sense of ecstasy, esoteric, Divine visions, sanctification, peace etc.<sup>58</sup>

The framework for the Christian mystical union is the substance of the human nature of Jesus Christ a human being who became the expression of the Word of God through the union of human nature and the Divine. Thus, “the object of worship is the revelation of God in man who is spiritually filled with grace and with the Divine light.” Furthermore, one becomes the ‘likeness’ of God through grace. As in the Jewish metaphor of marriage, in Christianity there is the Eucharistic communion as the metaphor for spiritual marriage.<sup>59</sup>

Within mystical theology is the aspect of ascetical theology through purification of the soul. That is, the processes of active and passive purification that the soul must pass to reach the mystical union. Although the active processes are treated to some extent in ascetical theology, they comprise purity of conscience, abhorrence to sin, purity of

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<sup>57</sup> James Hastings, ed., Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), 83–4.

<sup>58</sup> Mircea Eliade ed. The Encyclopedia of Religion. (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1987), 10:239.

<sup>59</sup> Eliade, 10:242–3.

heart, spirit, and the pureness of right actions. Whereas, with passive purification is the trials of purity that the souls encounter in preparation for contemplation.

Furthermore, mystical theology can be characterized as a search for and experience of immediacy with God. Thus, humankind is not content to know about God, he longs for union with God. The union with God can mean that humankind loses all sense of himself and is absorbed into God, to the union that is experienced as the consummation of love, in that the lover and the beloved remain intensely aware of themselves and of each other.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, Christian mystical theology is based on the ‘unknowability’ of God and His availability to love. Not only is Love an important aspect in Christian faith, it is an important factor in striving toward a mystical union with God. No mystical theology including Jewish theology is based purely on an intellectual exercise. Therefore, mystical theology is not to be understood only through knowledge, but through the application of knowledge and love. This premise is based on the following presuppositions:

1. God is unknowable in that His Divine nature cannot be understood through rational reasoning;
2. Because God is love, He bestows his love on humankind allowing for access or union with Him;
3. The love by which humankind attains union with God includes an intuitive understanding of God; and
4. This form of ‘knowing’ encompasses a higher state of being.<sup>61</sup>

Also, basic within mystical theology, are various degrees of contemplation that is

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<sup>60</sup> Louth, xv.

<sup>61</sup> Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn, eds., *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam An Ecumenical Dialogue*. (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1999) 67–8.

contained in the works of the early church fathers that describe the various phases of the elevation of knowledge, the reflection in the Presence of the Divine.

The objects of contemplation are God, His attributes, the Incarnation, and Life of Christ, etc. The preliminary or preparatory dispositions of contemplation are moral aptitude, prayer power, mortification or self-denial, corporal and spiritual, and soul purification. The fruits of contemplation, are especially the elevation of ecstasy, esoteric, and spirit-filled.

#### A. Gospel of John

The theological significance of the incarnation is expressed in the beginning of the Prologue of the Gospel of John (John 1:1): “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God” and “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14). These two lines form the foundation of the divine union of the Word of God. That is, Jesus provides access to God,<sup>62</sup> because Jesus provides a union and physical identity with God. Yet, it is the Word made flesh that Jesus brings God fully to the world. Jesus’ revelation of God is not just simply that He speaks God’s words and does God’s works. Jesus is the union of God’s Word.<sup>63</sup>

The entire meaning of the fourth Gospel is in the prologue. It is an effort to show the *Logos* who is thoroughly conceived of as an eternal, living, purposive, rational being, as He appeared in flesh, as He moved a man among men. It is the profound study of the

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<sup>62</sup> The Prologue to the Gospel of John represents the mystical union. The very essence of Christian mysticism, the authentic context in which the mystical tradition developed is to be found in the writings of John. Furthermore, John laid the foundation on all Christians who aspire to mystical union. Michael Cox, *Mysticism The Direct Experience of God*. (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, 1983), 46.

<sup>63</sup> Leander E. Keck, ed, The New Interpreter’s Bible. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 9:495.

consciousness of Jesus as the consciousness of the Son of God living under the conditions of human experience.<sup>64</sup>

In the Gospel of John, Christ Jesus is presented as the incarnate Word (*Logos*) of God (John 1:1–4). The doctrine of Incarnation is a mystical doctrine formulated, that is, the context for direct perception of God as revealed in Christ and thus inspires a mystical understanding of God who has revealed Himself in Christianity.

In sharp contrast to the portrait of the life of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels, John identifies him as the preexistent divine being who, descending from heaven, moves mysteriously through human life, proclaiming heavenly messages and working miracles, and who even foretells his ascension to heaven following his impending suffering and death. John's language may sound preeminently gnostic, but the content of his central message, namely, that the divine *Logos* had become human flesh, was certainly antignostic.<sup>65</sup>

For Christians the mystical experience of the Incarnation represents a metaphysical event.<sup>66</sup> The difference this makes to the Christian adept cannot be exaggerated. In no other religion does God, the Being with whom the adept yearns to be united with, actually put on flesh and become manifest as a suffering human with all the failings and limitations of humankind. In the Gospel of John, we read the overwhelming significance for the Christian adept: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us . . . .' For the Christian adept, the Incarnation means that 'God so loved the world that He gave His

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<sup>64</sup> Hastings, 7:532.

<sup>65</sup> Eliade, 7:160.

<sup>66</sup> The Fourth Gospel also lays great stress on the mystery of the Incarnation, which, is the doctrine that distinguished Christian mysticism from Jewish mysticism. Michael Cox, Mysticism The Direct Experience of God. (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, 1983), 46.

only-begotten Son.’ Thus, the world is sanctified by God’s love for it and by the Son’s sacrifice. Therefore, it follows that matter is not inherently antagonistic to the mystical life; used sacramentally, it is a ladder to God.<sup>67</sup>

The soul’s search for God is naturally conceived of as a return, as ascent to God; for the soul properly belongs with God, and in its ascent it is but realizing its own true nature. Christianity, on the other hand, speaks of the Incarnation of God, of his descent into the world that he might give to humankind the possibility of a communion with God that is not open to him by nature and yet “man is made in the image of God, and so these movements of ascent and descent cross one another and remain unresolved tension.”<sup>68</sup>

#### B. Paul

Paul, as a zealous Pharisee before his call,<sup>69</sup> was steeped in Jewish theology and mystical thought. His spiritual life constitutes a link between the Old and the New Testaments from which Christianity gained access to the tradition of the Hebrew Scripture.

Paul was both a first-century C.E. Jewish adept and a convert to Christianity. In fact, Paul is the only early Jewish adept and apocalypticist whose personal and confessional writing has come down to us. Just like the *Merkavah* adepts, Paul relates his experiences of *Hekhalot* travel. Furthermore, Paul believed that his salvation was in the union of Christ. In Galatians 1, Paul provides us with his evidence for an ecstatic experience, in that “the gospel he speaks is not something that man made up and he did not receive it

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<sup>67</sup> Michael Cox, *Mysticism The Direct Experience of God*. (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: The Aquarian Press, 1983), 40–1.

<sup>68</sup> Louth, xiv.

<sup>69</sup> Davies points out that the use of “conversion” is an incorrect term. W. D. Davies, *Jewish and Pauline Studies*. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1984), 123.

from any man, nor was he taught the gospel by man, but that he received it from Jesus Christ.”<sup>70</sup>

In Paul’s second Epistle to the Corinthians, he speaks of his mystical experience:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that this man; whether in the body or apart from the body, I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to Paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that an is not permitted to tell.

2 Corinthians 12:2-4

This passage in Second Corinthians 12 is esoteric as seen in the context of Jewish *Merkavah* mysticism. Paul does not directly identify himself as the subject.<sup>71</sup> From a mystical perspective, in this passage Paul is speaking from *Merkavah* knowledge. Paul mentions his ascension to the third heaven and his esoteric encounter (union) with the Divine Presence. As a Jewish adept of the first-century C.E., this claim by Paul is not unusual. His experience parallels the *Merkavah* tradition. Paul’s *Merkavah* journey is a link between the older Jewish *Ma’aseh Merkavah* texts and the Jewish *Merkavah* adepts. Thus, this experience parallels *Merkavah* ascent to the Divine Throne as in the *Ma’aseh Merkavah* mystical tradition.<sup>72</sup>

In *Merkavah* mysticism, the traveler often speaks as though he is actually going from palace to palace in the celestial realm, yet we know that the Jewish adept’s body is on earth, where his utterances are being questioned and written down by a group of his

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<sup>70</sup> Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 35.

<sup>71</sup> Most people believe that 2 Corinthians 12 refers to Paul, Segal, 36.

