

SHAMANIC INITIATORY DEATH AND RESURRECTION IN THE *HEKHALOT* LITERATURE

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1. *Shamanic Initiatory Transformations*

I have argued elsewhere that the most useful paradigm for understanding the strange collection of visionary and revelatory texts known as the *hekhalot* literature is an anthropological one.¹ The “descenders to the chariot,” as they sometimes called themselves, can be understood as a type of shaman, that is, “a social functionary who, with the help of guardian spirits, attains ecstasy in order to create a rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of his group members,” to quote Åke Hultrantz’s definition.² This paper explores one aspect of the shamanic vocation of the descenders to the chariot: the initiatory disintegration and reintegration that establishes the shaman’s supernatural power.

The shaman has a direct link with the supernatural world, but this link is not forged without difficulty or pain; the shamanic vocation often brings great suffering into the lives of those who pursue it. It is characteristic of the Arctic shaman (although not unknown in other traditions) that the initiation into the otherworld is experienced as a violent upheaval that involves the destruction of the whole person by the spirits, followed by a kind of resurrection as a new being who is at home both in the mundane and the spiritual world. The initiate seems to endure being eaten alive or otherwise consumed—often the victim sees the process as though it were happening to someone else—until nothing is left but a skeleton. Consciousness is frequently lost at this point (understandably), but the initiate may watch his or

¹ James R. Davila, “The Hekhalot Literature and Shamanism,” *Society of Biblical Literature 1994 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994) 767-89. All translations of *hekhalot* texts in this article are my own and are based on a text reconstructed from the manuscripts published by Peter Schäfer in Schäfer et al., *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1981); and (for 3 Enoch) Hugo Odeberg, *3 Enoch, or the Hebrew Book of Enoch* (1928; rpt. New York: Ktav, 1973). The Geniza text T.-S. K21.95.C is cited as G8. It was published by Peter Schäfer in *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1984) 97-111. All other abbreviations are those used in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*.

² Åke Hultrantz, “A Definition of Shamanism,” *Temenos* 9 (1973) 25-37; the quotation appears on p. 34.

her own skeleton being reforged and reclothed with flesh. In any case, the new shaman will discover that the terrifying personal disintegration has been followed by a reintegration that brings with it powers over the spiritual world.

The experience of Autdaruta, a Greenland Inuit shaman who told his story to Knud Rasmussen, is fairly typical. In his childhood or youth, after the death of his father, he received a call from the spirits and “began to be a magician, but did not speak to any one about it.” The following year, after moving south, he apprenticed himself to a very old master shaman. Autdaruta told Rasmussen:

One day he [Autdaruta’s teacher] came and said to me —

“Travel east with me, and I will teach you something; you may need help yet, you poor fatherless boy.”

So we travelled together, and he told me on the way that he was going to make a great magician of me. We went ashore up a fjord, close to a cave, and the old man took off his clothes and crept inside. And he told me to watch carefully what happened next. I lay hidden a little way off and waited. It was not long before I saw a great bear come swimming along, crawl ashore, and approach the magician. It flung itself upon him, crunched him up, limb for limb, and ate him.

Then it vomited him out again and swam away.

When I went up to the cave, the old man lay groaning. He was very much exhausted, but was able to row home himself. On the way back he told me that every time he allowed himself to be devoured alive by the bear he acquired greater power over his helping spirits.

Some time afterwards, he took me on a journey again, and this time it was so that I myself might be eaten by the bear; this was necessary if I wished to attain to any good. We rowed off and came to the cave; the old man told me to take my clothes off, and I do not deny that I was somewhat uncomfortable at the thought of being devoured alive.

I had not been lying there long before I heard the bear coming. It attacked me and crunched me up, limb by limb, joint by joint, but strangely enough it did not hurt at all; it was only when it bit me in the heart that it did hurt frightfully.

From that day forth I felt that I ruled my helping-spirits. After that I acquired many fresh helping-spirits and no danger could any longer threaten me, as I was always protected.³

³ Joan Halifax, *Shamanic Voices: A Survey of Visionary Narratives* (New York/London: Arkana/Penguin, 1979) 108-109. For a cross-cultural overview of initiatory disintegrations and reintegrations, see Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (rev. ed.; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964) 33-66. For more examples from the Inuit tradition as well as a discussion of the testimony of Autdaruta, see Dan Merkur, *Becoming Half Hidden: Shamanism and Initiation Among the Inuit* (rev. ed.; New York/London: Garland, 1992) 231-64.

For reasons that are not perfectly clear, this sort of initiatory death and revival is much less common outside of Arctic (and Australian) shamanism.⁴ But it does occur occasionally in both Asian and Native American traditions. An example from the latter is found in the narrative of the Great Vision experienced by the Sioux shaman Nick Black Elk (as told to John G. Neihardt). This experience occurred when he was a nine-year-old boy in 1873 or 1874. The details of the vision cannot detain us here, but toward its end Nick was given a magic herb by a black-horned man who underwent various transformations, including one into a skeleton. (Nick had been destined to use this herb to wreak great destruction on his enemies when he was thirty-seven years old, but out of compassion for the women and children who would suffer, he gave up his vocation instead and converted to Catholicism.) At the end of this episode he informs us:

During this whole time I did not notice how I was dressed. But now I noticed that I was painted red and all my joints were black. There was a white stripe between the joints all over my body. And whenever I would breath (sic), I would be breathing lightning. My bay horse had lightning stripes on it. The horse's mane was like clouds.⁵

⁴ Merkur suggests that this experience of disintegration and reintegration is a form of anxiety attack generated by sensory deprivation (e.g., "kayak-angst" among the Inuit), and that perhaps the natural environment in the Arctic and Australia may be more conducive to sensory deprivation than that normally experienced by Native Americans (see *Becoming Half Hidden* 250-56).

