Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1–12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul’s Apostolate*
Part 1: The Jewish Sources

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The theory that the background of Paul’s rapture into paradise (2 Corinthians 12) is indicated by the rabbinic story of four men who entered a garden, park, or orchard (pardees), which is found in collections of traditions associated with “merkabah mysticism,” is by no means new. First proposed by Wilhelm Bousset, the theory was developed by Hans Windisch and Hans Bietenhard, but has come to be associated with Gershom G. Scholem.1 Although a few scholars have subsequently referred to Jewish mysticism in


their interpretations of Paul,2 their subject on the whole has figured only at the periphery of the map of Pauline studies as a puzzled and little explored terra incognita of marginal or, at best, uncertain relevance to the whole. Growing recognition of the importance of apocalyptic for our understanding of Paul now makes it imperative that this unknown territory be explored. Following the publication of Alan F. Segal3's recent book, it is clear that Jewish mysticism must occupy a more central place than has previously been the case in any reconstruction of the matrices of Paul's experience and thought.

The New Testament scholar who seeks to engage the subject of Jewish mysticism may find it difficult to access. Although the situation with regard to the texts themselves is gradually improving,4 they remain well known only to a small number of specialists in early Judaica who have not yet reached a consensus about the origins and dates of their multifarious traditions and literary strata. There are three basic bodies of evidence to consider: the apocalyptic literature of the Second Temple and early Christian periods, with which most New Testament scholars are familiar; the traditions associated with ma'afeh merkabah in rabbinic literature; and the visionary-mystical hekalot literature, which describes (among other things) a journey through seven concentric palaces or temples (hekalot),5 corresponding to the seven celestial levels,6 to behold the vision of God's "glory."


3Alan F. Segal, Paul the Convert, the Apostle and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1990).

4Peter Schäfer's monumental edition, Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, together with the supplement Gesta fragmata zur Hekhalot-Literatur und Konkordanz zu Hekhalot Literatur and the four-volume Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 2, 6, 12, 13, 17, 22, 29; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1987–91) supersedes most earlier "editions" of the material that they include (vol. 1 of the Übersetzung has yet to appear). Work on a one-volume English edition of the corpus is underway.


5It is now widely recognized that the heavenly ascent, which Scholten placed at the center of his interpretation of hekalot merkabah, represents only one aspect of the literature. Nonetheless, it is with this aspect that this study is primarily concerned. See further and compare, Halperin, Faces, 539–67; Peter Schäfer, "Gerahom Scholten Reconsidered: The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism" (12th Sacks Lecture; Oxford: Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, 1986); reprinted as idem, "The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism," in idem, Hekhalot-Studien (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 19; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1988) 277–95; and idem, Der verborgene und offenbare Gott.

6According to J Enoch 18.3 and Massekhet Hekhalot 4 (in Adolf Jellinek, ed., Be Midrash: Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der alteren jüdischen Literatur [6 vols.; 1853–77; reprinted Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrmann, 1938] 2 42–43: also in Solomon Wertheimer, ed., Basi-Midrashot [2d ed.; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Kuk, 1950–53] 1 57–58 [there entitled Ma'afah Merkabah, but not to be confused with the text now known by that title; see n. 4 above]; this text is not in the Synopse), all seven palaces are located in the uppermost of the seven heavens. From a formal point of view, however, these two texts are not typical of the hekalot corpus: the former is an apocalyptic, and the latter a midrashic compilation. Neither include instructions for the heavenly journey. In the instructional texts, it seems that the "palaces" correspond to the heavenly levels, and a heavenly ascent is nowhere described apart from the journey through the hekalot. In Hekhalot Rabbi's description of Nehunya b. ha-Qanah's journey through the gates of the seven palaces (see below pp. 181–82), there is no mention of a prior ascent through the heavens. Nonetheless, the method is said to be "like having a ladder in one's house" (Hekhalot Rabbiti 13.2 and 20.3; Synopse §§199 and 237), implying that the journey through the palaces and the ascent through the seven heavens are one and the same thing. In the final chapter of Ma'afah Merkabah (Scholtem, Jewish Gnosticism 533 = Synopse §§595), Agiba speaks of...
(kabod) or appearance as a glorious and gigantic human form of fire and light, seated upon the merkabah ("throne-chariot") as described in scriptural passages such as Daniel 7, Isaiah 6, and, above all, Ezekiel 1. The form and enormous dimensions of the kabod are described in detail in the Sh'ur-qomah ("dimensions of the body") texts and passages of this literature.7 In apocalyptic, Hellenistic-Jewish, Samaritan, Gnostic, and early Christian literature, there is abundant evidence of a proliferation, during the late Second Temple and early Christian periods, of traditions that regarded the kabod as a created archangelic or demiurgic being and/or identified a human being who had ascended to heaven (for example, Enoch or Moses) with the glory on the throne.8 Traces of these traditions are preserved here
gazing “from the palace of the first firmament to the seventh palace” (MS New York: “. . . to the palace of the seventh firmament”). See further, P. S. Alexander, “Introduction” to J. Enoch in OTP 1. 239–40; Schäfer, Der verborgene und offenbare Gott, 11, 98–99, 117, and 123. The model is already explicit in a merkabah liturgy found at Qumran; see Carol A. Newsom, Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice: A Critical Edition (IHS 27; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).


and there in the hekhalot writings, even though such dualistic tendencies are on the whole eschewed. Unlike the apocalypses, the hekhalot writings offer detailed instructions about the ascetic, liturgical, and theurgical techniques that make the visionary journey possible.9 The most complete account of this journey is given in Hekhalot Rabbati, where Nehunya b. ha-Qanah reveals the mystical method to Ishmael and “the entire great and small sanhedrin” in the temple.10 Nehunya begins by describing a magical, apparently autohypnotic, method of inducing trance:

When a man wants to descend to the merkabah, he should invoke, the Prince of the Countenance, and adjure him a hundred and twelve times by the name of the God, who is called, the God of Daniel, ha-Qanah. The God of Daniel, ha-Qanah is the God of Israel.

He will not add to the hundred and twelve times, neither let him subtract therefrom. If he adds or subtracts, "his blood is on his own head" (Josh 2:19)! Rather, while his mouth is pronouncing the names, let the fingers of his hands count one hundred and twelve times. Then he will descend and master the merkabah.11

Following this episode, Nehunya travels in trance through the seven palaces and reveals, by automatic speech, the names of the terrifying angel


10Hekhalot Rabbati 13–(723 = Schäfer, Synopse §198)–(7)250 (it is not clear exactly where Nehunya’s narrative ends). There are English translations by L. Grodner in David Bim Emanuel, Understanding Jewish Mysticism, a Source Reader: The Merkabah Tradition and the Zoharic Tradition (New York: Ktav, 1978) 56–89 (not very reliable); Areyeh Kaplan, Meditation and the Kabbalah (York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1982) 42–54 (an interesting but idiosyncratic and somewhat speculative interpretation); P. S. Alexander, Textual Sources for the Study of Judaism (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1984) 120–25 (summarized, but by far the best; note that Alexander follows the chapter divisions in Wertheimer’s edition, Batei Midrash 1. 67–136, which differ from those found in the majority of the manuscripts). The passage is discussed in some detail by Joseph Dan, The Revelation of the Secret of the World: The Beginning of Jewish Mysticism in Late Antiquity (Occasional Paper No. 2; Providence: Brown University Program in Judaic Studies, 1992).

11Schäfer, Synopse §204–5. The magical names are given according to the primary readings in MS Oxford 1531 (which also records variants). The expression “descend to the merkabah” is characteristic of this literature (although “ascend” is also used) and has been variously explained by modern scholars. See Schollem, Jewish Gnosticism, 20 n. 1; Halperin, Faces, 227; Segal, Paul the Convert, 322 n. 77; Annelies Kuyt, “Once Again: Yarah in the Hekhalot-Literature,” Frankfurter jüdische Beiträge 18 (1990) 45–69.
guardians of the gateways, who will only allow the traveler to pass if they are shown the correct magic seals, on which are inscribed magical names of God. Finally, he is permitted to enter the innermost palace and to worship before the merkabah.