<sup>72</sup> Gershom G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*. (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965), 18.

fellow disciples. Paul speaks at a time before these mystical distinctions were clear or accepted by his Christian community. He is not sure whether the ascent took place in the body or out of it. We should also note that Paul does not utilize the concept of a soul (*psyche*) to effect this heavenly travel. Rather, Paul refers to spirit (*pneuma*) more frequently. This suggests that Paul understood being *in Christ* as literal exchange of earthly body for a new, spiritual one to be shared (union) with the resurrected Jesus at the eschaton. When a heavenly journey is described literally, the cause may be literary convention or the belief that the traveler did in fact make the ascent. Paul's confusion over the nature of his ecstatic journey to heaven provides a rare insight into an adept's inability to distinguish between bodily and spiritual journeys. Paul, however, conceived his journey without a developed concept of the soul. Thus, he is apparently describing a mystical idea of a spiritual body that is received by and finds union in Christ.<sup>73</sup>

Beside the aspect of mystical descent, Paul also expresses his union with Christ (the Divine Presence). In Galatians 2:20, Paul speaks, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Paul is a true Christian lover who is living not his own life, but the life of Christ. Thus, Paul is experiencing a union with Christ who is the One whose body is the Church. His contemplation is always on the body of Christ and that the life of Christ is also manifest in Paul's body.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Segal, 37-8.

<sup>74</sup> Louth, 202.

## V. Mystical Union

### A. Jewish Union

The essence of Jewish mysticism is made up of the immediate contact with God gained from the fundamental experience of the inner self. The general history of mysticism has employed the expression *unio mystica* (mystical union) for the fundamental experience, the mystical unification with God.<sup>75</sup> The earliest mystical adepts describe their experience in terms derived from the language characteristic of their age. They refer to the ascent of the soul to the celestial Divine Throne where it obtains an ecstatic view of the *kavod* (glory) of God and the secrets of His heavenly realm.<sup>76</sup>

*Devekut* (“to cleave”) with the verb *dvk* defined is the process by which one cleaves (a union with) to God and the ultimate goal of the mystical way. The usual meaning is “communion with God” that is achieved during prayer (*tefillah*) and *kavvanot* a form of contemplation (individual’s total concentration on mystical on the *tefillah*) resulting in ‘directed intention’. Also, *devekut* represents the highest rung on the spiritual ladder that is reached after the mystical adept has mastered the ‘fear’ of God. Many mystical adepts considered the worship of God in pure sublime ‘fear’ the highest attainment, more so than the worship of God in love. *Devekut* is not an intellectual state, but a state of emotional ecstasy. Thus, *devekut* results in a sense of beatitude and union with a complete unification of the soul to God and the ultimate goal of the mystical path. Thus, the usual emphasis is clearly that of adherence to the Divine that is achieved by the mys-

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<sup>75</sup> For Scholem in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, the *unio mystica* is the highest stage of the mystical experience. The other stages are more often to be found in Jewish mysticism are ecstasy and the ascent of the soul. The ascent being characteristic of early Jewish mysticism.

<sup>76</sup> Peter Schafer, *The Hidden and Manifest God Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 4.

tical adept during *kavvanah* (contemplation). Within Jewish mysticism, only after death can a one hope that his soul will obtain a complete and permanent state of *devekut* with God. The final state of bliss will not be achieved until the redemption and the coming of the *Meshiach* (Messiah) when all the Jewish people will live together eternally in the state of *devekut*. Therefore, the highest rank attainable by the soul as a result of *devekut* is the mystical cleaving (union) to God. As a result of *devekut*, there may be different ranks of *devekut* itself, such as *hishtavvut* (“equanimity” the indifference of the soul to praise or blame), *hitbodedut* (“solitude” being alone with God).<sup>77</sup>

Also, in the mystical literature, there is a connection between the state of *devekut* and prophecy that is the outcome of the union between one and God. Thus, when *devekut* is reached, the adept receives *Ru’ach ha-Kodesh* (“The Holy Spirit”) and he receives the highest spiritual achievement in the religious life.<sup>78</sup>

## 1. Jewish Prayer

In general, Jewish prayer (*tefillah*) is an esoteric term that conveys vague, if not distorted concepts. Jewish prayer is essentially the product of one’s desire for an intimate communion for the purpose of opening the heart and mind in adoration and supplication to the Divine Presence.<sup>79</sup>

In Hebrew Scripture, the act of prayer is based on the belief that God exists, hears, and answers (Ps. 65:3; cf. 115:3-7) and that He is a personal deity. In this sense, God is spoken of in anthropomorphic terms, in that humankind was created “in the image of

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<sup>77</sup> Roth, 10:624.

<sup>78</sup> Roth, 5:1598-9.

<sup>79</sup> Abraham Millgram, *Jewish Worship*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971), 9.

God” (Genesis 1:26-27), and implies a relationship with God. Although *tefillah* has a basis in intellectual thought, it is essentially emotional in character. *Tefillah* is the quest for a relationship with the Divine and one’s longing to unburden their soul before God. Thus, *tefillah* takes many forms such as: petition, expostulation, confession, meditation, recollection, thanksgiving, praise, adoration, and intercession.

In mystical terminology, *shafakh lev* (“to pour out heart”) and *biqqesh penei* (“to seek the face of” God) may be associated with prayer and mystical union with God. Despite its multifaceted character *tefillah* is essentially a human endeavor and thus rabbinically speaking it is ‘the service of the heart.’<sup>80</sup>

The function of *Ma’aseh Merkavah* prayers was evocative, that is to evoke an emotional experience. Also, to place the worship of the earthly adept in correspondence with that of the heavenly realm. In the *Merkavah* narrative, the prayers are seen as having specific functions. Some prayers are used to attain the vision of the cosmic realm, some prayers are for protecting the *Yorde Merkavah* from the hostile environment of the celestial realm. Furthermore, some prayers are expressions of gratitude to God for having saved the *Yorde Merkavah*, and some prayers are for the opportunity to stand in front of the Divine Presence.<sup>81</sup> Thus, prayer is the means that effects the ascent of the *Yorde Merkavah*. The prayer not only causes the ascent it also is an essential element in which the mystical adept beholds the glory (*kavod*) of the celestial realm and the Divine.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Roth, 13:978-9.

<sup>81</sup> Swartz, 23.

<sup>82</sup> Schafer, 87.

## 2. Jewish Contemplation

*Kavvanah* (“directed intention”) is the Jewish term that denotes a state of contemplation and devotion at prayer (*tefillah*). Although the demand for *kavvanah* is an obligation in *tefillah*, it is not specifically mentioned in the *Torah*. Yet, it is clearly mentioned by Isaiah (Isa. 29:13) who condemns those who “with their mouth and with their lips do honor to Me [Adonai], but have removed their heart far from Me [Adonai].” It is implicit in Deut. 6:5, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” In ‘directed contemplation,’ one must be engaged in the Divine Presence and have their mind focused entirely on Him. *Kavvanah* implies freedom from extraneous thoughts, and the total awareness of the Divine Presence. In mysticism, *kavvanot* (the plural of *kavvanah*) denotes the special thoughts an adept should have at the recitation of key words in mystical prayer. The contemplative thoughts are usually divorced from the contextual meaning of the words and are of a mystical, esoteric nature.<sup>83</sup>

The main mystical path traveled by the adept is associated with the ascent of the soul to a state of ecstatic rapture through a process of concentrated thought and contemplation. Above all, it is prayer that serves the principal realm for the ascent of the soul. The mystical intention or *kavvanah* is in effect a concentration of thought (contemplative) and the direction of the heart (*kavvanah ha-lev*) within the mystical adept.<sup>84</sup> Prayer stands independent of any outward action and can be easily transformed into a compre-

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<sup>83</sup> Roth, 10:852.

<sup>84</sup> Philip Birnbaum *A Book of Jewish Concepts*. (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1964), 656.

hensive inward exercise in contemplation.<sup>85</sup> The tradition of mystical prayer accompanied by *kavannah* developed as the central feature of *Merkavah* mysticism. *Kavannah* attained especially intense development in Jewish mystical thought, where it is regarded not only as a means of uplifting the soul of the adept toward closer communion (*devekut*) to the Divine Presence.<sup>86</sup> All *Merkavah* adepts were masters of contemplative prayer.<sup>87</sup>

In addition to the contemplative character of prayer, every prayer is directed not only towards the ascent but towards the upraising of the sparks of light that belong to the soul, “From the day the world was created until the end of time, no one prayer resembles another.”<sup>88</sup> Despite the fact that there is a common collectivity to all the *kavvanot* (the plural of *kavvanah*), each prayer has its own individual nature, and every moment of prayer is different and demands its own *kavvanah*. In this way the personal element in prayer came to be highly stressed by the mystical adepts.

*Kavvanah* is especially intense in Jewish mystical thought, it is not only regarded as uplifting (the ascent) of the soul closer towards the *devekut* (cleaving) with the Divine but also as a means of traverse the higher spiritual realm.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, in Jewish mystical thought, *kavvanah* denotes the state that is a result of the special *tefillah* (prayer) formulae as in the *Ma’aseh Merkavah* to provide the following results: (1) to protect the *Yorde Merkavah* on his journey to the celestial realm, (2) protect the *Yorde Merkavah* from the beings guarding the *Hekhalot* (palatial chambers), and (3) to allow the *Yorde*

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<sup>85</sup> Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, 353.

<sup>86</sup> Geoffrey Wigoder, ed. *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 408.

<sup>87</sup> Roth, 10:627–8.

<sup>88</sup> Roth, 10:629.

<sup>89</sup> Wigoder, ed., 408.