Carmen Blacker, following Ichiro Hori, attributes the rareness of this initiatory experience in Japan to differences between Arctic hunting culture and Japanese agricultural society: "The dismemberment and skeleton motifs suggest a hunting, pastoral people. The contrasting elements found in the Japanese tales of the cave, the passage through a hole down to a subterranean world, betoken a return to the womb of the earth mother goddess characteristic of an agricultural people" (*The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* [2nd ed.; London: Unwin Hyman, 1986] 346 n. 13). One difficulty with this thesis is that this experience is also rare among Native American hunting cultures.

If Merkur's analysis is correct, the descriptions of initiatory disintegration and reintegration associated with the descenders to the chariot may be due to the emphasis in their ascetic practices on prolonged isolation in surroundings conducive to sensory deprivation.

⁵ Raymond J. DeMallie (ed.), *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) 137. In this volume DeMallie published the original notes of Neihardt's conversations with Nick Black Elk, taken in shorthand by Neihardt's daughter, Enid. Black Elk's story is better known from Neihardt's earlier publication, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (2nd ed.; Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979 [1st ed., 1932]), which, however, heavily paraphrases the notes and sometimes seems to obscure their meaning (see, for example, the next note). The corresponding passage in *Black Elk Speaks* is on p. 44.

This element of his vision is later tied to an internal transformation and spiritual mission. After he awoke from his vision, he was visited by his relative Whirlwind Chaser, a medicine man, who told Nick's father, "Your son there is sitting in a sacred manner. I can see that there is a special duty for him to do. Just as he came in I could see the power of lightning all through his body."⁶

Lakota tradition also suggests a connection between the sweat lodge ceremony and an initiatory death and resurrection. During his first sweat lodge, in preparation for his first vision quest, Leonard Crow Dog, a Native American Sioux shaman, was told, "This steam is the holy breath of the universe. Hokshila, boy, you are in your mother's womb again. You are going to be reborn."⁷ The myth of the Stone Boy, as told to James Walker by two native informants, contains a number of episodes in which the dead are raised by being subjected to the sweat lodge ceremony.⁸

2. *Dangerous Encounters with the Divine in the Judaic Tradition*

In the Hebrew Bible, as well as in many ancient mythologies, there is a persistent tradition that it is deadly dangerous to have a direct encounter with the divine. A typical expression of this sentiment is found in the vision of the prophet Isaiah, which took place in Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem in the year 742 B.C.E. (Isaiah 6). This fear for one's life in the presence of God is a well-established theme in biblical literature.⁹

⁶ DeMallie (ed.), *The Sixth Grandfather* 150; compare Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* 49. Note that Neihardt's rendition weakens the direct connection between Whirlwind Chaser's statement and Nick's vision, since it reads "a power like a light" instead of "the power of lightning."

⁷ Halifax, *Shamanic Voices* 81.

⁸ James R. Walker, *Lakota Myth*, ed. Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) 93, 97, 150.

⁹ After his crippling encounter with a divine being, Jacob counted himself fortunate to have escaped with his life (Gen 32:24-32). The instinctive reaction of Samson's father, after he and his wife experienced a theophany of the angel of YHWH heralding the birth of their mighty son, was "We shall surely die, for we have seen God" (Judg 13:22). There is also the strange story about Moses, to the effect that when he came down from Mount Sinai after receiving the second set of tablets inscribed with the ten commandments, something about the appearance of the skin of his face so terrified the Israelites that he found it necessary to wear a veil (Exod 34:29-35). The traditional interpretation of v. 29 is that Moses' face glowed with an echo of the divine glory. However, William H. Propp has shown that it is philologically and contextually more likely that the meaning of the verse is that Moses' face was scorched, and thus horribly disfigured by the divine radiation ("The Skin of Moses' Face—Transfigured or Disfigured?" *CBQ* 49 (1987) 375-86). Note that the angels who serve before the throne of God suffer a similar fate (see below).

The fiery, and even radioactive nature of the heavenly world is also a commonplace in the *hekkhalot* literature. The angels, like Isaiah's seraphim ("burning ones"), are by nature aflame. The heavenly realm itself is pictured as burning with fire throughout (see, e.g., *Hekhalot Rabbati* §101; 3 *Enoch* 25:1-3 [§39]; *Ma'aseh Merkavah* §§554-55). Even given the flaming nature of the angels, however, they in turn cannot withstand the direct sight of God. In Isaiah's vision the seraphim must cover their faces so as not to look God in the eye. This theme is also picked up in the *hekkhalot* literature. The attending angels, including the inconceivably mighty living creatures who form the legs of the throne of God, must cover their faces to protect themselves from the divine radiance. Only then is it safe for God to uncover his face (*Hekhalot Rabbati* §§183-84, 189). Nevertheless, even these precautions are not always enough. The following passage from the *Hekhalot Rabbati* describes the divine glory and the effect it has on those beings fortunate or unfortunate enough to be exposed to it too directly or for too long.

(§159) The fine Presence, adorned Presence, Presence of beauty, Presence of flame, the Presence of YHWH, God of Israel, when He sits enthroned on His throne of glory and His dignity is perfected in the seat of His adornment. His beauty is finer than the beauty of the mighty acts of His adornment, made to ascend higher than the adornments of bridegrooms and brides in their bridal chamber. He who gazes on Him shall be torn apart at once; the one who peers at His beauty is poured out at once like a ladle. Those who attend on Him today do not attend on Him again tomorrow, and those who attend on Him tomorrow do not attend again, for their strength has grown weak and their faces have turned black, their mind wanders and their eyes have darkened after [seeing] the adornment of the splendor of the beauty of their King. As it is written, "Holy, holy, holy" (Isa 6:3).¹⁰

This text seems to allude to two distinct groups. The second, which "attends on" God, is clearly made up of the angelic beings who serve near the throne of glory. By the end of the first day of their existence the scorching heat of the divine presence has afflicted them with

There are other accounts in the Bible of dangerous encounters with God or divine beings (e.g., Exod 4:24-26; Num 22:21-35). For an example from extrabiblical myth, see the Greek story of Semele, the mortal mother of the god Dionysus. Zeus, disguised as a mortal man, became her lover, but Hera persuaded her to demand of Zeus that he appear to her in his true form. She was burned to death by his radiance, but the quick action of Hermes saved her unborn child, Dionysus. (See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 1 [rev. ed.; London/New York: Penguin, 1960] 56.)