Long sections of these texts consist of grandiloquent, rhetorical, and apparently ecstatic or ecstasy-inducing hymns and prayers, sometimes said to have been learned from helpful angels. The mystic must know and perform these in order to be able to make the ascent and withstand the overpowering and dangerous vision of the kābōd. Many include long lists of nomina barbara (is this what Paul means by “speaking in the tongues of angels” [1 Cor 13:1]?) and a very large proportion include or end with Isa 6:3 (the qēḏūṣah). Indeed, Isa 6:1–4, the vision and the praise of the divine glory, is as central a text in this tradition as Ezekiel 1. It seems that the mystic, by combining recitation of these liturgical passages with visualization of the images described, was able to enter, in imagination and belief, into the presence of the glory and participate in the worship of the angels. The rabbinic traditions about merkabah (the “work or story of the chariot”) are found in both talmudic and midrashic literature. In the midrashim, they are frequently associated with the Sinai theophany and so with the revelation of the Torah. Ezekiel 1 became, by the third century C.E. at the latest, the standard prophetic reading in the synagogues at Shabu’t (Pentecost), and a complex exegetical web associating Ezekiel 1 and the Song of Songs with the Sinai revelation was developing well before this time. The stories of Moses’ ascent into heaven to receive the Torah, often in the face of angelic opposition, belong in this context. The talmudic sources contain two types of material. There is a genre of “horror stories” which warn against involvement in merkabah, and in which ill-advised individuals come to various sticky ends. On the other hand, we find stories of great rabbis who successfully “experienced ha-merkabah (or: merkabah)” and produced supernatural phenomena by so doing. The parades story, as we shall see, combines both themes. These sources display an ambivalent attitude toward merkabah, and the overall impression is of something mysterious and wonderful, but terrifyingly dangerous and forbidden.

The theory proposed by Gershon G. Scholem and developed by Ithamar Gruenwald, among others, is that the talmudic merkabah was a continuation of apocalypticism and that the hekhalot writings preserve genuinely rabbinic esoteric visionary-mystical traditions which go back to the first century C.E. and beyond. A number of scholars have challenged this


13David J. Haileperin discusses the “reality” or otherwise of visionary experience in “Heavenly Ascentions in Judaism: The Nature of the Experience,” in David J. Luhr, ed., SBL Seminar Papers 26 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 218–32. The discussion is repeated in Faces, where he distinguishes throughout between “fantasy” and “hallucination.” Compare Schäfer, Der verborgene und offenbare Gott, 146–53. This discussion does not seem to me to be very useful. If a person believes that he or she has seen a vision, the question whether he or she “really” did so is of limited historical significance. The historical reality that concerns us is surely that the people who produced the (apocalyptic and) hekhalot literature apparently used traditional imagery as a basis for emotionally charged “active visualization,” in connection with mystical and theurgic techniques of the kind discussed above, in an attempt to obtain visions and/or ecstatic experiences. That some individuals did actually obtain such experiences and attributed “reality” to them seems to me beyond reasonable doubt.

14The term ha-merkabah is used, according to context, to mean either the divine throne or the biblical chapter, Ezekiel 1 (in the hekhalot, it always carries the former meaning). The expression merkabah (the “work/story of the chariot”) generally seems to refer to an esoteric tradition of exegesis of Ezekiel 1, sometimes associated with mystical practices and ecstatic experience, although it may occasionally be another term for the chapter itself. I do not italicize the term merkabah (other than in quotations), except in cases where it is used, unambiguously, as a shorthand term for Ezekiel 1 (ha-merkabah).

15See especially Ira Chernus, Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1982); and Haileperin, Faces, 262–356, who offer very different historical interpretations of this material.


18Ha. Hag. 14b and parallels.

theory, arguing that the rabbinic ma'aseh merkabah was a purely speculative and exegetical tradition and that the ecstatic mysticism of the hekhvalot literature developed in circles marginal to rabbinism in late and post-talmudic times. According to this view, the hekhvalot authors' relationship to both apocalyptic and rabbinic traditions (neither of which involved ecstatic mysticism) was merely that of literary derivation.

Uncertainty about the date of origin of the hekhvalot traditions and their relationship to early rabbinic orthodoxy has been a major deterrent to New Testament scholars who might otherwise have referred to Jewish mysticism when interpreting Paul. My analysis of the rabbinic ma'aseh merkabah traditions, however, leads me to support a modified version of the Scholom-Gruenwald hypothesis. The data suggest that esoteric traditions associated with the vision of God's kabod, including the mystical practice of "heavenly ascents," were inherited from apocalyptic circles and enthusiastically developed by some Tannaim but opposed by others, mainly because these traditions were also being developed by groups whom they regarded as heretical (including Christians and Gnostics). While it cannot be assumed that everything in the hekhvalot literature goes back to the tannaitic period, the writers' claim to be the heirs to a tradition from this time and milieu deserves to be taken seriously. As Segal has rightly argued, Paul himself is a witness to the currency of a mystical tradition within first-century apocalyptic Judaism.

Whatever the attitude of subsequent rabbinic orthodoxy toward this tradition may have been (and I have argued that it was mixed), it seems certain to have been the ancestor, at least, of hekhvalot mysticism.

The talmudic ma'aseh merkabah traditions are mostly appended to the mishnah-lemma m. Hag. 2.1, which reads as follows:

A It is not permitted to expound [var. [25]

A1 the forbidden sexual relationships with three (persons).

A2 nor the story of creation with two,

A3a nor the merkabah with an individual,

A3b unless he were wise [var. [26] and understands [understood] from his (own) knowledge.

B1 Whoever meditates upon [or: gazes at] four things,

B2 it were fitting [a mercy] for him [var. [27]


21 Gerd A. Wewers (Geheimnis und Geheimhaltung im rabinischen Judentum [Berlin/ New York: de Gruyter, 1975]) believes, however, that visionary mysticism was practised in apocalyptic circles, but that such practices were unanimously opposed by the rabbis in the early period.


23 Segal, Paul the Convert, esp. 34-71.

24 In the light of the above observations, I use the expression "merkabah mysticism" to refer to an esoteric, visionary-mystical tradition centered upon the vision of God on the celestial throne. It is not simply synonymous with the contents of the hekhvalot texts ("hekhvalot mysticism"), which represent one development of this tradition, whose influence is also found in the apocalypses (although the term merkabah is not yet in use) and in a wide range of Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic sources. See Morray-Jones, "Transformational Mysticism." All texts of m. Hag. read יריע, but גרשמי is found in MS Vienna of r. Hag. 2.1, where Yohanan b. Zakkai cites the "merkabah restriction" independently of its mishnaic context (parallel in y. and b. read simply: יריע, see berakhot יריע . . . etc.). Therefore t. (Vienna) may preserve the pre-mishnaic form of the "merkabah restriction." See Halperin, Merkabah, 29-39.

25 MSS Parma and Kaufmann.

26 The reading יריע (also at C2) is supported by several manuscripts and editions of m. t., y., and b., but יריע (thus the printed edition of m.) is equally well attested. See Halperin, Merkabah, 12 n. 7. Both readings appear to be early, and it is impossible to tell which is
if he had not come into the world:

B2a what is above,
B2b what is below,
B2c what is/was before,
B2d what is/was after.

C1 And whoever is not careful about the glory of his creator,
C2 it were fitting [a mercy] for him that he had not come into the world.

In its present form, the mishnah states that the forbidden relations (A1) may be taught to a maximum of two (not three) students at one time, the story of creation (A2) only to one (not two), and ha-merakah, that is, Ezekiel 1 not even to a single student, unless he meets the required condition. The “merakah restriction” (A3a–b), however, can be shown to have circulated as an independent unit, and so the mishnah as we have it is a redactional construct: the numerical sequence three-two-one has almost certainly been developed on the basis of the merakah restriction’s bé-yahid. David J. Hauperin has pointed out that the preposition b- would more naturally be translated “by,” which, although it makes no sense in the present context, may be a clue to the original meaning of the merakah restriction. It meant, he has suggested, that only an accredited scholar (hakam) who could be trusted not to fall into erroneous exegesis was allowed to study (dr/š/nh) Ezekiel 1 in private (in other words, on his own: bé-yahid).

This reconstruction does allow us to understand the preposition in its most obvious sense (“ha-merakah) may not be expounded by an individual on his own”). Neither drš nor the variant šnḥ, however, normally mean “to study”: both verbs usually refer to teaching (exposition to others). Moreover, Halperin’s theory implies that drš (“knowledge”) here means “scholarship,” which would be, as far as I am aware, unique. In rabbinic literature, the word normally means either “mind” or (personal and nonauthoritative) “opinion,” neither of which seems appropriate here. In prerabbinic apocalyptic and mantic wisdom literature, however, the term generally refers to revealed, esoteric knowledge, as do its Aramaic and Greek equivalents, mndrv* and γνώσις. In this literature, the verbal roots hkm, byn, and yd (whence drš) are very frequently juxtaposed, as at Dan 2:21:

He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who know understanding.