*Merkavah* to stand in the presence of the Divine.

In the *Hekhalot* mystical movement, ascetical practices culminated in a contemplative ascent of the soul through the seven heavens to reach the Divine Presence in a state of bliss. The final state is viewed as one in which the adept stands before the *Merkavah* (Throne of God) and sees and hears and experiences the oneness of God.<sup>90</sup>

#### B. Christian Union

The Christian concept of the mystical union can be defined as the search for and experience of an intimacy (oneness) with God through Jesus Christ. The experience of the mystical union represents the total absorption of humankind to the point, that it loses itself in the communion with God. The experience is thought of as the souls return (an ascent) to God and is further heightened by a sense of ecstasy, esoteric, divine visions, contemplation, and peace etc. Thus, from the creation perspective, the soul belongs with God the Creator and in this soul's ascent the soul realizes its own true nature. Whereas, Christianity refers to the Incarnation of God, as the *descent* into the world so that God may give to one communion (union).

Therefore, humankind is not content to know about God, he longs for the union (oneness) with God. Oneness with God means different things, from a literal identity one loses all sense of self and is absorbed into God; from the perspective of the union the experience is of the consummation of love in that the lover and the beloved are intensely aware of each other. Thus the goal of the mystical union is the soul's longing to seek out God for his own sake and the need for the intimacy with God.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Roth, 10:852-3.

<sup>91</sup> Louth, xv-xvi.

The Christian interpretation of the Greek word *nous* is normally understood as ‘mind’ or ‘intellect’. Neither of these meanings represents the contemplative aspect of the mind in which the Greek form of the word took shape. Thus, ‘mind’ and ‘intellect’ and their derivatives such as ‘intellection,’ and ‘intellectual,’ etc. all have a different quality from the Greek concept of *nous*. The most probable reason for this difference is the difference in cultures. The Greeks were pre–Cartesian, and the non–Hellenic are post–Cartesian. For example, a non–Greek would say, ‘I think, therefore I am.’ The act of thinking is an activity that ‘I’ engage in it; whereas, with the Greeks, they would say, ‘I think, therefore there is that which ‘I’ think—to *noeta*. Thus, what ‘I’ think is the activity (reasoning) of thinking; whereas, what the Greek thinks, *to noeta*, are the objects of the thought that exist. Therefore, *nous* and its derivatives have a different quality from the words, mind, mental, intellect, intellection, etc. Furthermore, the words ‘mind’ and ‘intellect’ suggest reasoning and thinking; whereas, *nous* and *to noeta* suggest an intuitive grasp of reality. Then *nous* is more an integral part of the mystical union than anything suggested by ‘mind’ or ‘intellect’, in that, *nous* is a deeper more contemplative form of thought, in that, to achieve union with the Divine is to contemplate and to see god in an immediate vision. In other words, contemplation (*theoria*) of the mind (*nous*) in union with God is an ideal form of religious life.<sup>92</sup>

Another, characteristic of the Christian mystical union is the concept of a spiritual or heavenly marriage. The use of the image of sacred and spiritual marriage between God and one’s soul is symbolization of the mystical union. Furthermore, the idea of a wedding

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<sup>92</sup> Louth, 193.

is the biblical metaphor of the Jewish covenant between Israel and God. In this context, the biblical *Song of Songs* was regarded by the early church (also in Judaism) as symbolic of the union of the Word with the church and the soul.<sup>93</sup>

Furthermore, the idea of a spiritual or heavenly marriage constitutes a permanent quality of mystical union and distinguishes between marriage and the promise of marriage, in that, there are periods of the absence of the Divine Presence. Thus, a Christian adept that experiences periods of absence where the elevated soul remains untouched or unoccupied with the Divine Presence can take care of earthly needs while maintaining a level of tranquility.<sup>94</sup>

In the Pauline as well as the Johannine writings of the New Testament, the life of Christ represents the communion with God. The union represents Christ as God's divine self-expression, or with God (the Father) in and through Christ. Thus, God's spirit seals the union and initiates an ever-growing participation in the intimacy of the divine life. Therefore, the presence of the Holy Spirit enhances the life of a Christian with a "sense" of the divine that if properly developed enables the adept to savor the union of God and all that relates to Him (in the heavenly realm).<sup>95</sup>

The importance of Paul and the Gospel of John is fundamental to the study of the mystical union. In Paul, we have the account of his ascent (*Ma'aseh Merkavah*) into heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2–4) provides an important mystical experience (revelation). In John, the mystical union of God (state of *Devekut* in Jewish Mysticism) through Jesus

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<sup>93</sup> Eliade, 10:241–2.

<sup>94</sup> Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn, 12–3.

<sup>95</sup> Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn, 4.

Christ is central to Christian mysticism. Furthermore, a number of Johannine texts (e.g. John 17:21), address the new life offered by Jesus Christ as a form of union with God. Also, other Johannine passages emphasize that because God is love it is only through loving Him that we become as He (e.g. 1 John 4:1–9). In the Pauline writings (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12), Paul stresses that “The knowledge that I [Paul] now have is imperfect; but then I shall know as fully as I am know.” This passage on speculation could refer to the nature of union and its relation to love (*agape*) and knowledge (*gnosis*).<sup>96</sup>

Thus, the ultimate goal of the mystical experience is the union between oneself and the Divine Presence and of the contemplative way. The mystical union is arrived at in stages of prayer and contemplative states resulting in a heightened awareness of the soul. Yet it is the contention of Christian mysticism that this heightened awareness can never be reached by a conscious effort but only by a passive ‘openness’ of total receptivity toward Divine grace as the experience of the love of the Incarnate Christ. It is about the soul’s response to God’s descent in the Incarnation. Grace is not just the soul’s awareness that it is experiencing something beyond its own powers, it is God’s love for humankind that underlies the very possibility of one’s response in love. Therefore, grace is God’s gift to the soul of communion with Himself, without which not even the soul’s search for God would be possible. Thus, mystical union is the crowning point of the return of the ‘isolated’ soul to the Divine in its spiritual aspects.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn, 60–1).

<sup>97</sup> Eliade, 10:239.

## 1. Christian Prayer

The concept of prayer in Christianity is the sense of a personal relationship that has been established with God. It is the expression of a desire, in the form of a request, to influence the spiritual communion. But, it does not have to be a petition asking for benefit(s). Prayer should be understood to represent a worshipful plea and intercourse of the human soul with God. It is an instinct springing from humankind's sense of his own weakness and human limitations and from his awareness and awe of the greatness of the universe.<sup>98</sup>

If prayer is the natural and necessary outcome of belief in God, it is most natural and most necessary to the Christian believer. Thus, the incarnation of the Son of God brought the world into touch with God. Thus, God revealed Himself to humankind in the Incarnate Christ, and the Son of God, by taking human nature upon Himself lifts humanity into close communion with God. God was no longer so far beyond humankind, no longer so far as to seem unable to condescend to the needs, the longing, and the understanding of humankind. From a mystical perspective, prayer is the 'ascent' of the human soul to its Creator. This communion of the soul with God is at the core of mystical prayer especially for one who has faithfully prepared through a contemplative way for the inward apprehension of the Divine Presence. Prayer for a Christian adept represents an immediate and mystical consciousness of the Divine Presence. A Christian adept experiences God radically different than found in ordinary prayer consciousness and awareness

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<sup>98</sup> Clement, 181.

of God. Thus, an ‘uneducated soul’ praying would seek God from ‘above’ as versus from within as a Christian adept would do.<sup>99</sup>

Centering prayer is a way that prepares the individual to be in the Presence of the Divine and to establish union with God. It is rooted in God’s life within us, as we read in Paul’s epistles. By praying this way, one allows God to enter within one’s self and to become manifest in everything that we do in our lives and to permeate our entire being. Thus, a Christian adept becomes a receptacle for the Divine. The theological basis of centering prayer is in the renewal of our intimate union with God.<sup>100</sup>

## 2. Christian Contemplation

From the beginning of Christian mysticism in the New Testament, we find that the life of contemplation, although the temptation for detachment and negation may be great, ultimately embraces a sense of community with others; the adept, is acutely aware of his place in the union of faith. The adept approaches God not as an individual in isolation, but as an individual adept in the Body of Christ.<sup>101</sup>

Christian contemplation oriented itself to the biblical word and the sacramental reality that God is seen in Jesus (the *Logos* as the *theoria* of God). Thus, the message of Christian spirituality is of love. In this regard, contemplation embraces the experience of God. In the Gospel of John, the use of the Greek verb *theoran* is found fairly often, frequently the meaning given to the verb is “to contemplate.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Bernard McGinn, The Foundations of Mysticism. vol. 1 (New York: The Crossword Publishing Company, 1991), XIX.

<sup>100</sup> Manuela Dunn Mascetti, Christian Mysticism. (New York: Hyperion, 1998), 175–6.

<sup>101</sup> Cox, 41–2.

<sup>102</sup> Louis Bouyer, The Christian Mystery From Pagan to Christian Mysticism. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 189.