¹⁰ Cf. 3 *Enoch* 22B:7 (P. Alexander, "3 [Hebrew Apocalypse of] Enoch," *OTP* vol. 1, 305).

something remarkably similar to radiation sickness; they wither, lose their faculties, and die.¹¹ But it is the first group that interests us in this discussion. They “gaze” and “peer” at God and as a result are “torn apart at once” and are “poured out at once like a ladle.” Who are they? The description of their actions makes the answer clear. The verb “to gaze” (בסֹהֵב) is frequently used in the *hekhalot* literature to describe the visionary gazing of the descenders to the chariot at the throne of God.¹² Likewise, in the *hekhalot* texts the verb “to peer” (בצִיִּיר) is used mainly of the four who entered the garden. Each of them “peered” into the garden (presumed to be “paradise” or the heavenly realm in these texts) and went to his appropriate fate.¹³ This is our first indication that the descenders to the chariot, who literally rush in where angels fear to tread, are regarded as facing significant danger in obtaining their goal of a direct vision of God.

Two rather difficult passages in the *Hekhalot Zutarti* seem to tie the vision of God to the dangers of the descent. The opening paragraph reads:

(§335) If you want to be unique in the world, to have the mysteries of the world and the secrets of wisdom revealed to you, repeat this teaching and be careful with it until the day of your separation. Do not seek understanding of what is behind you and do not search out the words of your lips. You will understand what is in your heart when you merit the beauty of the chariot. Be careful with the glory of your Creator, and do not descend to it. And if you descend to it, do not enjoy it. And if you enjoy it, your end is to be banished from the world. “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter” (Prov 25:2), lest you be banished from the world.

This section promises the practitioner both special knowledge, presumably *Sar Torah* revelations, and “the beauty of the chariot,” meaning the experience of the otherworldly journey and the vision of God. However, the warnings in the last part of the paragraph are obscure.

¹¹ This idea is based on a midrash of Lamentations 3:23 which is found in the rabbinic literature (see David J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel’s Vision* [Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1988] 267, 270).

¹² E.g., 3 *Enoch* 1:1 (§1; Alexander, “3 [Hebrew Apocalypse of] Enoch,” *OTP* vol. 1, 255-56); *Hekhalot Rabbati* §§81, 200; *Hekhalot Zutarti* §§337/347, 349/361, 412; G8 2a.46.

¹³ *Hekhalot Zutarti* §§338/344, 339/345; *Merkawah Rabba* §§671-72. The verb is also used in other passages to describe the descenders to the chariot looking at the vision of the throne of God: *Hekhalot Rabbati* §§102 (discussed below) 225; G8 2a.25. Curiously, every other use of this verb in the *hekhalot* literature has God or angels as its subject: §331; *Sar Panim* §636; §791.

They seem to say that it is preferable not to descend to the chariot, but if one does so, he should certainly not “enjoy” the experience, on pain, apparently, of death. Perhaps “enjoying” the glory of God is a technical term for some sort of magical praxis that was disapproved of by the writer. Whatever the exact meaning, the association of the vision of God with deadly danger is clear.¹⁴

The next paragraph (§336) gives an incantation revealed to Moses when he ascended to God. Next come variant versions of the story of the four who entered the garden, along with accounts of ascents of Moses and R. Akiva (§§337-48). Then comes a passage that describes the powers of the descenders to the chariot (§349 and the first sentence of §350). Then we read:

(§350) First, this is written: “For a human being shall not see Me and live” (Exod 33:20). Second, it is written “that God speaks with a human being and he lives” (Deut 5:24 [21]). Third, it is written: “And I saw YHWH seated on a throne” (cf. Isa 6:1b).

(§351) And what is His name? SSYT KSPN WDNYN DNYN NWN NYNYH, since all the holiness of His hosts is fire, even the fire of YH ŠWWH HYY ŠBY fire BNYN, effulgence KYŠN NGWNY ‘BYRW, seated on an exalted and lifted-up throne. “Holy, holy, holy, YHWH of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isa 6:3). Blessed be the glory of YHWH from His place (Ezek 3:12). ‘WTYY SWSWQSYW HYTH ŠHQH QSPP PŦQY ŦWQW ‘PHH SPHQ SWPQ ŸYQ NYSHH QQH SQWS WHS W‘QY’ H’ ‘QŦM PTHYY, and there are those who say before Him: “A throne of glory on high from the beginning [is the place of our sanctuary]” (Jer 17:12).

(§352) The holy ones of the Most High say: “We see ‘something like the appearance of the lightning-flash” (cf. Ezek 1:14).

The prophets say: “‘In a dream’ we see a vision like a man who sees ‘a vision of the night” (Job 33:15).

The kings who are on the earth¹⁵ say: “‘LWQ’ KTR GHYM.”

But R. Akiva¹⁶ says: “He is, as it were,¹⁷ like us, and He is greater than all. And this is His glory, which is made secret from us.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Peter Schäfer reads the whole paragraph as a “purposeful revision” of the prohibition of esoteric practice in m *Hagiga* 2:1, “taken up in a quite playful manner” (*The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992] 70-71; the quotation is on p. 70.) His interpretation is surely correct, as far as it goes, but it does not elucidate the warning against enjoying the glory of God.

¹⁵ Var. “Those who walk on the earth.”

¹⁶ The name Akiva is missing in all but one manuscript.

¹⁷ See Peter Schäfer, et al., *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur III §§ 335-597* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1989) 20 n. 1 for a discussion of this term.

¹⁸ Or “And this is His glory, that He is made secret from us.”

Moses says to all of them: “Do not inquire into your own words; rather, let Him be blessed in His place.” Therefore it is written: “Blessed be the glory of YHWH from His place” (Ezek 3:12).