At Qumran, drš refers to the special, esoteric knowledge of the sect. IQS 4.22 is of special interest:

to instruct the upright in the knowledge of the Most High and to teach the wisdom of the heavenly ones to those of perfect conduct.

The knowledge and wisdom to which this passage refers are of divine origin and associated with the angels. Moreover, lēḥabin here means to instruct, rather than to study.

On these grounds, I have argued that the merakah restriction is an ancient unit of tradition that was inherited by the rabbis of the first century CE from the apocalyptic tradition (the verb hayah and the variant wē-hebin

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suggest that it may originally have been formulated in the past tense. In this context, the term *hakam* does not denote a scholar in the rabbinic sense, but rather a mantic sage, such as Daniel, who possesses esoteric knowledge and is skilled in visionary-mystical technique. The term *yahid* does not carry the numerical significance that it acquires in the context of the Mishnah but simply means “an individual” or possibly, by analogy with occurrences of the term elsewhere, an ascetic “solitary.” Thus, the unit of tradition originally meant that no individual (or ascetic) was competent to expound (that is, teach about, or express an opinion concerning) Ezekiel’s vision unless he was a mantic sage who could do so on the basis of his own visionary-mystical experience and esoteric knowledge. It was, then, originally a statement about competence and only acquired halakhic significance in the context of rabbinism, where the original meaning was changed in several ways. Most importantly, the term *hakam* was understood in its rabbinic sense, and so the unit was taken to mean that only an ordained rabbi (that is, a talmudic sage) was permitted to involve himself in *ma'aseh merkabah.*

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33At h. Hag. 2.1, y. Hag. 77a, and b. Hag. 14b, Yoanan b. Zakai cites the merkabah restriction as though it were an ancient unit of tradition, and critical analysis confirms that the story preserves the unit in its preimsha form. However, the talmudic tradition that Yoanan b. Zakai was the authoritative source of the merkabah-mystical tradition is a false construction imposed by the talmudic redactors on their sources, which originally had exactly the opposite meaning, namely, that Yoanan, unlike Eleazar b. Arakh and Eleazar b. Hyrcanus, did not have access to the esoteric and mystical tradition. This explains why the hekhalot writers cite other tannaitic authorities but never Yoanan, which would be astonishing if their intention was to invoke apuruous talmudic authority for their compositions. See Morray-Jones, "Merkabah Mysticism," 229–301.

34At m. Ta'anit 1.4, t. Ta'anit 1.7, and b. Ta'anit 10a–b, the *yehidim* are ascetic intercessors (or rain) on behalf of the community, André Neher ("Échos de la secte de Qumran dans la littérature talmudique," in *Les manuscrits de la Mer Morte*, colloque de Strasbourg, 25–27 Mai 1955 [Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957] 48–54) identified the *yehidim* with the *hasidim* of *Tob.* Note that a certain group of all the *yehidim* seems also to have been *yehidim.* Neher also associated them with the *yehidim* (community) of Qumran and argued that they were avowed celibates (the Mishnah, however, states that they were not). *Jéhouda* is an important term in Syriac Christian "protonomasticism," where it refers to a celibate ascetic whose heart and mind are "single" for Christ. It is sometimes translated by the Greek μονάζων, but in the early Syriac sources does not yet carry the full sense of "monk." See A. F. J. Klijn, "The Single One" in the *The Gospel of Thomas,* JB 81 (1962) 271–78; Gilles Quispel, "L’église selon Thomas et les origines de l’ascèse chrétienne," in *Aspects du judéo-christianisme*, colloque de Strasbourg, 23–25 avril 1964 (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1965) 35–41; F. E. Morard, "Monachos, moine: histoire du terme grec jusqu’au IVe siècle," Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie 20 (1973) 332–41; Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem* (2d ed.; Cistercian Studies Series 124; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992) 136–39.


B and C are formally connected units of tradition. C is clearly a warning against heretical speculations and/or visionary-mystical practices associated with the *kabod,* which were held to compromise the unity of God. Interpretation of B, however, is less straightforward, and it is not clear whether "before" (*lê-panim*) and "behind/after" (*lê-‘ahor*) should be understood in spatial or temporal terms. Gerd A. Wewers adopts the latter interpretation, taking B and C to be comments on A2 (*ma‘aseh bîre‘îšîth*) and A3 (*hamekabah*). Although this view finds some support in later rabbinic sources, it is unlikely to be correct since B2d must, if temporal, refer to the future. Christopher Rowland argues that B’s fourfold formula refers to the subjects of apocalyptic revelation: the mysteries of the celestial and infernal worlds, the beginning of creation, and its eschatological fulfillment. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, however, has suggested that the whole of B–C originally applied to the vision of the merkabah and that B referred to the dimensions of the body of God (that is, the glory) with its surrounding brightness as described in Ezek 1:27–28. Though this analysis is less convincing than Rowland’s, there is evidence that both “spatial” and “temporal” interpretations were current in the early period. Whatever the unit’s original meaning, B–C evidently refers to matters that were regarded as forbidden, and the mishnah as a whole thus represents the strain of
rabbincic opinion that was hostile toward the esoteric and mystical tradition, especially as it was developed in circles outside rabbincic control.

The story of the four who went into parades is found in the Tosefta and both Talmuds as part of a collection of material appended to this mishnah (called by Halperin the "Mystical Collection")\(^4\). The meaning of the story and its tradition-historical background are disputed matters, however, and it is therefore necessary to defer consideration of Paul's account until the Jewish sources have been evaluated.\(^41\)

At this juncture, I ask the reader to refer to pages 210–17 for a presentation based on the version of i. Hag. 2.1 (according to MS Vienna),\(^42\) which combines three units of material: the story itself (A) and two parables appended by way of commentary, one of a king's parades (B) and the other of a highway passing between two roads (C).\(^43\) Unit A also occurs at y. Hag. 77b, b. Hag. 14b–15b, and Cant. R. 1.28\(^44\) (= 1.4.145). Both the Jerusalem and the Babylonian Talmuds incorporate additional material (indicated in square brackets) about the arch-heretic Elisha b. Aburyah, otherwise known as 'Aher ("the Other One"), but only a small proportion of this material is common to both sources.\(^46\) The Babylonian Talmud also includes additional material about Ben Zoma and Aqiba. Neither the Babylonian Talmud nor Song of Songs Rabbah include B and C, which occur within the "Mystical Collection" in the Jerusalem Talmud, but in different contexts.\(^47\) C is also found, in an altogether different context, in 'Abot de-Rabbi Nathan (version a) chapter 28.\(^48\)

The geonomic commentaries of the tenth and eleventh centuries interpreted the story in the light of the hekhelat traditions. Rashi explains that the four men "ascended to heaven by means of a name,"\(^49\) while Hai Gaon of Pumbeditha, in a frequently quoted responsum, offers a detailed explanation of the story in terms of the hekhelat mystical practices.\(^50\) Hai's younger contemporary Hanan b. Hushiel offers a similar interpretation:

"Pardes was used as a term for the Garden of Eden, which is reserved for the righteous. Thus it is that place in 'Arabot wherein the souls of the righteous are stored. And it is explained in the hekhelat that the sages who were worthy of this matter used to pray, cleanse themselves of all defilement, fast, immerse and purify themselves. Then they would employ the names and gaze into the palaces and see how the angelic guards stand, and how one palace follows on after the one before it."\(^51\)

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the parades story was interpreted in terms of the prevailing view of ma'aseh merkabah as gnostizing (or merely Greek philosophical) cosmological speculation.\(^52\) Wilhelm Bousset was the first modern scholar to take the geonomic interpretation seriously, even though he believed the hekhelat traditions to be post-talmudic.\(^53\) Scholem, however, argued that the talmudic story should be interpreted in the light of the hekhelat literature as the Geonim affirmed.\(^54\)