Christian contemplation can be viewed from five perspectives: (1) the primacy of love, (2) darkness and suffering, (3) as a gift, (4) in relation to activity, and (5) as personal analogy. The contemplative experience, of the experience of the self, and the experience of the encounter with Christ represents the ultimate experience of love. This experience of an encounter with Christ involves transcending the self with Christ as the main focus. Contemplation can be first ascetic and then fulfillment for the sake of denial (the dark night of the soul). Thus, the evaluation of contemplation of the dark and painful hours of transcending the self are the criterion of the true experience of God. Traditionally, in Christian thought one cannot achieve the ascent above the self in contemplation. Only God Himself must do it for us. Therefore, it is experienced and theologically evaluated as a gift of grace. For this reason, contemplation is not a methodological approach. The essential aspect of transcending of the self is connected with action in the contemplative process. The human consciousness aspect of contemplation is the experience of God in three persons (the Trinity); the mystery of origin, the visibility of encounter, and the immanence of experience. The practice of contemplation covers the whole history of Christian mysticism. We find the beginnings in the early church with important contributions from the Eastern Church.<sup>103</sup>

With the differences being mostly a matter of different emphasis, it is difficult to define the boundaries between prayer, meditation, and mysticism. Prayer involves a loving relationship of one on earth and of God above. Whereas, meditation involves a process or methodological approach to an experience. Finally, contemplation comes

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<sup>103</sup> Erwin Fahlbusch, The Encyclopedia of Christianity. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 1:677–8.

closest to a mystical experience, in that, contemplation represents an ascent or elimination of the separation from God and the communion or mystical union with the Divine Presence. Yet, Christian contemplation has its own distinctiveness, as compared to Jewish contemplation (*kavvanah*), even though it contains much similarity to Jewish *kavvanah* and that is the role of Jesus in the New Testament. Among the preminent Fathers of the Early Church, Clement of Alexandria insisted on the contemplation of Jesus as the goal of the Christian spiritual quest. As a result of his belief, he expounded the growth of the contemplative soul which laid the groundwork for mystical theology.<sup>104</sup>

One lives in a transitory world of phenomena, of conjecture, and of belief. But, one's soul belongs to a higher realm, a world that is truth, eternal, and not susceptible to change. To regain its kinship with that world the soul must purify itself from this world; it must seek to die to this world, to live now the life it hopes it may lead after death. This purification has two sides: moral and intellectual. The moral purification restores to the soul transcendence over the body; the body will cease to disturb its endeavors after contemplation. For the soul to regain its kinship with the higher realm, the soul must purify itself in this world. The soul must seek to 'mystically' die in this world in order to live the life it hopes to live in the world after death. This purification has a moral and intellectual aspect. The moral aspect of purification restores to the soul the transcendence over the body. The intellectual aspect of purification instructs the soul in abstract thought. It weans the soul from dependence on the world of sense and adapts it to the more austere. After the soul has purified itself, it will attain contemplation (*theoria*) of the highest

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<sup>104</sup> Dan and Lavinia Cohn-Sherbok, *Jewish & Christian Mysticism An Introduction*. (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), 89.

good. Thus, in contemplation, the mystical adept experiences ecstasy and the soul transcends it self and becomes and the kinship with the Divine reality is experienced.<sup>105</sup>

## VI. Comparative Aspects of Mysticism

### A. Reasons for focusing on the *Sefer Yetzirah*, *Shi'ur Qomah*, and *Ma'aseh Mer-kavah*

My choice of *Sefer Yetzirah*, *Shi'ur Qomah*, and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* was not a haphazard selection. I chose these treatises because early Jewish adepts would have studied the *Sefer Yetzirah*, *Shi'ur Qomah*, and the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* to acquire the state of *Mekubal*. The adept would have studied at least some if not all these treatises for the purpose of achieving contemplative prayer and a mystical union with God.

In general, *Kabbalah* (Traditional study) can be divided into three categories: (1) the theoretical (2) the magical, and (3) the meditative. The theoretical study of mysticism is much later than the period under study and refers to the *Zohar*. The magical category is closely related to the meditative and consists of various signs, incantations and divine names through which one can influence or alter natural events. The meditative category deals with prayer, contemplation, and the ascent of the soul and is appropriate for the study of early Jewish mysticism.

One of the best and earliest meditative sources is the *Sefer Yetzirah*. This book would have been of great importance to early Jewish adepts. The *Sefer Yetzirah* is an instruction manual, describing meditative exercises. These exercises were meant to strengthen the adepts mystical praying as well as the contemplative skills. It would have

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<sup>105</sup> Louth, 194.

been with these powers of prayer and contemplation that an adept would be able to perform the *Merkavah* feats of mystical ascension and union with God.

Also, the *Shi'ur Qomah* is meditative and would have been useful to the adept to dispel attacks by second century C.E. anti-Jewish gnostics. The *Shi'ur Qomah* deals with the “primordial God” on the Throne of Glory (*Merkavah*) whom the *Shi'ur Qomah* calls *Yotzer Bereshit*, i.e. Creator of the World. The anti-Jewish gnostics drew a sharp distinction between the unknown, “strange,” good God, and the Creator, whom they identified with the God of Israel. The *Shi'ur Qomah* reflects an attempt to give a new turn to this trend of thought, which had become widespread throughout the Near East by postulating something like a harmony between the Creator and the “true” God.<sup>106</sup>

Finally, One of the best meditative sources that reflects Ezekiel (referred to as the *Merkavah* in Jewish mysticism) is the *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. Historically, the oldest central theme of Jewish mysticism is the throne-mysticism. The importance of the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is the contemplation of the perception of God's appearance on the Throne of Glory as described by Ezekiel and the contemplation of the mysteries of the celestial throne-world. Furthermore, the Jewish adept is guided by God's Throne of Glory that embodies and exemplifies all of creation. It is for this reason, that the goal of the Jewish adept is the mystical union with God.

#### B. The Application of the *Ma'aseh Merkavah*

Prayer is the means to the mystical ascent for the purpose of a mystical union with God. In *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, the most important protagonist of the prayer of ascent is

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<sup>106</sup> Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 65.

Rabbi ‘Akiva. For the prayer “one utters when he ascends to the *Merkavah*”. The prayer obviously is the means that effects the ascent of the *yorde Merkavah*. Rabbi Akiva prays:

When I recited this prayer,  
I saw 640,000 myriads of angels of glory  
standing in front of the Throne of Glory,  
and I saw the binding of the *Tefellin* of the hosts [angels] of God,  
and Lord, the God of Israel.  
And I gave praise with all my limbs.<sup>107</sup>

Thus, the prayer not only effects the ascent, but provides an essential element that the adept beholds (the binding of the *Tefellin* by the angels) and at the same time the union (Divine Presence) with God (I saw . . . Lord, the God of Israel.). The praise with all Akiva’s limbs is central to the synagogue liturgy, the *Alenu* (to praise the Lord of all things . . .). The same structure is also found in Section 592:

R. Yisha‘el said:  
Thus R. Akiva said to me:  
I recited a prayer and beheld the *Shekhinah*  
and saw everything that one does before the Throne [of Glory].

Besides, the prayer for a means toward the mystical union with God, there is prayer to acquire a contemplative state through prayer. In section 560, we have:

When Rabbi Nehuniah ben HaQannah revealed to me [R. Ishmael] The Prince of the *Torah*—*Suriel*, the Prince of the Presence, was revealed [to me]. He said to me [R. Ismael]: every one who seeks him (*Suriel*) must sit for forty days in fast, eat his bread with salt [only], and must not eat any kind of defilement; he must perform twenty–four immersions, and not look at any kind of colored garments; his eyes must be cast to the ground. And he must pray with all his strength [contemplatively], direct his heart to his prayer.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Section 550; cf. Also Section 570 in MS. NY 8128.

<sup>108</sup> Section 560 in MS. NY 8128.

The most important elements connected with contemplation for the purpose of devotion to the Divine Presence: fasting, observance of purity, rules for food, and prayer. This special significance placed on the contemplation during prayer is certainly a reference to *kannavah* (Jewish contemplation).

### C. Key Aspects in Jewish and Christian Mysticism

What binds together early Jewish and Christian writings commonly seen to contain “mystical elements” has to do with the desire on the part of the adept to “know” or experience God, and with the writer’s attempt to properly maintain the boundaries within which these desires can be fulfilled. Mystical writings are treatises reflecting a desire for a relationship with God. Also, it must be acknowledged that inherent in this assumption is a profound thought. What is desired must be conceived. All Jewish and Christian adepts must grasp the knowledge in order for the mystical experience to be attained. This is problematic when the object of the desire is God who is transcendent.