The issue in the quoted passage seems to be the contradictory statements in the Bible about whether a human being can see God and live. The first passage quoted, Exod 33:20, denies the possibility altogether. The second, Deut 5:24, asserts that the Israelites did just this when they experienced the revelation of God at Sinai. Finally, Isa 6:1 introduces Isaiah’s vision of God. The implied question is, Who is right? If it is fatal to see God, how was it accomplished by Israel at Sinai and Isaiah in the temple? Peter Schäfer believes that the paragraph contains its own answer. The prophet Isaiah is taken to be one of the descenders to the chariot (since he too saw the vision of God’s throne), and the fact that he returned unscathed establishes that there is indeed a way for human beings to survive the sight of God.¹⁹ Schäfer may be right here, although it is not clear to me how the Israelites’ vision of God on Mount Sinai is to be integrated into this interpretation. Be that as it may, the question is addressed further in the rest of this section.

The meaning of the second paragraph, especially in its context, is far from transparent. Pointing to the initial question, “And what is His name?” Schäfer suggests that “this entails that the name of God is the crucial revelation for the *merkavah* mystic. . . . The ‘vision’ of God consists, so to speak, of the communication of his names.”²⁰ C. R. A. Morray-Jones focuses on the use of the term “glory” (*kabod*): “[This paragraph] establishes a link between the *kabod* in the preexistent celestial sanctuary and the earthly temple.”²¹ Both points seem to apply. The paragraph seeks to present theurgical knowledge of God’s name and presence (glory) which is relevant for making the descent to the chariot.

The final section addresses how various kinds of beings experience the sight of God. The holy ones (angels) describe an element from Ezekiel’s *merkavah* vision. The prophets see visions in dreams. The statement of the kings of the earth (or mortals in general?) is incomprehensible and probably corrupt. R. Akiva alludes to the vision of God in the *Shi’ur Qomah*: God looks like us, but is of enormous dimensions, and his true nature remains hidden from us. Moses gets the last

¹⁹ Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God* 58

²⁰ Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God* 58.

²¹ C. R. A. Morray-Jones, “Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1-12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul’s Apostolate. Part 2: Paul’s Heavenly Ascent and Its Significance,” *HTR* 86 (1993) 265-92; the quotation is on p. 281.

word. He seems to command a shift from speaking about God to blessing (i.e., praising) him. Again, the general sense is clear, although the details are not. Angels have a direct view of the chariot. Prophets see obscurely in dreams. The descenders to the chariot see God in the vision of the *Shi'ur Qomah*, although their human limitations prevent a complete understanding of what they see. Schäfer takes the statement of Moses to be an anticlimax. Moses simply repeats the traditional belief that the job of both human beings and angels is “to praise God during the daily liturgy.”²² This much is certainly true, but it seems to me that Moses may also be affirming Akiva’s position by encouraging the “blessing” of God in the sense of the ecstatic praise described in the *hekhlat* literature as one of the means used by the descenders to the chariot to induce their trances.

In any case, once again, the vision of God is treated as a potentially fatal enterprise. But some hope is offered as well. The Israelites at Sinai and the prophet Isaiah in his vision in Solomon’s Temple looked at God and lived. R. Akiva (presumably representing the descenders to the chariot) refers to the vision of the *Shi'ur Qomah*, which is especially associated with his group. This successful perception of the beatific vision is associated with knowledge of the divine names and the proper praise of God, both elements that belong to the ascetic practices attributed to the descenders to the chariot.

Vivid descriptions of this danger are found in both the *Hekhalot Rabbati* and the *Hekhalot Zutarti*. In the continuation of the text mentioned above, which described the fiery nature of the angels around the chariot (§101), we read:

(§102) A condition of holiness, a condition of might, a fearsome condition, a confounding condition, a condition of quivering, a condition of cold sweat, a condition of confoundedness, a condition of shuddering is the condition of the shirt of ZHRRY’L YHWH, God of Israel, who is garlanded and who comes onto His throne of glory. And it [the shirt] is engraved, and all of it is filled inside and out with “YHWH, YHWH.” And no eyes of any creature are able to gaze at Him, neither eyes of flesh and blood nor the eyes of His attendants. And the one who gazes at Him and peers at and sees Him—*flashbacks* seize his eyeballs and his eyeballs emit and bring forth torches of fire and they scorch and burn him. The fire that goes forth from the man who gazes burns him and scorches him. For what reason? Because of the likeness of the eyes of the shirt of ZHRRY’L YHWH, God of Israel, who is garlanded and comes onto the throne of glory. . . . (§103) . . . For with six voices the *beings*²³ who carry

²² Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God* 59.

²³ The difficult word מדה (literally, a “measure”) sometimes seems to have this meaning in the *hekhlat* literature (cf. Halperin, *Faces of the Chariot* 430 and 545 n. ii).

His throne of glory sing, the cherubim and the ophannim and the holy living creatures, with voice after voice that is made to ascend over its companion and that is modulated before Him.

(§104) The voice of the first: whoever hears it immediately moans and prostrates himself. The voice of the second: whoever listens to it immediately gets lost and does not return again. The voice of the third: whoever hears it is seized by convulsions and dies immediately. The voice of the fourth: whoever listens to it—immediately the skull of his head, as well as his frame, is shattered, and most of the joints of his ribs are torn out. The voice of the fifth: whoever hears it is immediately poured out like a ladle and it dissolves all of him into blood. The voice of the sixth: whoever listens to it—immediately skipping seizes his heart and his heart shakes and overturns his bowels and it dissolves his gall inside him like water. As it is written: “Holy, holy, holy” (Isa 6:3).