\(^41\) The following discussion is a highly summarized account of my own work in progress, which I hope to publish in due course as part of a revised and extended version of my doctoral dissertation.
\(^43\) The strange story of Joshua b. Hananiah and Simeon b. Zoma, which occurs after C in MSS Vienna and London, but before B in MS Erfurt, and which is also found at y. Hag. 77b, b. Hag. 14b, and Gen. R. 2.4, is too long and complex to be considered here.
\(^44\) In Samson Dusky, ed., Midrash Rabbah: Shir ha-Sirim (Jerusalem: Devir, 1980) 27 [Hebrew].
\(^46\) y. Hag. 77b–c (most of the Jerusalem Talmud's material is also found at Ruth R. 6.4 and Qoh. R. 7.8.1); b. Hag. 15a–b.
\(^47\) y. Hag. 77c (B) and 77a (C).
\(^49\) See Bousset, "Himmelreise," 153; Scholem, Major Trends, 49; Halperin, Merkabah, 3; idem, Faces, 6; and Moshe Idel, Kabbalah: New Perspectives (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1988) 90; all of whom quote the first part of the responsum only. The complete text can be found in Bernhard M. Lewin, Otsar ha-Geonim: The Saurus of the Gaonic Responsa and Commentaries, vol. 4: Tractate Tom Tow, Chagiga and Maschkin (Haifa/Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press Association, 1931) 3. 13–15; and a more complete translation can be found in Kaplan, Meditation, 26–27.
\(^50\) Hanan b. Hoshaya, a. Hag. 14b–15b; Hanan's commentary, like Rashi's, is included in the printed edition of the Babylonian Talmud.
\(^52\) See n. 1 above.
\(^53\) Scholem, Major Trends, 52–53; and idem, Jewish Gnosticism, 14–19. In this interpretation, Scholem was followed by Bietenhard (Die himmlische Welt) who, however, developed Bousset's theory of a connection with 2 Corinthians 12 before Scholem did.
Scholm's hypothesis has been developed by several scholars. Of particular importance for what follows is André Neher's suggestion that *pardes* was a term for the heavenly temple. Neher argued that texts such as Ezekiel chapters 1, 10–11, 40–48 and Isaiah 6 indicate that visionary experience was associated with the sanctuary from an early period, and that *merkabah/hekkaloth mysticism* was a development, and relocation in heaven, of the temple cult tradition. He suggested that the mishnaic tractate *Midrash*, which describes a journey into the temple, was originally a book of esoteric, visionary-mystical instruction, and that the *pardes* story was a fragment that had become detached from its original context, in which the mystical experience was still deemed to occur within the context of the earthly temple.

Scholm's theory has also had its critics. Johann Maier, while accepting that the story refers to the vision of the merkabah, believed the original meaning to be that the four interpreted Ezekiel 1 in the light of apocalyptic imagery of the heavenly cult and temple, and that the story was only later understood to refer to a visionary ascent. Ephraim E. Urbach argued that the theme of ascent to the heavenly temple appears only in the Babylonian version (A11–19 and A53–60) and is therefore a later interpretation of the story, which in the earlier form represented by the Tosefta and the Jerusalem Talmud was simply an allegory of contemplative exegesis of Ezekiel's *merkabah* vision. Others have argued that, if the components unique to the Babylonian Talmud are disregarded, there is nothing in the story itself (apart from its context in the “Mystical Collection”) to suggest that it was originally concerned with *merakabah* at all. In his earlier study, Halperin found no evidence that the story originally referred to any kind of mysticism or esotericism, and argued that the hekkaloth parallels were attempts to explain the Babylonian version. He has subsequently modified his position to the extent of conceding that the redactor of the Babylonian Talmud has borrowed from the hekkaloth tradition, but maintains that this tells us nothing about the original form of the story, which must, he argues, have been a metaphor intended to convey something (he is not sure what)

about the lives and actions of the four dramatis personae. Schäfer, arguing that the reading “went in... and came out” is to be preferred over “went up... and came down” (A9–10; A41–42), suggests that the story was originally an allegory of four types of rabbinic teachers who “entered the garden” of Torah scholarship with differing results. An intermediate position is adopted by Rowland, who argues that the story originally referred to aesopical Torah exegesis. Others have looked further afield for explanations: Henry A. Fischel maintains that the story is a warning about the dangers of Epicurean philosophy and that *pardes* was a term for the school of Epicurus, which originally met and lived together in a garden. While Samson H. Levey has suggested that *pardes* should be vocalised *parados* (short for *aparados* = “authoritative tradition”) and that the four undertook a study of Christian tradition about Jesus. According to these interpretations, then, the story does not refer to ecstatic mysticism and is therefore of no relevance to the visionary experience of Paul.

Several commentators have looked for a key to the story’s meaning in the traditions found in other rabbinic sources about the four dramatists personae. This quest has usually involved identification of the three other than Aqiba as representatives of different kinds of (usually Gnostic) heresy which could result from uncontrolled esoteric and/or mystical activity or, alternatively, from involvement in non-Jewish speculative philosophy. One or other of the three has occasionally been identified as a Christian. It should

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56 André Neher, "Le voyage mystique des quatre," *RHR* 140 (1951) 59–82.


58 Urbach, "Masoret," 12–17. Urbach’s point that A11–19 are not part of the original story is almost certainly correct, but on A53–60 see further below.


61 Peter Schäfer, "New Testament and Hekhaloth Literature: The Journey into Heaven in Paul and in Merkabah Mysticism," *JSJ* 35 (1984) 19–35, reprinted in *Idem*, *Hekhaloth-Studien*, 234–49; for a critical response to this hypothesis, see Young, "The Ascension Motif," 77–80. Schäfer states (*Hekhaloth-Studien*, 248), "What Scholm has demonstrated is nothing but a classic example of what S. Sandmel called 'parallelemania.' It will be obvious that I disagree with this dismissive evaluation. Schäfer's criticism of Scholm's methodology, however, is at least partly justified, and I have therefore tried to take account of the methodological principle that he enunciates (Hekhaloth-Studien, 249): 'It is only possible to make a reliable assertion concerning the relationship of Hekhaloth Literature and the New Testament... if the respective literatures are analysed in their own structure.'


65 This approach was initiated by Grätz (*Gnosticismus*, 56–101), who identified Ben Azzai as an ascetic and enigmatic Gnostic, Ben Zoma as a speculative Gnostic, and Elisha b. Abuyah as an anti-Gnostic Gnostic.

66 Neumark ("Geschichte der jüdischen Philosophie", 1. 93) and Neher ("Voyage Mystique," 81–82) both argue that Elisha became a Christian, while Leopold Löw (*Die Lebensalter in der...*)
be noted that the four dramatis personae are elsewhere associated with one another in a nonmystical context. A factor common to the traditions concerning all four is their reputation for outstanding Torah scholarship, but of the four only Elisha b. Abuyah is widely regarded as a heretic and renegade. The traditions collated by the talmudic redactors stress the contrast between his great learning and, after his apostasy, his contempt for the law, willful immorality, and collaboration with the Romans. Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, by contrast, are generally presented in a favorable light. Ben Azzai is portrayed as a person of exceptional sanctity. His celibacy is mentioned in several sources, but there is no indication that this behavior was associated with heretical beliefs. The traditions concerning his death are somewhat confused. He appears in a list of martyrs at Lam. R. 2.2.4, but this is of doubtful historical value. Other sources record that he recited Ps 116:15, the verse applied to him in the pardes narrative (A22–23), with reference to the death of God’s saints. There is evidence to suggest that Ben Zoma was involved in esoteric matters and suspected of unorthodox beliefs about the creation, but on the whole the tradition speaks respectfully of his wisdom. Neither Ben Azzai nor Ben Zoma, despite

their great learning, was ever ordained, and they are frequently cited together as examples of outstanding “disciples” (talmidei-hakhamim). Elisha was never ordained either and appears together with Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma in another context:

There are three disciples (talmidei-hakhamim) [who are significant for dreams]: if one sees Ben Azzai in a dream, he may hope for saintliness (basidut); if Ben Zoma, he may hope for wisdom; if ‘Aber, let him fear punishment. It emerges that the four characters in the pardes narrative have one thing in common: their reputation as outstanding scholars. One (Elisha) is famous for his heresy and wickedness, and at least two of the others (Aqiba and Ben Azzai) for their saintliness. Torah scholarship and moral rectitude do not, then, in themselves explain why Aqiba was able to avoid the dangers that overcame the other three, lines A41–49 (Song of Songs Rabbah) notwithstanding. What these three have in common against Aqiba is the fact that they were never ordained, and it is somewhat surprising that the significance of this has never before, to my knowledge, been recognized. The point is surely that Aqiba, alone of the four, was a hakam according to the rabbinic definition of terms (that is, an ordained rabbi). The others, despite their great learning, were merely talmidei-hakhamim and so their involvement in ma’aseh merkahab led them to disaster. It is apparent, then, that the story was composed or adapted by an early redactor of the “Mystical Collection” to be an illustration of the merakahab restriction in the Mishnah (only a hakam may expound the merakahab), which is the lemma upon which the “Mystical Collection” hangs. Thus, the four names convey the essential point of the story in this context.