Paul did experience ascetic experiences for the love of Jesus and the Church that was a characteristic of Christian adepts. Thus, in 1 Corinthians 9:27, Paul speaks “I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” In other words, Paul does not abuse his body to induce a mystical experience (s) but in order to prevent himself from sinning. He does not (and this is common with Christian adepts) provoke ecstatic states. A good example of this is in 2 Corinthians 12:2 that I mentioned earlier in that he ‘was caught up to the third heaven.’ This mystical experience was not self induced. He will only keep himself prepared to receive them with one end in view, that is the unity of faith and love in Christ within in the Church. This certainly is different from early Jewish mysticism, in that the

adept through meditative techniques and reading of mystical prayers such as the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* wanted to induce an esoteric experience for a personal relationship.<sup>109</sup>

The intermingling of the personal and the collective was to be distinctive of Christian mysticism. Christian mystical literature may be said to begin with the Pauline Epistles. His letters represent the first important witness to faith. Paul's faith in the living presence of Jesus. Furthermore, Paul's writings are grounded in an intense transforming personal faith that was also grounded in the life of the Church and the community of the followers of Jesus and united by faith. This characteristic of collectivism was prevalent in all early Christian adepts. Furthermore, with the spread of the early Church, you have collectively Christian adepts that are more diversified in their cultural backgrounds. Whereas, with early Jewish adepts, you have less or no cultural diversity or collectivism because the Jewish adepts were centered in Palestine.<sup>110</sup>

The mystery of the Incarnation, in the Fourth Gospel of John is the doctrine that distinguishes Christian mysticism from Jewish mysticism. The activities of prayer and contemplation leading to a mystical union with God is the same mystical experience whether Jewish or Christian. The difference being that Jewish adepts utilized the meditative treatises especially the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* for the power of prayer and contemplation to obtain the ascent of the soul and to be in the presence of the Divine. Whereas, Christian adepts followed the Pauline and Johanne writings for prayer and contemplation with the exception that Jesus represents the way in the Incarnation (the union) with God. The Christian adepts accomplished communion through belief in Jesus with obtaining the as-

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<sup>109</sup> Cox, 46.

<sup>110</sup> Cox, 44.

cent and the communion with God in faith and love and community as versus a metaphysical union. A good example is in John 17:21 'that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.'<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Idel and McGinn, eds. 59–60.

## Appendix A

## Sepher Yetzirah

<http://wolf.mind.net/library/ancient/qabala/sephir.thm>

**The Book of Formation****CHAPTER I**

Section 1. In thirty-two <sup>(1)</sup> mysterious Paths of Wisdom did Jah, <sup>(2)</sup> the Jehovah of hosts, <sup>(3)</sup> the God of Israel, <sup>(4)</sup> the Living Elohim, <sup>(5)</sup> the King of ages, the merciful and gracious God, <sup>(6)</sup> the Exalted One, the Dweller in eternity, most high and holy--engrave his name by the three Sepharim <sup>(7)</sup> --Numbers, Letters, and Sounds. <sup>(8)</sup>

2. Ten are the ineffable Sephiroth. <sup>(9)</sup> Twenty-two are the Letters, the Foundation of all things; there are Three Mothers, Seven Double and Twelve <sup>(10)</sup> Simple letters.

3. The ineffable Sephiroth are Ten, as are the Numbers; and as there are in man five fingers over against five, so over them is established a covenant of strength, by word of mouth, and by the circumcision of the flesh. <sup>(11)</sup>

4. Ten is the number of the ineffable Sephiroth, ten and not nine, ten and not eleven. Understand this wisdom, and be wise by the perception. Search out concerning it, restore the Word to its creator, and replace Him who formed it upon his throne. <sup>(12)</sup>

5. The Ten ineffable Sephiroth have ten vast regions bound unto them; boundless in origin and having no ending; an abyss <sup>(13)</sup> of good and of ill; measureless height and depth; boundless to the East and the West; boundless to the North and South; <sup>(14)</sup> and the Lord the only God, <sup>(15)</sup> the Faithful King rules all these from his holy seat, <sup>(16)</sup> for ever and ever.

6. The Ten ineffable Sephiroth have the appearance of the Lightning flash, <sup>(17)</sup> their origin is unseen and no end is perceived. The Word is in them as they rush forth and as they return, they speak as from the whirl-wind, and returning fall prostrate in adoration before the Throne.

7. The Ten ineffable Sephiroth, whose ending is even as their origin, are like as a flame arising from a burning coal. For God <sup>(18)</sup> is superlative in his Unity, there is none equal unto Him: what number canst thou place before One.

8. Ten are the ineffable Sephiroth; seal up thy lips lest thou speak of them, and guard thy heart as thou considerest them; and if thy mind escape from thee bring it back to thy control; even as it was said, "running and returning" (the living creatures ran and returned) <sup>(19)</sup> and hence was the Covenant made.

9. The ineffable Sephiroth give forth the Ten numbers. First; the Spirit of the God of the living; <sup>(20)</sup> Blessed and more than blessed be the Living God <sup>(21)</sup> of ages. The Voice, the Spirit, and the Word, <sup>(22)</sup> these are the Holy Spirit.

10. Second; from the Spirit He produced Air, and formed in it twenty-two sounds--the letters; three are mothers, seven are double, and twelve are simple; but the Spirit is first and above these. Third; from the Air He formed the Waters, and from the formless and void <sup>(23)</sup> made mire and clay, and designed surfaces upon them, and hewed recesses in them, and formed the strong material foundation. Fourth; from the Water He formed Fire <sup>(24)</sup> and made for Himself a Throne of Glory with Auphanim, Seraphim and Kerubim, <sup>(25)</sup> as his ministering angels; and with these three <sup>(26)</sup> he completed his dwelling, as it is written, "Who maketh his angels spirits and his ministers a flaming fire." <sup>(27)</sup>

11. He selected three letters from among the simple ones and sealed them and formed them into a Great Name, I H V, <sup>(28)</sup> and with this He sealed the universe in six directions.

Fifth; He looked above, and sealed the Height with I H V.

Sixth; He looked below, and sealed the Depth with I V H.

Seventh; He looked forward, and sealed the East with H I V.

Eighth; He looked backward, and sealed the West with H V I.

Ninth; He looked to the right, and sealed the South with V I H.

Tenth; He looked to the left, and sealed the North with V H I.

12. Behold! From the Ten ineffable Sephiroth do, proceed--the One Spirit of the Gods of the living, Air, Water, Fire; and also Height, Depth, East, West, South and North. <sup>(29)</sup>

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## CHAPTER II

Section 1. The twenty-two sounds and letters are the Foundation of all things. Three mothers, seven doubles and twelve simples. The Three Mothers are Aleph, Mem and Shin, they are Air, Water and Fire Water is silent, Fire is sibilant, and Air derived from the Spirit is as the tongue of a balance standing between these contraries which are in equilibrium, reconciling and mediating between them.

2. He hath formed, weighed, and composed with these twenty-two letters every created thing, and the form of everything which shall hereafter be.

3. These twenty-two sounds or letters are formed by the voice, impressed on the air, and audibly modified in five places; in the throat, in the mouth, by the tongue, through the teeth, and by the lips. <sup>(31)</sup>

4. These twenty-two letters, which are the foundation of all things, He arranged as upon a sphere with two hundred and thirty-one gates, and the sphere may be rotated forward or backward, whether for good or for evil; from the good comes true pleasure, from evil nought but torment.

5. For He shewed the combination of these letters, each with the other; Aleph with all, and all with Aleph; Beth with all, and all with Beth. Thus in combining all together in pairs are produced the two hundred and thirty-one gates of knowledge. <sup>(32)</sup>

6. And from the non-existent <sup>(33)</sup> He made Something; and all forms of speech and everything that has been produced; from the empty void He made the material world, and from the inert earth He brought forth everything that hath life. He hewed, as it were, vast columns out of the intangible air, and by the power of His Name made every creature and everything that is; and the production of all things from the twenty-two letters is the proof that they are all but parts of one living body. <sup>(34)</sup>

### CHAPTER III

Section 1. The Foundation of all the other sounds and letters is provided by the Three Mothers, Aleph, Mem and Shin; they resemble a Balance, on the one hand the guilty, on the other hand the purified, and Aleph the Air is like the Tongue of a Balance standing between them. <sup>(35)</sup>

2. The Three Mothers, Aleph, Mem and Shin, are a great Mystery, very admirable and most recondite, and sealed as with six rings; and from them proceed Air, Fire, and Water, which divide into active and passive forces. The Three Mothers, Aleph, Mem and Shin, are the Foundation, from them spring three Fathers, and from these have proceeded all things that are in the world.

3. The Three Mothers in the world are Aleph, Mem and Shin: the heavens <sup>(36)</sup> were produced <sup>(37)</sup> from Fire; the earth from the Water; and the Air from the Spirit is as a reconciler between the Fire and the Water.

4. The Three Mothers, Aleph, Mem and Shin, Fire, Water and Air, are shown in the Year: from the fire came heat, from the waters came cold, and from the air was produced the temperate state, again a mediator between them. The Three Mothers, Aleph, Mem and Shin, Fire, Water and Air, are found in Man: from the fire was formed the head; from the water the belly; and from the air was formed the chest, again placed as a mediator between the others.