Once again, the victim of this dissolution must be the descender to the chariot. This passage echoes §159, translated above. The subject “gazes at” and “peers at” the divine vision. As a result he is torn apart and “poured out like a ladle.” But what is the cause and purpose of this horrifying ordeal? The most obvious answer is that this is presented as the fate of unworthy human beings who somehow manage to pass the preliminary tests of the descent (such as the water test) and who then stand before the throne of God. They are consumed by the radiant glory of God’s holiness. This seems to be the position of Ira Chernus, who argues that the best way to read this section “is to assume that in fact this text is describing dangers—very dreadful dangers—facing the mystic who wants to see God. . . . I think, then, that the text is saying that no creature can see God under ordinary circumstances, but if an individual is willing to accept these terrifying dangers then he may in fact see God.”²⁴ Although Chernus does not make it explicit, his assumption seems to be that the person destroyed in this violent way must be an unworthy practitioner whose death illustrates the dangers of the descent to the chariot. Presumably a worthy candidate would escape harm. Some support for this interpretation is found in the *Merkavah Rabba* in a warning given to R. Ishmael by R. Akiva:

(§681) R. Ishmael said:

R. Akiva said to me:

Son of the proud, go, return to the presence of R. Nehuniah ben HaQanah and ask your master, that he may tell you and explain to you discernment regarding this praxis: how one makes use of it and how people adjure with it, lest you err and use it in a way contrary to the

²⁴ Ira Chernus, “Visions of God in Merkabah Mysticism,” *JJS* 13 (1982) 123-46; the quotation is on pp. 129-30.

halakhah and you act inappropriately and they (the angels) attack you as in the case of so-and-sos whom they (the angels) attacked and whose gall was dissolved inside them (the victims) to become like water. For they listened to what was contrary to the *halakhah* and they acted inappropriately.²⁵

R. Nehuniah tells Ishmael that he has been protected thus far only because of his priestly status, and then R. Nehuniah gives him instructions for adjuring angels that are nearly identical to those he gives his disciples in the *Hekhalot Rabbati* (§203b-5).²⁶ This paragraph uses the image of dissolution in a way similar to §§104 and 159, but it pertains to an attack, presumably by the angels, rather than a self-immolation caused by seeing God face to face. Thus it is a closer parallel to §204 than to §§102-104 and 159, although all three passages deal with the dangers of the celestial descent for mortals.

Instructions in the *Hekhalot Rabbati* on what the descender to the chariot should expect in the seventh palace also focus on dangers from angels during the descent.

(§246) Greatest of all, there are the five hundred and twelve eyes in the four living creatures opposite the gate of the seventh palace. All the forms of their faces are faces of sixteen by sixteen faces which belong to every single living creature, opposite the gate of the seventh palace.

(§247) When a man seeks to descend to the chariot, ‘Anaphi’el opens the doors of the gate of the seventh palace for him. This man enters and stands at the threshold of the gate of the seventh palace, and the holy

²⁵ An echo of the language of §§104 and 159 is also found in the David Apocalypse. When the angel SNWNY’L, the Prince of the Presence, revealed to R. Ishmael the punishments to be meted out to Israel, Ishmael exclaimed “As soon as I heard this strong voice I was poured out and struck dumb, and I fell backward” (§124). Here the expression “to be poured out” is used metaphorically.

²⁶ The passage in the *Hekhalot Rabbati* reads:

(§203b) We came and sat before him, and the associates were a whole crowd standing on their feet, because they were seeing to the *globes* of fire and the torches of light that they had set as a barrier between us and them. And R. Nehuniah ben HaQanah sat and set out in order all the matters of the chariot: descent and ascent; how one who descends, descends, and how one who ascends, ascends:

(§204) When someone seeks to descend into the chariot, he calls on Suriah, Prince of the Presence, and adjures him one hundred and twelve times by TWTRWSY’Y WY’Y who is called TWTRWSY’Y SWRTQ TWTRBY’L TWPGR ‘SRWYLY’Y ZBWDY’L and ZHRRY’L TND’L and SQDHWZY’Y DHYBYRWN and DYRYRWN WY’Y God of Israel.

(§205) And he must be careful not to add to the one hundred and twelve times, nor to subtract from them. And if he adds or subtracts, his blood is on his own head. But his mouth must only enunciate the names, and the fingers of his hands must count to one hundred and twelve. And at once he descends to and has authority over the chariot.

living creatures lift up five hundred and twelve eyes on him. And every single eye of the holy living creatures is split open like a great winnowers'²⁷ sieve. And the appearance of their eyes is as if "they dart like lightning" (Nah 2:5). Besides, there are the eyes of the mighty cherubim and the ophanim of the Shekhinah, which resemble torches of light and of flames of glowing juniper coals.

(§248) And this man is in a cold sweat, and he shrinks back and shakes. He is confounded, confused, and overcome, and he falls backward. But 'Anaphi'el the prince supports him, he and the sixty-three guardians of the gates of the seven palaces. All of them help him and say to him, "Do not fear, son of the beloved seed! Enter and see 'the King in his beauty' (Isa 33:17). You shall not be destroyed, nor shall you be burned.

(§249 is a *merkavah* hymn.)

(§250) And they give him strength. At once (God?) blows the horn "from above the firmament over their heads" (Ezek 1:26), and the holy living creatures cover their faces, and the cherubim and the ophanim turn their faces, and he enters and stands before the throne of glory.

Here the descender to the chariot is promised by the angels that he will be spared both destruction and burning. Good as their word, they avert their faces in order to let him pass into the celestial throne room, where he proceeds to recite the hymns of the throne.

Two other passages in the *hekhlot* literature deal with how to avoid angelic immolation. The first is a prayer that appears at different points in the MSS:

(§§393//470//730) May You have goodwill, YHWH our God, whose mercy presses down in the hour when we invoke Your great and fearsome name, so that we are not drowned in fire. For all Your attendants are flaming fire. May You have goodwill, O merciful and good Father, for in that hour we are saved from the harmful (spirits).

The second is one of a group of adjurations of the Prince of the Presence found in the *Sar Panim*. It is to be recited after carrying out a set of ascetic exercises that are typical for these texts.²⁸

(§626) In this (forty-two letter) name, with this language, I call to you, 'WZHY', Prince of the Presence, Youth, attendant before the King of the world. And he is a prince and a master over the whole host on high.

²⁷ This word is incomprehensible in the manuscripts. I translate according to David J. Halperin's emendation ("A Sexual Image in *Hekhalot Rabbati* and Its Implications," *Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism: Early Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Joseph Dan [Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought VI, 1-2; Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1987] 117-32, esp. 118, 126-27 n. 7).