The interpretations that deny an intrinsic connection between the talmudic pardes story and ma’aseh merkahab must therefore be discounted. The question whether the story implies mystical or merely exegetical activity, however, remains to be decided. It is clear from A53–60 that the redactor of the Babylonian Talmud understood it in terms of a heavenly ascent, but the other sources are more ambiguous. This question is bound up with that of the relationship between the talmudic and hekhalot traditions.

The pardes story appears in two of the hekhalot compilations: Hekhalot Zuta (HZ), preserved in MSS Munich 22 (M) and New York (N), and Merkahab Rabbah (MR), preserved in MSS New York (N) and Oxford (O).
Both HZ(N) and MR(N) include additional material, but differ from each other. Halperin presents this material as three different texts, but this is quite misleading. It is evident that all four sources contain the same basic text, which has been expanded in different ways by the redactors of HZ(N) and MR(N). The following table shows how the material appears in Schäfer’s Synopsis.

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<th>HZ (M)</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>§338</td>
<td>§344</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>§339</td>
<td>§345</td>
<td>§672</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>§346</td>
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<td>§673</td>
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§§340–43 have nothing to do with the parades story and appear only in HZ(N), as do §§344–45. Thus, in HZ(M), §346 follows on from §339. For the sake of clarity, the basic text is shown below in bold print, significant variations being noted within square brackets, [. . . . ]. Material unique to MR(N) is shown in normal print within braces, { . . . . }. Material unique to HZ(N) is shown in normal print, within angled brackets and underlined, < . . . . >. The following discussion will concern the basic text only.

A1a R. Aqiba said:

A1b We were four who went into parades. One looked and died, one looked and was stricken, one looked and cut the shoots, and I went in in peace and came out in peace.

A2a Why did I go in in peace and come out in peace? [HZ(N) and MR(N) omit A2a]

A2b Not because I am greater than my fellows, but my deeds [MR(N) and HZ(N): they] have caused me to fulfill the teaching that the sages have taught in their Mishnah: “Your deeds will bring you near and your deeds will keep you afar.”

B1a And these are they that went into parades: Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma and ‘Aher and R. Aqiba.

B1b (R. Aqiba said to them: Beware! When you approach the pure marble stones, do not say, “Water! Water!”—according to what is written: “The speaker of lies shall not endure before my sight.”)

B2a Ben Azzai [MR(O): Ben Zoma] looked into the sixth palace and saw the brilliance of the air of the marble stones with which the palace was paved (‘ Ironically, behold the son of Hillel’s house), and his body could not bear it, and he opened his mouth and asked them: “These waters—what is the nature of them?” and died. Of him, scripture says: “Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his saints.”

B2b Ben Zoma [MR(O): Ben Azzai] looked at the brilliance in the marble stones (בזק היוער), and thought that they were water, and his body could bear that he did not ask them, but his mind could not bear it, and was stricken—he went out of his mind. Of him scripture says: “Have you found honey? Eat what is enough for you. . . .” etc.

B2c Elisha b. Abuyah looked [HZ(N): went down] and cut the shoots. In what way did he cut the shoots? They say that whenever he went into the synagogues and study-houses and saw children succeeding in Torah-study, he used to speak over them and they would be silenced, and of him, scripture says: “Do not let your mouth lead your flesh into sin. . . .”

B2d [They say that when Elisha went down to the Merkabah he saw Metatron to whom permission had been given to sit for one hour in the day to write down the merits of Israel. He said, “The sages have taught: On high there is neither standing nor sitting, neither rivalry nor contention, neither division nor affliction.” He entertained the thought that there might perhaps be two powers in heaven. At once, they led Metatron outside the curtain and punished him with sixty lashes of fire, and permission was given to Metatron to burn the merits of ‘Aher. A heavenly voice came forth and they [sic] said: “Return, backsliding children (Jer 3:22)—except for ‘Aher!”]

B2e R. Aqiba went in [HZ(N) and MR(N): went up] in peace and came out [HZ(N) and MR(N): came down] in peace. Of him, scripture says: “Draw me, we will run after you. . . .”

C1 R. Aqiba said:

C2a At that time, when I went up to the heavenly height, I made more signs in the entrances of יֶד than in the entrances of my house,
C2b and when I arrived at the curtain (משה), angels of destruction came forth to do me violence. The Holy One, blessed be he, said to them: “Leave this elder alone, for he is worthy to behold my glory” [MR(N): to behold me (משה)]. It can be seen that whereas A and C are both first-person accounts by R. Aqiba, B is, like the talmudic versions, a third-person narrative. It therefore seems probable that the unit originally comprised A and C only, and that B (basic text) has been taken over from the talmudic sources by a subsequent redactor. This impression is confirmed by a Geniza fragment of Hekhalot Zutarti, where the material in A and B occurs in a different order.80

A/B1 R. Aqiba said:
A/B2 We four were going into pardes, and these are they [sic]: Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, ʾAheir [sic] and I, Aqiba.
A/B3 Ben Azzai looked and died. Ben Zoma looked and was stricken. ʾAheir looked and cut the shoots. I went up in peace and came down in peace.
A/B4 Why did I go up in peace and come down in peace?
A/B5 Not because I am greater than my fellows, but my deeds caused me to fulfill what was taught by the sages in the Mishnah: “Your deeds will bring you near and your deeds will keep you afar.”

C1 R. Aqiba said:
C2a When I went up to the heavenly height, I set down a sign in the entrances of לָקֶם, more than in the entrances of my house,
C2b and when I arrived behind the curtain, angels of destruction came and wanted to drive me away, until the Holy One, blessed be he, said to them: My sons, leave this elder alone, for he is worthy to behold my glory.
C2c Of him, scripture says: Draw me, we will run after you... .

The awkward transition from first to third person in A/B2 indicates that the names of the four have been added by a redactor who was familiar with the Babylonian Talmud, A3–5. Therefore A/B3 will originally have read “one... one... one... and I...” as in HZ/MR, A1b. The underlying text of the fragment is thus virtually identical with HZ/MR, A and C, save that C2b, “... and wanted to drive me away” is closer to the Babylonian Talmud, A55. The only other significant difference is that the fragment includes the application to Aqiba of Cant 1:4 (C2c), which in the HZ/MR version occurs only in the section derived from talmudic sources (B2e). Since C2c reverts to the third person, it is probable that the redactor of the fragment has also adopted this item from the talmudic versions.

A2a–b (= A/B4–5 of the fragment) is parallel to Cant. R., A41–49. The fact that Song of Songs Rabbah employs the first person only at this point suggests that the hekhalot version has priority as far as this item is concerned. Moreover, this explanation of Aqiba’s success is incompatible with the meaning of the talmudic versions (that he, unlike the others, was an ordained hakam). C2b corresponds to the Babylonian Talmud, A53–60 which, however, renders it in the third person. It cannot be a coincidence that God’s statement that Aqiba is “worthy to behold my glory (raʿay lēhiṣṭakkel bi-kēbod)” uses the language of m. Hag. 2.1 B–C. Here, too, the hekhalot version must have priority over the Babylonian Talmud, which changes lēhiṣṭakkel to lēhiṣṭammē.81

These observations suggest that the hekhalot writings have preserved a form of the pardes narrative that was quite different from that found in the talmudic sources, though B (basic text) has been added by a redactor who was familiar with a talmudic version. When this addition is discounted, it can be seen that the hekhalot version was originally a statement by or attributed to Aqiba that he and three unnamed individuals “went into pardes,” that the other three met with disaster, and that he alone went in/up and came out/down safely, despite the opposition of the angels, through the merit of his deeds. Since the other three were not identified, the meaning of the story cannot have been that they were not, like Aqiba, hakamim. Indeed, Aqiba refers to them as ḥabarim (A2b = A/B5, whence Song of Songs Rabbah, A41–50), a term which implies equality of status (“fellow”

81 Scholem (Major Trends, 358 n. 17) and Maier (Kultus, 145–46) have shown that the curious expression lēhiṣṭammēl bi-kēbodī (“to make use of my glory”) refers to theurgic pronunciation of the divine name, originally in the context of the temple cult. Nonetheless, lēhiṣṭakkel is likely to be the better reading, by reference to m. Hag. 2.1.
or "colleagues") and, possibly, comembership of a formal (perhaps esoteric) "fellowship" (ḥaburah).82

It appears, then, that there are two basic versions of the pardes story. One, the first-person account in the hekhhalot recensions, explains Aqiba's success as a consequence of his deeds and does not name the three who came to grief. In the second (talmudic) version, which is expressed in the third person, Aqiba's success is due to his being an ordained hakam and so the names of the three who were not hakamim convey the essential point of the story, which is an illustration of the merkabah restriction. There are two possible explanations of the relationship between these two versions.