5. These Three Mothers did He produce and design, and combined them; and He sealed them as the three mothers in the Universe, in the Year and in Man--both male and female. He caused the letter Aleph to reign in Air and crowned it, and combining it with the others He sealed it, as Air in the World, as the temperate (climate) of the Year, and as the breath in the chest (the lungs for breathing air) in Man: the male with Aleph, Mem, Shin, the female with Shin, Mem, Aleph. He caused the letter Mem to reign in Water, crowned it, and combining it with the others formed the earth in the world, cold in the year, and the belly in man, male and female, the former with Mem, Aleph, Shin, the latter with Mem, Shin, Aleph. He caused Shin to reign in Fire, and crowned it, and combining it with the others sealed with it the heavens in the universe, heat in the year and the head in

man, male and female.<sup>(38)</sup>

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## CHAPTER IV

Section 1. The Seven double letters, Beth, Gimel, Daleth, Kaph, Peh, Resh, and Tau have each two sounds associated with them. They are referred to Life, Peace, Wisdom, Riches, Grace, Fertility and Power. The two sounds of each letter are the hard and the soft--the aspirated and the softened. They are called Double, because each letter presents a contrast or permutation; thus Life and Death; Peace and War; Wisdom and Folly; Riches and Poverty; Grace and Indignation; Fertility and Solitude; Power and Servitude.

2. These Seven Double Letters point out seven localities; Above, Below, East, West, North, South, and the Palace of Holiness in the midst of them sustaining all things.

3. These Seven Double Letters He designed, produced, and combined, and formed with them the Planets of this World, the Days of the Week, and the Gates of the soul (the orifices of perception) in Man. From these Seven He bath produced the Seven Heavens, the Seven Earths, the Seven Sabbaths: for this cause He has loved and blessed the number Seven more than all things under Heaven (His Throne).

4. Two Letters produce two houses; three form six; four form twenty-four; five form one hundred and twenty; six form seven hundred and twenty;<sup>(39)</sup> seven form five thousand and forty; and beyond this their numbers increase so that the mouth can hardly utter them, nor the ear hear the number of them. So now, behold the Stars of our World, the Planets which are Seven; the Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon, Saturn, Jupiter and Mars. The Seven are also the Seven Days of Creation; and the Seven Gateways of the Soul of Man--the two eyes, the two ears, the mouth and the two nostrils. So with the Seven are formed the seven heavens,<sup>(41)</sup> the seven earths, and the seven periods of time; and so has He preferred the number Seven above all things under His Heaven.<sup>(42)</sup>

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### *Supplement to Chapter IV*

NOTE.--This is one of several modern illustrations of the allotment of the Seven Letters; it is not found in the ancient copies of the "Sepher Yetzirah."

He produced Beth, and referred it to Wisdom ; He crowned it, combined and formed with it the Moon in the Universe, the first day of the week, and the right eye of man.

He produced Gimel, and referred it to Health; He crowned it, combined and joined with it Mars in the Universe, the second day of the week, and the right ear of man.

He produced Daleth, and referred it to Fertility; He crowned it, combined and formed with it the Sun in the Universe, the third day of the week, and the right nostril of man.

He produced Kaph, and referred it to Life; He crowned it, combined and formed with it

Venus in the Universe, the fourth day of the week, and the left eye of man.

He produced Peh, and referred it to Power; He crowned it, combined and formed with it Mercury in the Universe, the fifth day of the week, and the left ear of man.

He produced Resh, and referred it to Peace; He crowned it, combined and formed with it Saturn in the Universe, the sixth day of the week, and the left nostril of man.

He produced Tau, and referred it to Beauty; He crowned it, combined and formed with it Jupiter in the Universe, the Seventh Day of the week, and the mouth of man.

By these Seven letters were also made seven worlds, seven heavens, seven earths, seven seas, seven rivers, seven deserts, seven days, seven weeks from Passover to Pentecost, and every seventh year a Jubilee.

Mayer Lambert gives:--Beth to Saturn and the Hebrew Sabbath--that is Saturday; Gimel to Jupiter and Sunday; Daleth to Mars and Monday; Kaph to the Sun and Tuesday; Peh to Venus and Wednesday; Resh to Mercury and Thursday; and Tau to the Moon and Friday.

## CHAPTER V

1. The Twelve Simple Letters are Héh, Vau, Zain, Cheth, Teth, Yod, Lamed, Nun, Samech, Oin, Tzaddi and Qoph; <sup>(43)</sup> they are the foundations of these twelve properties: Sight, Hearing, Smell, Speech, Taste, Sexual Love, Work, Movement, Anger, Mirth, Imagination, <sup>(44)</sup> and Sleep. These Twelve are also allotted to the directions in space: North-east, South-east, the East above, the East below, the North above, the North below, the South-west, the Northwest, the West above, the West below, the South above, and the South below; these diverge to infinity, and are as the arms of the Universe.

2. These Twelve Simple Letters He designed, and combined, and formed with them the Twelve celestial constellations of the Zodiac, whose signs are Teth, Shin, Tau, Samech, Aleph, Beth, Mem, Oin, Qoph, Gimel, Daleth, and Daleth. <sup>(45)</sup> The Twelve are also the Months of the Year: Nisan, <sup>(46)</sup> Yiar, Sivan, Tamuz, Ab, Elul, Tishri, Hesvan, Kislev, Tebet, Sabat and Adar. The Twelve are also the Twelve organs of living creatures: <sup>(47)</sup> the two hands, the two feet, the two kidneys, the spleen, the liver, the gall, private parts, stomach and intestines.

He made these, as it were provinces, and arranged them as in order of battle for warfare. And also the Elohim <sup>(48)</sup> made one from the region of the other.

Three Mothers and Three Fathers; and thence issue Fire, Air and Water. Three Mothers, Seven Doubles and Twelve Simple letters and sounds.

3. Behold now these are the Twenty and Two Letters from which Jah, Jehovah Tzabaoth, the Living Elohim, the God of Israel, exalted and sublime, the Dweller in eternity, formed and established all things; High and Holy is His Name.

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*Supplement to Chapter V*

NOTE.--This is a modern illustration of the allotment of the Twelve Letters; it is not found in the ancient copies of the "Sepher Yetzirah."

1. God produced Hé predominant in Speech, crowned it, combined and formed with it Aries in the Universe, Nisan in the Year, and the right foot of Man.
2. He produced Vau, predominant in mind, crowned it, combined and formed with it Taurus in the Universe, Aiar in the Year, and the right kidney of Man.
3. He produced Zain, predominant in Movement crowned it, combined and formed it with Gemini in the Universe, Sivan in the Year, and the left foot of Man.
4. He produced Cheth, predominant in Sight, crowned it, combined and formed it with Cancer in the Universe, Tammuz in the year, and the right hand of Man.
5. He produced Teth, predominant in Hearing, crowned it, combined and formed with it Leo in the Universe, Ab in the Year, and the left kidney in Man.
6. He produced Yod, predominant in Work, crowned it, combined and formed with it Virgo in the Universe, Elul in the Year, and the left hand of Man.
7. He produced Lamed, predominant in Sexual desire, crowned it, combined and formed with it Libra in the Universe, Tishri in the Year, and the private parts of Man. (Kalisch gives "gall.")
8. He produced Nun, predominant in Smell, crowned it, combined and formed with it Scorpio in the Universe, Heshvan in the Year, and the intestines of Man.
9. He produced Samech, predominant in Sleep, crowned it, combined and formed with it Sagittarius in the Universe, Kislev in the Year, and the stomach of Man.
10. He produced Oin, predominant in Anger, crowned it, combined and formed with it Capricornus in the Universe, Tebet in the Year, and the liver of Man.
11. He produced Tzaddi, predominant in Taste, crowned it, combined and formed with it Aquarius in the Year, and the gullet in Man).
12. He produced Qoph, predominant in Mirth, crowned it, combined and formed with it Pisces in the Universe, Adar in the Year, and the spleen of Man.

NOTE.--Mediaeval authorities and modern editors give very different allocations to the twelve simple letters.

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**CHAPTER VI**

Section 1. Three Fathers and their generations, Seven conquerors and their armies, and Twelve bounds of the Universe. See now, of these words, the faithful witnesses are the Universe, the Year and Man. The dodecad, the heptad, and the triad with their provinces; above is the Celestial Dragon, T L I, <sup>(49)</sup> and below is the World, and lastly the heart of Man. The Three are Water, Air and Fire; Fire above, Water below, and Air conciliating between them; and the sign of these things is that the Fire sustains (volatilises) the waters; Mem is mute, Shin is sibilant, and Aleph is the Mediator and as it were a friend placed between them.

2. The Celestial Dragon, T L I, is placed over the universe like a king upon the throne; the revolution of the year is as a king over his dominion; the heart of man is as a king in warfare. Moreover, He made all things one from the other; and the Elohim set good over against evil, and made good things from good, and evil things from evil: with the good tested He the evil, and with the evil did He try the good. Happiness <sup>(50)</sup> is reserved for the good, and misery <sup>(51)</sup> is kept for the wicked.

3. The Three are One, and that One stands above. The Seven are divided; three are over against three, and one stands between the triads. The Twelve stand as in warfare; three are friends, three are enemies; three are life givers; three are destroyers. The three friends are the heart, the ears, and the mouth; the three enemies are the liver, the gall, and the tongue; <sup>(52)</sup> while God <sup>(53)</sup> the faithful king rules over all. One above Three, Three above Seven, and Seven above Twelve: and all are connected the one with the other.