²⁸ These ascetic exercises are described in *Sar Panim* §623.

(§627) I adjure you and I decree upon you that you should augment me so as to be bound to my will. And you shall accept the adjuration of my decree, and you shall do what I ask, and you shall fulfill my request. You shall not confound me, you shall not make me quake, you shall not perforate me, you shall not put my frame into a cold sweat, my ankles shall not slip, and you shall not make the speech of my lips err. But let me be strengthened and made valiant, and let the adjuration be made mighty, and let the name be in order in my throat. Let no cramp seize me, and do not let the foot of your attendants make me wander so as to confound me and to make me fear and so as to make my hands slack.²⁹ And let me not be drowned in the fire and in the flame, in the tempest and the storm that goes with you, wondrous and elevated one.

Chernus is correct in arguing that there are deadly dangers to be faced during the descent to the chariot, and that some of them are fatal to the unworthy and ignorant, but can be overcome by those properly initiated. Specifically, it is possible to neutralize the threat from the guardian angels by reciting the proper hymns, presenting the proper seals, and passing tests along the way. But this explanation does not suffice for §§102-104 and 159, which deal not with angelic encounters but with the experience of seeing God face to face. A number of points speak against this interpretation for these passages. First, given the horrendous trials that must be overcome on the way to the chariot, it is hard to imagine that anyone unworthy of the vision could get as far as the throne of God in the innermost palace. But even if we grant the possibility, there is nothing in either §§102-104 or §159 that even hints that the descender to the chariot who suffers this violence is sinful or wanting in merit or instruction. Rather, the indication is that simply gazing or peering at God has this most unpleasant side effect. Third, a text in the *Hekhalot Zūtarti* recounts another such immolation, but this time the victim is named. He is R. Ishmael, the narrator and hero of much of the *hekhlot* literature. Speaking of the obscure angel MGH(Y)ŠH or MNḤŠH, he reports:

(§420) And he stands at the first gate and ministers at the great gate. When I saw him, my hands and feet were burned, and I was standing without hands and feet until PNYYYWN the prince from among the heavenly attendants appeared to me before the throne of glory opposite the inner room of the seraphim, whose name is like His name, and it is one name. And he stands before the throne of glory and tends the throne, and he clothes (God) with the shirt and adorns the Ḥashmal and opens

²⁹ The text and meaning of this sentence are unclear (see Peter Schäfer et al., *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur IV §§ 598-985* [Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1991] 23).

the gates of salvation to show grace and lovingkindness and mercies in the eyes of all who see him.³⁰

Here R. Ishmael began to be consumed by the same fiery dissolution that overtook the nameless victims in §§102-104 and 159. But surely in this case the process is not one of punishment for sinfulness or unworthiness. Rather, the common factor is that R. Ishmael “saw” the inhabitants of the heavenly throne room, apparently while he was in front of the throne of glory (note the specific mention of God’s shirt).³¹

One more example of this visionary disintegration and reintegration is found in the *hekhhalot* literature. It is perhaps the most illuminating case, but I have delayed introducing it because it is in one of the latest strata of these texts. It is the description of the transformation of the mortal Enoch into the angel Metatron in 3 *Enoch* 3-15 (§§4-19). But before we look at this passage it is worthwhile to examine the biblical and postbiblical narratives about the antediluvian patriarch Enoch.

3. *The Enoch Tradition*

The earliest mention of Enoch is found in Genesis 5:18-24. This intriguing fragment is the only reference to Enoch in the Hebrew Bible.³² It reads like a summary of a much longer story and raises more questions than it answers. Why did he have such a (comparatively!) short life? What does it mean to say that “Enoch walked with God”? And most intriguing of all, what should we make of the statement “and he was not, for God took him”?

These questions were not lost on ancient Jewish writers, and their interest in Enoch is shown by the compendium of literature known

³⁰ A variant version of this episode is found in G8 2b.36-44.

³¹ On this celestial garment see Gershom G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (2nd ed.; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965) 56-64.

³² Another Enoch, a son of Cain, is listed in the Yahwistic genealogy in Gen 4:17-18. It is likely that this genealogy and the Priestly one share a common archetype in the form of a list of names. Such “genealogical stocks” are known elsewhere in the West Semitic world. But by the time of the final redaction of Genesis, the two genealogies had developed independently into very different forms. It is clear that the editor of Genesis considered the Enoch mentioned in chapter 4 to be a different person from the Enoch in chapter 5. As far as I can tell, no subsequent text in the later literature about Enoch identified the two figures. For Genesis 4-5 see my article “The Flood Hero as King and Priest,” *JNES* 54 (1995) 199-214, esp. 207-10.

today as the book of 1 *Enoch*. Written originally in Aramaic and perhaps Hebrew it is fully preserved only in an Ethiopic translation based on a Greek translation. Fragments of the original Aramaic were discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls and were published by J. T. Milik.³³ The book of 1 *Enoch* is actually a library of texts about Enoch. No less than five works, written over a period of centuries, are included in this collection. In 1 *Enoch* the adventures of Enoch are recounted in much more detail than in the Bible. Whether these more detailed legends are postbiblical exegetical expansion of the biblical passage, survivals of a preexilic Enoch tradition that was purged from the Bible, or both, does not concern us here.³⁴ Our interest is in how these ancient traditions can illuminate our understanding of the figure of Enoch in 3 *Enoch*.

The Book of the Watchers tells the story of the lust of the angels for mortal women and the subsequent fall of these angels. This story also appears in very abbreviated form in Gen 6:1-4. In 1 *Enoch* 14-16, Enoch interceded for these angels (the "watchers") and as a result was caught up by God into heaven, where he saw a vision of the celestial throne room with God himself seated on the throne. (This vision obviously has a great deal in common with the descriptions of the heavenly realm in the *hekhalot* literature.) In this text, too, the danger of looking directly at God is emphasized. God then rejected Enoch's intercession for the watchers. The phrase "and he was not, for God took him" is interpreted to mean that Enoch was taken up to heaven bodily while still alive. In the remainder of the Book of the Watchers (chs. 17-36) we are told how he was given a tour of the heavenly realm by the angel Uriel. Presumably he remained in heaven permanently.