First, if the talmudic version is held to have priority, the redactor of the original hekhhalot version must have failed to see the point of the talmudic story, excerpted from it the story of Aqiba, changed the narrative into the first person, dropped the other three names, the significance of which he did not understand and which were irrelevant to his main concern (Aqiba's heavenly ascent), added the motif of angelic opposition, and provided an alternative explanation of Aqiba's success. This version in turn influenced Song of Songs Rabbab (A43–49) and the Babylonian Talmud (A53–60). Later redactors of the hekhhalot version reinserted the names and the scriptural verses associated with them (B, basic text), which they derived from the talmudic versions, but did not convert this material from the third to the first person.

If, on the other hand, the original hekhhalot version is accorded priority, a much simpler reconstruction is possible. The original, first-person account did not give the names of the three who came to grief and explained that Aqiba succeeded, despite the opposition of the angels, through the merit of his deeds. The redactor of the earliest talmudic version (probably the Jerusalem Talmud, which omits A2–5) took this story, expressed it in the third person, and made it into an illustration of the merkabah restriction by adding the names of the three talmidei-hakamim. The hekhhalot version was subsequently expanded by the addition of details from the third-person talmudic version (HZ/IM, B, basic text).

The second reconstruction is so much the more economical that the conclusion that the hekhhalot version has priority seems inescapable. It follows, then, that an early redactor of the talmudic "Mystical Collection" made a preexistent story about Aqiba's ascent to the merkabah, in the face of angelic opposition, into an illustration of the merkabah restriction by identifying the three unnamed characters as talmidei-hakamim. It should be noted, however, that his source, which is preserved at HZ/IM, A and C, and in the Geniza fragment (though somewhat obscurely, must already have been among the traditions associated with the mishnah, the language of which it employs (ra'uy lēhistakkal bi-kkhodi, C2b). According to this source, the pardes is located "behind the paroged" (C2b), which can only mean: in the celestial Holy of Holies, where the glory of God resides.83 Thus, the source from which the talmudic versions are derived refers quite explicitly to both an ascent to the heavenly temple and the vision of the glory, and cannot have been understood in any other terms.

Once this is recognized, the details of the story fall into place. The alteration by some sources of "went in" to "went up," and "came out" to "came down" (A9–10; A41–42; HZ/IMR, B2e) may be less significant than Schafer supposed, since both pairs of expressions were used in the context of the temple. The disasters that befell the three other than Aqiba were evidently a consequence of their having "looked." The talmudic version makes it clear that the object at which Aqiba, alone of the four, was worthy to look was the divine glory in the Holy of Holies (C2b). Of those who were not found worthy, that one should have died hardly requires further explanation. Scripture itself associates the vision of God with extreme danger and the risk of death.84 The second was evidently injured in some way, which seems natural enough, even though the precise meaning is not quite clear. The geonic commentators understood that Ben Zoma was afflicted with madness,85 as does HZ(N) (B2b). In the talmudic version, it seems to be implied that both the death and the injury were inflicted by the "angels of destruction," who only desisted from attempting to injure (or destroy) Aqiba at God's command (HZ/IMR, C2b).86 It should be noted that

82 The word is used of those present at Nehuyn b. ha-Qanah's trance-ascent to the merkabah at Hekhalot Rabbati 14.3 (Schafer, Synopse, §203).

83 On the term paroged, which must mean here the curtain before the celestial Holy of Holies, corresponding to the veil (paroket) of the earthly temple, see Halperin, Merkabah, 169 n. 99. The same usage occurs at b. Hag. 13a in connection with Elisha b. Abuya's account to R. Meir of his condemnation by a bat-gol in the heavenly temple (y. Hag. 2.1 [77b] places this event in the earthly temple, and does not use the term paroged). According to MSS Vatican 134 and Munich 95 of the Babylonian Talmud, but not the printed edition, the word is also found, with the same meaning, in the story (on the same page) of Elisha's disastrous encounter with the angel Meiatron, whom he took to be a "second power." Elisha's statement to Meir must be a reference to this story. See further, P. S. Alexander, "3 Enoch and the Talmud," JSJ 18 (1987) 54–68; but compare C. R. A. Morray-Jones, "Hekhalot Literature and Talmudic Tradition: Alexander's Three Test Cases," JSJ 22 (1991) 17–36.

84 Exod 33:20; etc. On the mystical tradition in midrashic literature that the Israelites' experience at Sinai involved an "initiatory death" and transformation, see Chernin, Mysticism, 33–73; and Morray-Jones, "Transformational Mysticism," 23.

85 Rashi, Ha Gaon, and Hatanan (see nn. 49–51 above) all interpret the expression in this way.

86 Compare the angelic gatekeepers described at Hekhalot Rabbati 15.8 and 17.6 (Schafer, Synopse, §213 and §224; translated in Alexander, Textual Sources, 122–23 [following Wertheimer's chapter divisions: 17.8 and 19.6]). See further n. 17 above.
the expression mal‘akei-habbalah refers to a species of demonic angel,\textsuperscript{87} which implies that the protectors of the realm of the merkabah were regarded as such in the early tradition.\textsuperscript{88} The Babylonian Talmud’s alternative, “ministering angels” (A54), is deliberately “softer” and reflects a concern to guard against the possibility of association between the demonic principle and God.\textsuperscript{89} With regard to the fate of the third individual, the expression “cut the shoots” is evidently associated with the garden image. Although the meaning is not immediately apparent, it seems that some kind of sacrilege is intended.\textsuperscript{90}

The preexistent heavenly temple, found in several rabbinic sources\textsuperscript{91} and in Philo,\textsuperscript{92} is a central image of the apocalyptic-mystical tradition.\textsuperscript{93} T. Levi 3.4 states,

\textsuperscript{87}See, for example, b. Qidd. 72a.

The tradition of Solomon’s mastery over the demons, whom he compelled to assist him in the building of the temple (see the Testament of Solomon, for example), may reflect a similar conception. The construction of the temple, which embodies the order of the cosmos (see further below pp. 202–6), was regarded as a means of subduing the demonic and destructive powers of the primeval chaos waters, over which God is enthroned upon his merkabah. On this theme, see David Neiman, “The Supercaelian Sea,” JNES 28 (1969) 243–49; John Day, God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) esp. 18–21; Halperin, Faces, 227–49; Margaret Barker, The Gate of Heaven: The History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem (London: SPCK, 1991) 18–20, 62–67. Thus, it is not surprising that the mystic should be assaulted by demons of destruction when he attempts to enter the celestial sanctuary.

\textsuperscript{88}Halperin (Faces, 157–249) has shown this to be a recurring theme in the rabbinic treatment of the merkabah traditions. The substitution of “drive me away” (the Babylonian Talmud, A54; Geniza fragment, C2b for “do me violence” (HZ/MR, C2b) is similarly explained (see n. 79 above).

\textsuperscript{89}According to y. Hag. 77b–c and parallels (see n. 46 above), this means that Elisha killed young students of the Torah, or that he persuaded them to abandon their studies (in Song of Songs Rabbah), by “speaking a word” over them, which almost certainly means pronouncing a magic spell: compare HZ[N, B2c]. These explanations, however, are derived from an independent body of tradition concerning Elisha and tell us nothing about the meaning of the expression “cut the shoots” in the preeminent version of the parades story, which did not name Elisha.

\textsuperscript{90}See, for example, Gen. R. 69.7; Pesiqta’ Rabbati 20.4; Tanh. Nasso 19b; b. Sanh. 94b; Tg. Isa. 1:1–6; Tg. Ket. 1 Chr 21:15. Elsewhere, the temple is regarded as the source of the creation of the world: t. Yoma 4:6; b. Yoma 54b; Gen. R. 1.4; Tanh. QedaSim 10. See further, Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews (7 vols.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1911–38) 1. 12–13; Avigdor Apterwitzer, "Beit ha-Miqdal be’er Ma’alal ‘al pi ha’Aggashah," Tarbiz 2 (1931) 137–53 and 257–77 [Hebrew].