4. And after that our father Abraham had perceived and understood, and had taken down and engraved all these things, the Lord most high <sup>(55)</sup> revealed Himself, and called him His beloved, and made a Covenant with him and his seed; and Abraham believed on Him <sup>(56)</sup> and it was imputed unto him for righteousness. And He made this Covenant as between the ten toes of the feet--this is that of circumcision; and as between the ten fingers of the hands and this is that of the tongue. <sup>(57)</sup> And He formed the twenty-two letters into speech <sup>(58)</sup> and shewed him all the mysteries of them. <sup>(59)</sup> He drew them through the Waters; He burned them in the Fire; He vibrated them in the Air; Seven planets in the heavens, and Twelve celestial constellations of the stars of the Zodiac.

## Appendix B

Shi'ur Qomah<sup>112</sup>

With the help of the Rock, and [God's] salvation, with the aid of heaven; with the help of GOD we will begin and we will complete [it]. 'My help comes from GOD, who made heaven and earth' (Psalm 121:2). I will begin to write the Shi'ur Qomah. All Israel has a portion of the world-to-come, as it is said: 'Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever. They are the shoot that I planted; the work of My hands so that I may be glorified' (Isaiah 60:21).

Rabbi Ishmael said: I saw the Ruler of the ruler of rulers, the Holy Blessed One sitting on a high and exalted throne. The [divine] soldiers stood before, to the right and to the left. The Prince of the Face [i.e. Presence], whose name is *Metatron Ruchpi, Sokoniah, Paskon, 'Itimon, the Ga'on, 'Igron, Sagron, Danigaron, Miton, Mikon, Hastas, Haskas, Sartam, Haskam, Hikron, ...na, Raba, Bantaszantaf* spoke to me.

Rabbi Ishmael said: How much is the height of the body (*shi'ur qomah*) of the Holy Blessed One who is hidden from all creatures? The *parasangs* of [God's] feet fill the entire world, as it is said: 'Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool' (Isaiah 66:1). The height of [God's] soles is 30 million *parasangs*. [God's] right sole is called *Par-samiah Atrakat Shamah* and the left *Agomatz*. From [God's right] sole to the ankle is 150 million *parasangs*. Similarly the left. The right ankle is called *Tzagmiah* and the left *Astamatz*. From [God's right] ankle to the knees is 190,005,200 *parasangs*. Similarly the left. The right calf is called *Kangago Mahadiyah Tasaskam* and the left *Mangahovaziyah...zaziyah*. From [God's right] knee to the thigh is 120,001,200 *parasangs*. And similarly the left. The right knee is called *Satmagatz Yehamiyi* and that of the left is called *Maghanuriyah*. The right thigh is called *Shashtastafarnisiyi* and the left is called *Tafganichaziza*. From [God's] thighs to the neck is 240 million *parasangs*. [God's] thighs are called '*Astanah...dadiyah*. On [God's] heart are placed seventy names: *Tzatz, Tzedek* ('Righteousness'), *Tzachi'el, Tzur* ('Rock'), *Tzvi* ('Deer'), *Tzaddik* ('The Righteous'), *Sa'af, Sachatz, Tzeva'ot* ('Hosts'), *Shaddai* ('Almighty'), '*Elohim* ('God'), *Zan* ('Provider'), *YaH, YaH, YHVH, Tzach* ('Shining'), *Dagul* ('Distinguished'), '*Edom/Adom* ('red'), *Sasas, 'A, Va'a'a, 'Aya, 'Aha, Hav, YaH, Ho, Vecho, Tzatzatz, ...faf, Natz, Heh, Chai* ('Living'), *Chai, Chai, Hahabav, 'Aravot* ('Skies'), *Yav, HeH, VaH, Mamam, ...Nan, Havav, YaH, Yahah, Chafetz* ('Will'), *Katzetz, 'Ay, Za, Tza'a, Za, 'A'a, ...Heh, Keshet* ('Connection'), *Bozach, Niter, Ya, Ya, Yod, Hon* ('Wealth'), *Fa'af, Ra'u, Yayay, ...f, Vavav, Vro, Bavav, Bavav, Tatat, Bafach, Palal, Sis*, are its letters. Blessed be the name of [God's] glorious kingdom forever and ever. Blessed be the name of [God's] glorious kingdom forever and ever. Blessed be the name of [God's] glorious kingdom forever and ever.

[God's] neck 130,000,800 *parasangs*....[God's] neck is called *Sangihu Yavah Tikatz*. The circumference of [God's] head is 3,000,000,033 and a third *parasangs*, of which the

<sup>112</sup> Cohen, Martin Samuel. The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1985), pp. 192–4.

tongue cannot speak nor the ear hear. '*Atar Hodariya*' '*Atasya* is its name. [God's] beard is 11,500 *parasangs*. Its name is *Hadrak Samiya*'. The appearance of the cheeks is like the form of the wind/spirit (*ruach*) and like the form of the soul (*neshamah*). [And therefore,] no soul can recognise [it]. [God's body] is like beryl, the splendour of [God's] glory is luminous, awesome in the darkness, cloud and dense cloud. Surrounding it are the princes of the Face (Presence) and the *Seraphim* are before [God supplicating] as [obediently as water poured from] a pitcher. We have nothing in our hands but the names that have been revealed to us. The nose is called *Lagbagtziya*', but *Gagtafiya*' is [also] its name. [God's] tongue [stretches] from one end of the world/universe to the other, as it is said: 'Making [God's] words known to Jacob, [God's] statutes and judgments to Israel' (Psalm 147:19). '*Asagichu'ya*' is its name. The width of [God's] forehead is... *Masagihu Na'yaya*' is its name. On [God's] forehead there are written seventy-two letters: *YYHV, HYH, YVH, VYH, H', HY, HY, HY, H', HH, VVH, YYHV, VH, VYHV, HH, YH, Y', H', YH, YHV', HV, HV, YYHYV, HYH, VYH, YHV, H', H', HYH, VYH*. The black of [God's] right eye 11,500 *parasangs*, and similarly, the left. The right is called '*Urik*' '*At Tisum* and the name of its prince is *Rechavi'el*. The left is called '*Asagychu'ya*'. The flashes of their lights [extend] to all creatures. The white of [God's] right eye is 20,000, and similarly the left. [God's] right tooth [sic] is called *Padranpasiya* and the left...*uktzattia*'.

From [God's] right shoulder to the left is 160,000,000 *parasangs*. The right shoulder is called *Matatgi'a*' '*Angatz* and the left *Tatmahnagia*'. It [also] has another name: *Shalmahingya*'. From [God's] right arm to the left is 120,000,000. The arms are folded. The right arm is called *Gavarhazazyat'achsi* and the left *Metataghagtziku*. The fingers of [God's] right hand are 100,000,000 *parasangs* each. Similarly the left. [Those] of the right [are called] *Tatmah, Tatzmatz, Gagmavah, Gagshamash, Gagshas* and [those] of the left [are called] *Tatzmatz, Tatmah, 'Agagmatz, 'Ugmatz, Veshoshnas*. And thus you may count from the big one onwards. The palm of [God's] right hand are 40,000,000 *parasangs* and similarly the left. The name of the right is...*zaziya*' '*Atgariyi* and the left is called *Shakizaziya*'. [God's] toes [on the right] are 10,000,000 *parasangs*. 2,000,000 *parasangs* for each toe. And similarly the left. [The names of those] on the right is '*Adomatz, 'Asumat, Darmanat, Kavta.....ramon*, and [those] of the left are *Yeshnayan, Baznayan, Hatzmat, 'Ahuz, Vtahamum*. From the hands you count onwards. Therefore [God] is called 'the great, mighty, and awesome God,' as it is said: 'For GOD your God is God, [and] ruler of rulers, the trustworthy God, who keeps the covenant and love with those who love [God] and keep the divine commandments for a thousand generations' (Deuteronomy 7:9).

However, he told me the calculation of the *parasangs*. Each *parasang* is three *mils*, and each *mil* is ten thousand cubits. Each cubit is two spans of [God's] spans. And one of [God's] spans fills the entire world/universe ('*olam*), as it is said: 'Who measured out the waters with the hollow of the hand, and marked off the heavens with a span?' (Isaiah 40:12).

Rabbi Nathan, Rabbi Ishmael's student, says: Even [regarding] the nose he gave me an exact measurement; similarly the lip, and the cheeks. The appearance of the face and the cheeks was like the measure and the form of the soul. No creature can recognise it. Even though he gave me the measurement of the forehead, the width of the forehead is like the height of the neck. Similarly, the shoulder is like the length of the nose, the nose is like

the length of the little finger. The height of the cheeks is [like] half the circumference of the head. Similarly the measure of any person. [God's] lip is like 77,000. The name of upper lip is *Gavrahtiya'* [and] that of the lower is *Hashrayiy*. [God's] mouth is like a consuming fire' what it speaks [?]...*Sadrassa'* is its name. What [God?] desires, the spirit in [God's] mouth speaks. The crown on [God's] head is 500,000 by 500,000; Israel is its name. On the precious stone that is between its horns are engraved [the words] 'Israel, My people, is mine. Israel, My people, is mine.' 'My beloved is shining and ruddy [...]' his head is the finest gold. His locks are wavy.[...] His eyes are like doves beside springs of water[...]. His cheeks are like beds of spices,' etc. (Song of Songs 5:10-13).