³³ J. T. Milik and Matthew Black, *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments from Qumrân Cave 4* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976).

³⁴ Milik argues that the verses on Enoch in Genesis 5 are dependent on the Astronomical Book (*Books of Enoch* 8). He also believes that part of the Book of the Watchers (chs. 6-19) served as a source for the story of the Nephilim in Gen 6:1-4 (*Books of Enoch* 22-31). His position on these dates has not been widely accepted (see, for example, the review of this volume by James C. VanderKam in *Maarav* 3.1 [1982] 85-97). Margaret Barker is inclined, at minimum, to find a core of preexilic traditions from the Judean royal cult in the literature of 1 *Enoch*. She also seems to allow for the possibility that some of the extant Enoch literature was composed during the monarchy (see *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* [London: SPCK, 1987], especially ch. 1; idem., *The Lost Prophet: The Book of Enoch and Its Influence on Christianity* [London: SPCK, 1988]).

Whether or not such a translation to heaven is envisioned in the biblical text, this interpretation of Gen 5:24 is widely accepted in the Enoch literature written after the Book of the Watchers. The second section of 1 *Enoch* (chs. 37-71), the Similitudes of Enoch, is a case in point. This document, which is missing from the Qumran fragments, is dated by Milik as late as the third century C.E., although many other scholars are inclined to put it sometime in the first century C.E.³⁵ It consists of three cycles of visions revealed to Enoch which deal with the coming apocalyptic judgment and the mysterious heavenly redeemer figure called the “Son of Man.” The last two chapters, which may be a secondary addition to the main work, describe how Enoch ascended to heaven, where he, in defiance of all narrative logic, was himself transformed into the Son of Man.

The book of 2 *Enoch*, which seems originally to have been written in Greek, survives only in a translation into Old Church Slavonic. Much of the material in it probably goes back to the early centuries C.E., although its final forms (two recensions are preserved) appear to be the result of a long process of transmission.³⁶ According to this work also, Enoch ascended to heaven and was given a tour of the celestial realm. He was likewise transformed into an angelic being when he came before the throne of God.³⁷

4. *Enoch and Metatron*

This, then, is the mythic background of the story in 3 *Enoch* 3-15 (§§4-19). I have digressed concerning this tradition because it has been shown by David Suter that there are striking parallels between the

³⁵ Milik, *Books of Enoch* 89-98. For a summary of scholarship on the Similitudes see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 142-54.

Jub 4:16-26 also tells a legend of Enoch that seems to be dependent on the Book of the Watchers. *Jubilees* is fully preserved only in an Ethiopic translation and is generally agreed to have been written in the second century B.C.E. (see O. S. Wintermute, “Jubilees,” *OTP* vol. 2, 35-50 and 62-63; Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination* 63-67).

³⁶ For discussions of date and provenance see F. I. Andersen, “2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch),” *OTP* vol. 1, 91-100; Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 83-87.

³⁷ The rabbinic literature also preserves traditions about an initiatory death and resurrection of the Israelites before Mount Sinai. Elements of this legend are probably also related to the translation of Enoch in 3 *Enoch* and the initiatory transformation elsewhere in the *hekhalot* texts. For the rabbinic material see Ira Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism: Studies in the History of Midrash* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1982) 33-73.

Similitudes and 3 *Enoch*.³⁸ The latter clearly flows out of the tradition that produced the former, whether the connection is oral tradition, literary transmission, or both. With this in mind, let us now turn to the account of Enoch's apotheosis in 3 *Enoch*.

The story begins with the ascent of R. Ishmael to the seventh palace and his encounter with God and the angels. The angel Metatron reveals that he was once the man Enoch, but he was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot as a witness to the generation of the Flood. Although he was challenged by the angels, who believed that a mortal had no place in heaven, God overruled them and revealed celestial secrets to Enoch, enlarged him to enormous size, and enthroned him in what sounds very like a royal investiture. After receiving the homage of the other angels, he underwent a fiery transformation into the highest angel in heaven:

(3 *Enoch* 15:1b-2; [§19]) As soon as the Holy One, blessed be He, took me to serve the throne of glory, the wheels of the chariot, and all the needs of the Shekhinah, at once my flesh was changed into flame, my tendons into a fire of glowing heat, my bones to glowing juniper coals, my eyelids to radiance of lightning-bolts, my eyeballs to torches of fire, the hair of my head to glowing heat and flame, all my limbs to wings of burning fire, and my bodily frame to scorching fire. On my right were hewers of fiery flames, on my left torches were burning. There blew around me wind, storm, and tempest, and the noise of earthquake upon earthquake was in front of me and behind me.

The apotheosis of Enoch in this passage is clearly a literary event, not necessarily meant to describe the actual or potential experience of a descender to the chariot. Nevertheless, it provides an important context for the very difficult texts in the earlier strata of the *hekhlat* literature which we have been examining. Gershom G. Scholem rightly uses this passage to interpret §§102-104. He writes that the vision of the "cosmic raiment" (the shirt of God)

induces in some way the mystical experience which, according to 3 *Enoch* 15:1, transformed the human Enoch into the angel Metatron. In both cases it is said that the eyeballs are transformed into torches of fire. This is not, it is to be noted, a description of dangers confronting the mystic, but of a mystical transfiguration taking place within him. What is

³⁸ David Winston Suter, *Tradition and Composition in the Parables of Enoch* (SBLDS 47; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979) 14-23. These parallels include the use of similar terminology (such as רוחות, "spirits," for angels; בְּחִירִים, "elect ones," for the righteous; the phrase "the throne of His glory"; and the Trisagion [Isa 6:3b]), a cosmological oath that reveals the secrets of creation, and the transformation of Enoch into an angelic being.

a permanent transfiguration in the case of Enoch, however, is only a temporary experience in the case of the Merkabah mystic . . .”³⁹