In the uppermost heaven of all dwells the Great Glory in the Holy of Holies superior to all holiness.\textsuperscript{94}

This source describes a cosmos of three, rather than seven heavens. The same model is implied by 1 Enoch 14.8–25, a text that is crucial for our understanding of this tradition.

\textsuperscript{8}And behold I saw the clouds: And they were calling me in a vision; and the fogs were calling me; and the course of the stars and the lightnings were rushing me and causing me to desire; and in the vision, the winds were causing me to fly and rushing me high up into heaven. 9And I kept coming (into heaven) until I approached a wall which was built of white marble and surrounded by tongues of fire; and it began to frighten me. 10And I came into the tongues of fire and drew near to a great house which was built of white marble, and the inner wall(s) were like mosaics of white marble, the floor of crystal, 11the ceiling like the path of the stars and lightnings between which (stood) fiery cherubim and their heaven of water, 12and flaming fire surrounded the wall(s), and its gates were burning with fire. 13And I entered into the house, which was hot like fire and cold like ice, and there was nothing inside it; (so) fear covered me and trembling seized me. 14And as I shook and trembled, I fell upon my face and saw a vision. 15And behold there was an opening before me (and) a second house which is greater than the former and everything was built with tongues of fire. 16And in every respect it excelled (the other)—in glory and great honor—to the extent that it is impossible for me to recount to you concerning its glory and greatness. 17As for its floor, it was of fire and above it was lightning and the path of the stars; and as for its ceiling, it was flaming fire. 18And I observed and saw inside it a lofty throne—its appearance was like crystal and its wheels like the shining sun; and (I heard?) the voice of the cherubim; 19and from beneath the throne were issuing streams of flaming fire. It was difficult to look at it. 20And the Great Glory was sitting upon it—as for his gown, which was shining more brightly than the sun, it was whiter than any snow. 21None of the angels was able to come in and see the face of the Excellent and the Glorious One; and no one of the flesh can see him— 22the flaming fire was round about him, and a great fire stood before him. No one could come near unto him from among those that surrounded the tens of millions (that stood) before him. 23He needed no council, but the most holy ones who are near him neither go far away at night nor move away from him. 24Until then I was prostrate on my face covered and trembling. And the Lord called me with his own mouth and said to me, “Come near to me, Enoch, and to my holy
Word." 22And he lifted me up and brought me near to the gate, but I (continued) to look down with my face.95

This is unmistakably a merkabah vision, and the terrifyingly dangerous nature of the vision of the glory is emphasized (1 Enoch 14.21–25). The circumspect nature of Enoch's "looking" (1 Enoch 14.25) is reminiscent of the parades story. "Tens of millions" of angelic guardians who prevent access to the presence are mentioned (1 Enoch 14.22), and only God's direct invitation persuades Enoch that he may enter safely (1 Enoch 14.24). The three-stage sequence of the ascent appears to be modeled on the Jerusalem sanctuary.96 The wall of white marble, which seems to correspond to the boundary of (the first) heaven (1 Enoch 14.9), is analogous to the wall surrounding the inner courts of the temple, or perhaps to the soreg (balustrade) beyond which no Gentile was allowed to pass.97 The two concentric houses (1 Enoch 14.10–17) correspond to the sanctuary and the Holy of Holies. These three stages of Enoch's visionary journey must correspond to the three celestial levels of the cosmology of the early sections of 1 Enoch, in the third and highest of which is also found the "paradise of righteousness" or, in Aramaic, the parades qatats.98

This correspondence between the Garden of Eden, which is also the future paradise of the righteous, and the heavenly sanctuary is confirmed by Jub. 3.9–13, 8.19, and 2 Bar. 4.2–7. Questions of Ezra 1.19–21 places the throne of glory "opposite the garden" in the seventh heaven. A few late midrashim describe the garden of paradise as a succession of seven halls or chambers, of gold, silver, and precious stones, to which the various classes of the righteous are allocated.99 One source has only three chambers.100

95E. Isaac, trans., "1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of Enoch)," OTP 1. 20–21.
96See further, Maier, Kultur, 127.
97m. Mid. 2.3: b. Yoma 16a: Josephus Bell. 5.193.
100Ma’aléh bê-Rabbi Joshua ben Levi in Moses Gaster, "The Sefer ha-Ma’asîyot," appendix to Judith "Monefiore" College Reports for the Years 1894–5 and 1895–6 (Ramat-ga‘ układ: Judith "Monefiore" College, 1896) 96–97 [Hebrew]. This is an extended version of the story of how Joshua b. Levi was permitted to enter paradise during his lifetime in the company of the angel of death, also found at b. Ketub. 77b. A longer, and probably later, version of

The division of the righteous in the world to come into seven hierarchical classes is found in several midrashic sources,101 at y. Hag. 77a, and at 4 Ezra 7.92–98, where the seventh class is said to behold the vision of God. A threefold division is also recorded.102 In these sources, then, the traditions of the Garden of Eden or paradise, the celestial levels, the heavenly temple, and the hekaîlot are intertwined; and the common factor is the idea of a holy place in which God’s glory may be seen.103 The three-level cosmology is almost certainly older than the more elaborate seven-level version.104 The two models appear to correspond to the hierarchical structure of the temple in the following way:105

The Sevenfold Model

1. Within the soreg
2. The Court of Women
3. The Court of Israel
4. The Court of Priests
5. Beyond the altar
6. The sanctuary building
7. The Holy of Holies

The Threefold Model

1. Within the soreg [or: the wall around the inner temple]
2. The sanctuary building
3. The Holy of Holies

story in Jellinek (Bet ha-Midrasch, 2. 48–51) has seven houses. See further Ginzberg, Leg-
 ends 5. 31–32. On the importance of Joshua b. Levi in the merkabah tradition, see Cherru-
 b, Mysticism, 35–43; and Halperin, Faces, 253–57, 309–13, and 345–46.
101See, for example, Lev. R. 30.2; Midrash Tehilim Ps 11.6. See further, Ginzberg, Leg-
 ends, 1. 11, 21; 4. 118; and 5.30–33; Goldberg, "Rabbah Yohannan"s Traum: Der Sinai in der frühen Merkavamystik," Frankfurter judaistische Beiträge 3 (1975) 1–27, esp. 11–13.
102ARN(b) 43. Seder Gan-Eden has seven classes of the righteous but three walls around the Garden.
103Compare the merkabah vision in paradise in Adam and Eve 25–29. Another common feature linking the inner sanctuary with the Garden of Eden is that both are guarded by cherubim (see Tanh. Bërêšît 1.25), as of course are the hekaîlot.
104The sevenfold model is most commonly found in rabbinic sources, for example, Lev. R. 29.11; ARN(a) 37; Pesiqta Rabbati 20.4; and Midrash ha-Gadol on the Pentateuch: Exodus (Jerusalem: Qad. 1956) 108–9. A few sources record, in addition, alternative traditions that enumerate two or three heavens: for example, b. Hag. 12b; Midrash Tehilim Ps 114.2; and Deut. R. 2.32 (to 6.4), though the parallel text published by Lieberman, Debarim Rabbah. Edited for the First Time from the Oxford ms. No. 147 (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1940) 65, has seven only. See further, Young, "The Ascension Motif," 89–91.
105The following analysis of the sevenfold structure of the temple is based on m. Kelim 15.6–9, which lists ten areas of increasing holiness in Jerusalem, the first three of which are outside the temple. In this source, differing opinions are expressed about the precise divisions between the levels, and so the following model, based on the opinion of R. Jose, is provisional only (compare Neher, "Voyage Mystique," 73–76). The idea that there were seven levels of holiness within the temple, however, seems to have been generally recognized.

The threefold model is based on 1 Enoch 14, discussed above. On the association
The image of the temple as a garden can be further explained by reference to the descriptions of Solomon’s temple found in the Bible, which state that the inner walls of the sanctuary were covered with carvings of gourds, flowers, and palm trees, all overlaid with gold. Rabbinic traditions about this “gold of parwayim” (2 Chronicles 6) associate it with the Garden of Eden, from which it was said to come, and say that the trees made from this gold bore golden fruit. These traditions are also preserved in the medieval treatise Massekhet Kelim, which states that the temple contained seventy-seven tables of gold, and their gold was from the walls of Eden which had been revealed to Solomon. . . . and trees of gold of parwayim which used to bear fruit, six hundred and sixty-six myriads of talents of pure gold which came from beneath the tree of life in the holy garden. (Massekhet Kelim 5, 7)

Much earlier, in the Genesis Apocryphon from Qumran, parwayim is evidently a term for paradise. It appears, then, that the interior of the sanctuary was both a replica of its celestial counterpart and an image of the primordial and future paradise, with which the heavenly temple was closely connected if not identified.

between the sevenfold structure of the temple, the seven days of creation, and the enthronement of the kabod, see Levenson, “The Temple and the World,” 288–93. On the sevenfold structure of the heavenly temple in the liturgical cycle at Qumran, see Newson, Songs.