...20,000,000 *parasangs*. Anyone who does not finish with this verse is deviating [from the correct path]. 'Yielding fragrance, his lips are lilies distilling liquid myrrh. His arms are rounded gold set with jewels. His calves are pillars of alabaster[...] His speech is most sweet; he is altogether very desirable. This is my friend and my beloved' (Song of Songs 5:14-16). '*Antiyya'* *Tachun Yachun Good Pure Yod Yod Yod Yah Yah Yah Chasin [Ya]h YHVH* in place of *YH YH*. 'Holy, holy, holy is GOD of Hosts. The whole earth is full of [God's] glory' (Isaiah 6:3). [God's] eyebrows are like the measure of the height of the eye. The right eye is called *Hadraxolad* and the left '*Afdah Tzatziyhu*. [God's] sideburns are like the height of the forehead. That of the right is called '*Atztahiyya'* and the left '*Metatot-zatziya'*. Thus the total measure is 100,000,000,000 *parasangs* high and 10,000,000,000 *parasangs* wide.

Rabbi Ishmael said: When I said this thing before Rabbi Akiva, he said to me: Whoever knows the measure of the height (*shi'ur qomah*) of the Creator and the praise of the Holy Blessed One is protected from all creatures, secure in being a child of the world-to-come, and they will lengthen his days. Rabbi Ishmael said: Akiva and I are guarantors in this matter, but only if one recites this *mishnah* each day.

Blessed is GOD forever. Amen and amen.

## Appendix C

Ma'aseh Merkabah  
from the  
Book of Ezekiel

[www.JewishEncyclopedia.com](http://www.JewishEncyclopedia.com)

**Chapter One**

1. Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the river Kebar that the Heavens (*shamayim*) were opened, and there appeared visions (*mar'ot*) of Elohim.
2. In the fifth day of the month which was the fifth year of King Jeho'achin's captivity,
3. The Word of God came expressly upon Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Kebar; and the hand of the Holy One YHVH was there upon him.
4. And I looked, and, behold, a stormy Spirit (*ruach*) came out of the north, a great cloud, with a fire flashing up, so that a brightness was round about it; and out of the midst thereof was the Eye of Hashmal (Ayin, Eye of Vast Face), out of the midst of the fire.
5. And out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four Chayot (Holy Beings). And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man (Adam).
6. And every one had four faces, and every one of them had four wings.
7. And their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like the Eye of burnished brass.
8. And they had the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides; and as for the faces and wings, of them four,
9. Their wings were joined one to another; they turned NOT (*Lo*) when they went; they went everyone straightforward.

10. As for the likeness of their faces, they had the face of a man (Adam); and they four had the face of a lion on the right side; and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; and they four had also the face of an eagle.

11. Thus were their faces; and their wings were stretched upward, two wings of every one were joined to another, and two covered their bodies.

12. And they went every one straightforward; wherever the spirit went, they went.

13. As for the likeness of the Chayot, their appearance was like coals of fire, burning like the appearance of torches; it flashed up and down amongst the Chayot; and there was brightness to the fire, and out of the fire went forth lightning.

14. And the Chayot ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning.

15. Now as I beheld the Chayot, behold one Ofan (Wheel) at the earth close by the Chayot, at the four faces thereof.

16. The appearance of the Ofanim (Wheels) and their action was like unto the Eye of Beryl; and they four had one likeness; and their appearance and their action was, as it were, an Ofan within an Ofan.

17. When they went, they went toward their four sides; they turned NOT (*Lo*) when they went.

18. As for their wings, they were high and full of fear (*erah*), and they four had their wings full of eyes round about.

19. And when the Chayot went, the Ofanim went hard by them; and when the Chayot were lifted up from the earth, the Ofanim were lifted up, too.

20. Wherever the Spirit (*ruach*) went, so they went; and the Ofanim were lifted up beside them. For the spirit of the Chayah was in the Ofanim.

21. When those went, these went, and when those stood, these stood; and when those were lifted up from the earth, the Ofanim were lifted up beside them. For the spirit of the Chayah was in the Ofanim.

22. And over the heads of the Chayot there was the likeness of a Firmament (*raqia*), like the cold Eye of Awe, stretched forth over their heads above.
23. From Abyss (*tahat*) to Firmament were their wings conformable, the one to the other. This one of them had two, and that one of them had two, which covered their bodies.
24. And they went, I heard the voice (*qol*) of their wings like the voice of great waters, like the voice of *Shadhai* a voice of tumult like the voice of a host; when they stood, they let down their wings.
25. As they went, I heard the voice from AL (*Ol*) ... within the Firmament that was over their heads, as they stood, they let down their wings.
26. And there was the likeness of a throne as if of sapphire, supporting and from AL within the Firmament, and upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness as the appearance of a man (Adam) upon it above.
27. And I saw the Eye of Hashmal (Vast Face), as the appearance of fire round about enclosing it. From the appearance of His loins and upward; and from the appearance of His loins and downward, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness round about Him.
28. As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the glory of the Lord YHVH. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of One that spoke.

## Chapter Two

1. And He said unto me: "Son of man (Adam), stand upon your feet, and I will speak with you."
2. And my spirit (*roochi*) entered into me when He spoke unto me, and set me upon my feet; and I heard Him that spoke unto me.

## Chapter Three

12. Then the spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me the voice of a great rushing: "Blessed be the glory of the Lord YHVH from His Place;"
13. Also the noise of the wings of the Chayot as they touched one another, and the noise of the Ofanim besides them, even the noise of a great rushing.

14. So the Spirit lifted me up, and took me away; and I went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit, and the hand of the Lord YHVH was strong upon me.

### Chapter Eight

1. And it came to pass in the sixth year, in the sixth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house, and the elders of Judah sat before me, that the hand of the Lord YHVH *Adonai* fell there upon me.

2. Then I beheld, and lo, a likeness as the appearance of fire, from the appearance of His loins and downward, and from His loins and upward, as the appearance of splendor (*zohar*), as the Eye of Hashmal.

### Chapter Ten

1. And I looked, and behold, EL of the Firmament (Small Face), that was AL-Head (i.e. Vast Face), the Kerubim, as a stone of sapphire was the appearance of the likeness of a throne.

2. And EL spoke to the man (*ish*) clothed in linen, and said: "Go in between the wheel (*galgal*), even under the Kerub, and fill both your hands with coals of fire from between the Kerubim, and dash them against the city." And he went in, in my sight.

3. Now the Kerubim stood on the right side of the house, when the man went in; and the cloud filled the inner court.

4. And the glory of the Lord YHVH mounted up from the Kerub to the threshold of the house; and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the Lord YHVH's glory.

5. And the sound of the wings of the Kerubim was heard even to the outer court as the voice of *EL Shadhai* when He speaks.

6. And it came to pass, when he commanded the man clothed in linen, saying: "Take fire from between the wheel, from between the Kerubim," that he went in, and stood beside an Ofan.

7. And the Kerub stretched forth his hand from between the Kerubim unto the fire that was between the Kerubim, and took thereof, and put it into the hands of him that was clothed in linen, who took it and went out.

8. And there appeared in the Kerubim the form of a hand of a man (Adam) under their wings.

9. And I looked, and behold four Ofanim beside the Kerubim, one Ofan beside one Kerub, and another Ofan beside another Kerub; and the appearance of the Ofanim was as the Eye of Beryl.
10. And as for their appearance, they four had one likeness, as if an Ofan had been within an Ofan.
11. When they went, they went toward their four sides; they turned NOT (*Lo*) as they went, but to the place wherever the Head (*rosh*, Vast Face) looked, they followed it.
12. And their whole body, and their backs, and their hands, and their wings, and the Ofanim were full of eyes round about, even the Ofanim that they four had.
13. As for the Ofanim, they were called in my hearing the wheel (cycle).
14. And every one had four faces: the first face was the face of a Kerub, and the second face was the face of a man (Adam), and the third the face of a lion (*areh*), and the fourth the face of an eagle (*nesher*).
15. And the Kerubim mounted up -- this is the Chayah that I saw by the river Kebar.
16. And when the Kerubim went, the Ofanim went beside them; and when the Kerubim lifted up their wings to mount up from the earth, the same Ofanim also turned not from beside them.
17. When they stood, these stood, and when they mounted up, these mounted up with them; for the Spirit of the Chayot was in them.
18. And the glory of the Lord YHVH went forth from off the threshold of the house, and stood over the Kerubim.
19. And the Kerubim lifted up their wings, and mounted up from the earth in my sight when they went forth, with the Ofanim beside them. And they stood at the door of the east gate of the house of the Lord YHVH; and the Glory (*kavod*) of *Elohi* of Israel was above over them.
20. This is the Chayah that I saw under *Elohi Yisroel* by the river Kebar; and I knew that they were Kerubim.

21. Every one had four faces, and every one four wings; and the likeness of the hands of a man (Adam) was under their wings.

22. And as for the likeness of their faces, they were the faces that I saw by the river Kebar, their appearance and themselves; they went every one straightforward.

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