Murray-Jones, in response to Scholem’s comment, writes:

Chernus disputes this interpretation, arguing that the passage refers to the danger of the vision of the Glory, but both are surely right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny. The meaning must be that the vision of the garment of the Glory, which embodies the Name of God, involves a transformation of the mystic’s body into fire, a process which is terrifyingly dangerous, even fatal should he prove unworthy.⁴⁰

Murray-Jones also notes two other passages that support the thesis that this immolating transformation was experienced by worthy as well as unworthy descenders to the chariot. In the *Hekhalot Zutarti* §349 (= §361), R. Akiva asserts that the descender to the chariot is able “to walk in rivers of fire and to know the lightning.” Later in the *Hekhalot Zutarti* we read:

(§366) R. Akiva said:

I had a vision of and I observed the whole inhabited world and I saw it as it is. I ascended in a wagon of fire and I gazed on the palaces of hail and I found GRWSQ’ GRWSQ’ that sits on the burning sea.⁴¹

Both walking in fire and riding in a wagon of fire “would hardly be possible in an ordinary body.”⁴²

³⁹ Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism* 60.

⁴⁰ Murray-Jones, “Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition,” *JJS* 43 (1992) 1-31; the quotation is on p. 25.

⁴¹ A similar passage appears in the Magic Book (§496) which reads:

R Akiva said:

I saw (and) you (pl.) shall see those who tread on the inhabited land of the earth. And what is it? I ascended <<in the world>> in a wagon of fire. What did I see? I saw GRWSQ’ that sits on the burning sea . . .”

The word GRWSQ’ (with variants) is incomprehensible and appears to be corrupt in both passages. In §496 the word בעלמא, “in the world,” is a corrupt dittography of בענלא, “in a wagon.” The word יהוהו, “you shall see,” may also be a dittography of the previous word הויהו, “I saw.” In §366 I have emended the meaningless word מקליחא (with variants) to the reading בא קלי, “the burning sea,” which is found in §496.

⁴² Murray-Jones, “Transformational Mysticism,” 24. Murray-Jones also mentions §420, in which R. Ishmael’s hands and feet were burned away. One more text, this time in the *Ma’aseh Merkawah*, describes the transformation of a human being who ascends through the seven palaces. The speaker is R. Ishmael:

(§558) When I ascended to the first palace, I became pious. In the second palace I became pure. In the third palace I became upright. In the fourth palace I became faultless. In the fifth palace I brought holiness before the King of kings of kings, blessed be He. In the sixth palace I recited the Qedusha before Him who spoke and formed the world and commanded that all creatures be created, so that the attending angels would not destroy me. In the seventh palace I stood with all my vigor, but I

Conclusion

This paper provides detailed support for one aspect of a broader case made in my earlier article “The *Hekhalot* Literature and Shamanism” in which I argued that the experiences and praxes reported of the descenders to the chariot in the *hekhalot* literature have illuminating parallels to the experiences and praxes reported cross-culturally of shamans. The descenders to the chariot are chosen by shaman’s marks found on their bodies; they gain supernatural powers through a personal disintegration and reintegration; by means of rigorous ascetic practices they generate ecstatic experiences (including otherworldly journeys) and gain control over the spirits; and they use their powers as leaders in their communities.

The focus in the present paper is the experience of personal disintegration and reintegration. We have explored passages in the *hekhalot* literature which describe the dangers facing the descenders to the chariot. They focus on the radioactive glory that emanates from beings in the celestial realm, most especially God. Mortals who wish to enter the heavenly throne room risk attack and immolation by the angels, but careful adepts can avoid harm through knowledge of the proper magical techniques. Nevertheless, the achievement of their main goal, to gaze directly at God, brings a danger to the descenders to the chariot that cannot be avoided. Even the righteous R. Ishmael found himself literally consumed by the experience. The sight of the figure of God on his throne brings about a personal disintegration that burns and rends its victim. But worthy mortals are transformed rather than destroyed by the ordeal. R. Akiva could walk in the heavenly rivers of fire and ride in a fiery chariot like the one that took Elijah into heaven. At least temporarily, he gained a divine nature something like that of Enoch, whose transformation into an angel was narrated as far back as the Second Temple period.

This disintegration and reintegration is strikingly similar to that experienced by shamans. They are eaten alive and regurgitated, stripped down to skeletons and rebuilt, or transformed into lightning, or starved and revived. They return from these ordeals as new persons with great magical abilities. Thus, the descender to the chariot, like the shaman, undergoes a personal destruction and resurrection as

shook and shrank back in all my limbs, and I said . . . (a *merkavah* hymn follows). The transformation here is spiritual rather than physical, but it does seem to produce a change in the adept that protects him from hostile angels.

part of the process of gaining his power to function in the supernatural world.⁴³

⁴³ These conclusions raise the fascinating question of how Enoch's transformation into an angel would have been regarded in the Second Temple period. Space forbids a lengthy digression on this problem, but a couple of possibilities are worth noting. First, the Second Temple descriptions of Enoch's apotheosis could be purely fictional literature whose later reflexes served as a foundation myth of sorts in the *hekhalot* literature. That is, the visionary experiences attributed to the descenders to the chariot were interpreted in terms of the Enoch legend, even though historically there is no connection between the groups that produced the two bodies of literature. Alternatively, it is not impossible that shamanistic groups in the Second Temple era drew on their own religious experiences in describing Enoch's ascent, and that the *hekhalot* literature was written in circles that developed more or less directly from these apocalyptic groups. Much work remains to be done on this problem, and it will not be solved soon, if ever. In *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, Himmelfarb argues that both the Second Temple apocalypses and the *hekhalot* literature are pure fiction, without any basis in visionary experience; whereas Morray-Jones, in "Transformational Mysticism," seeks to establish a line of descent from Second Temple apocalyptic to the *hekhalot* literature. A revised and expanded version of this article appears as chapter five of my book *Descenders to the Chariot: The People Behind the Hekhalot Literature* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming), which presents a comprehensive case for comparison of the *hekhalot* literature with shamanism.