103 Num. R. 11:3; Cant. R. 4.17 (= 3.10.3).


106 On the correspondence between the earthly and heavenly temples see y. Ber. 4.6 (8c) = Cant. R. 4.11 (= 4.4.9); Midrash Téhillim Ps 30:1; Tanh. wa-Yeqhel 7. See further Aptowitz, “Beit ha-Miqdal Shel Malaḥ,” 106–107; William David Davies, The Gospel and the Land (Berkely/London: University of California Press, 1974) 131–54; and, especially, Barker, The Gate of Heaven.

107 On the antiquity of this theme, see Levenson, “The Temple and the World,” 297–98; Margaret Barker, The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity (London: SPCK, 1987) 127 and 233–45; and idem, The Gate of Heaven, 57–103. A different, but closely related image is that of the tower in the vineyard (Isa 5:1–7). Jörg Baumgarten (“QS500 and the Ancient Conception of the Lord’s Vineyard,” JJS 40 [1989] 1–60) has shown that this was identified with the heavenly temple in paradise as early as Qumran. At Mark 12:1–11 and parallels, the citation of Ps 118:22–23 is strongly suggestive of the temple/paradise association; consider the context in which these two verses occur (Ps 118:19–29).

108 Note that this interpretation does not apply to the parable in the Jerusalem Talmud which occurs in a different context and has a completely different meaning.

109 Maier, “Geführdungsmotiv,” 26–27. For alternative interpretations, see Halperin, Merkabah, 94–97, and Rowland, The Open Heaven, 316.

110 See Halperin, Merkabah, 105.

111 Schäfer (Der verborgene und offenbare Gott, 68–69 and 112) has shown that the opening paragraphs of Hekhalot Zaqari, immediately preceding the story of the four, contain several echoes of m. Hag. 2.1. He further states that the story appears to be a “foreign body” within Merkabah Rabba and that, as a redactional unit, it is “much more securely anchored” in Hekhalot Zaqari. In the light of these observations, it seems not at all improbable that the context within which the story came to be associated with the mishnah was an early version of temple
ative possible estimate would therefore date the composition of the story to the early third century, and there is no reason to assume that the attribution to Aqiba (late first and early second century) in the original first-person version is inaccurate. Aqiba was strongly devoted to the Song of Songs, which was associated in the mystical tradition (especially the Sêurr qomah) with the vision of the body of the kabod. This text provides ample grounds for the idea that this vision occurs in a garden, and the term pardes may well be derived from Cant 4:13 (pardes nimmonim). At m. Yad. 3.5, Aqiba compares the Song of Songs to the Holy of Holies:

R. Aqiba said: "God forbid! No man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs, that it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel—for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."

Thus, the accuracy of the hekhalot sources' attribution of the pardes narrative to Aqiba, though not proven, is by no means inherently unlikely. It may even be the case that a preexistent unit of tradition, which was already associated with the merkabah restriction (itself of prerabbinic origin), was either appropriated by Aqiba or subsequently attributed to him. Whoever the original author of the unit may have been, he evidently used the word pardes as a technical term for the Holy of Holies in the highest heaven, where God appears in his glory upon the merkabah. He evidently expected his readers to understand this usage, which was deeply rooted in the prerabbinic and pre-Christian tradition of the visionary ascent.

Part two of this article will explore the relevance of this material for our understanding of Paul's ascent into paradise (2 Corinthians 12), the extraordinary claim that he based upon it, and the epochal significance of this mysterious event.

117This possibility raises a question mark over the assumption that "no authentic texts have been recovered in which the sages involved describe their own experiences" (Young, "The Ascension Motif," 83, who expresses a widespread view).
Tosefta

A1

Four men went into pardes:

A3

A4 Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma,

A5 'Aher and R. Aqiba.*

A6 One looked and died;
A7 one looked and was stricken;
A8 one looked and cut the shoots;
A9 one went up in peace
A10 and came down in peace.*

A11

A12

A13

A14

A15

A16

A17

A18

A19

A20 Ben Azzai* looked and died.

A21 Of him, scripture says:
A22 "Precious in the eyes of the LORD
A23 is the death of his saints."*d

A24 Ben Zoma* looked and was stricken.

A25 Of him, scripture says:
A26 "Have you found honey?
A27 Eat what is enough for you..."*d

A28
A29

Jerusalem Talmud

Four men went into pardes:

One looked and died;
one looked and was stricken;
one looked and cut the shoots;
one went in peace
and came out in peace.

Babylonian Talmud

Our rabbis taught:

Four men went into pardes
and these are they:
Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma,
'Aher, and R. Aqiba.

R. Aqiba said to them:*d
When you approachd
the pure marble stones/
do not say
"Water! Water!"
—according to what is written:
"The speaker of lies
shall not endure
before my sight."*d

Ben Azzai looked and died.!

Of him, scripture says:
"Precious in the eyes of the LORD
is the death of his saints."*d

Ben Zoma looked and was stricken,
and of him it is said:
"Have you found honey?
Eat what is enough for you..."*e

Ben Zoma looked and died, A24

Song of Songs Rabbah

We read in a mishnah: A1

Four men went into pardes: A2

Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma A4

'Aher and R. Aqiba A5

A6
A7
A8
A9
A10
A11
A12
A13
A14
A15
A16
A17
A18
A19
A20
A21
A22
A23
A24
A25
A26
A27
A28
A29
A30
A31

A32 Elisha looked and cut the shoots.

'Aher cut the shoots.

Who is 'Aher?
Elisha ben Abuyah, who used to kill the masters of Torah.

[Additional material about Elisha]

A33
A34
A35

A36 Of him, scripture says:
A37 "Do not let your mouth lead your flesh into sin..." etc.
A38 —that he ruined the work of his own hands.

[Additional material about Elisha]

A39
A40

A41 R. Aqiba went up in peace and came down in peace.

R. Aqiba went in in peace and came out in peace.

[Additional material about Elisha]

A42
A43
A44
A45
A46
A47
A48

A49

A50 Of him, scripture says:
A51 "Draw me, we will run after you..."

Of him, scripture says:
"Draw me, we will run after you..."

A52
A53
A54
A55
A56
A57
A58
A59
A60

Babylonian Talmud

Aher cut the shoots.
Rabbi Aqiba came out in peace

[Additional material about B. Zoma]

A32
A33
A34
A35

A36
A37
A38
A39
A40

Song of Songs Rabbah

R. Aqiba went in in peace and came out in peace,
and he said,
Not because I am greater than my fellows,
but thus taught the sages in a mishnah:
"Your deeds will bring you near
and your deeds will keep you far."

—and of him it is said:
"...The king has brought me into his chambers."

Even R. Aqiba —the ministering angels wanted to drive him away.
The Holy One, blessed be he, said to them:
Leave this elder alone,
for he is worthy
to make use of my glory.
B1 They employed a parable:
B2 To what may the matter be compared?
B3 To the garden of a king
B4 with an upper chamber
B5 built above it.
B6 What should a man do?
B7 Look,*
B8 only let him not
B9 feed his eyes on it.

C1 They employed another parable:dd
C2 To what may the matter be compared?
C3 To a highwayf
C4 which passes between
C5 two roads,ff
C6 one of fire and one of snow.
C7 He who turns aside this way
C8 is scorched by the fire.ffffff
C9 He who turns aside that way
C10 is scorched by the snow.ii
C11 What should a man do?
C12 Let him walk in the middle
C13 —only let him not turn aside,
C14 neither this way nor that way.ii
C15
C16
C17

Jerusalem Talmud

[Additional material about Elisha]

... to the garden of a king
with an upper chamber
built above it.

One may look,
but not
damage (it).b

This teaching is like

two paths,
one of fire and one of snow.
He who turns to this side
dies in the fire.
He who turns to that side
dies in the snow.
What should one do?
One should walk in the middle.

Babylonian Talmud

[Additional material about Aqiba]

Abot de-Rabbi Natan (a)hh

They employed a parable:
To what may the matter be compared?

To a courtyardff
which passes between
two roads,ff
one of fire and one of snow.
If one walks on the side of the fire,
lo, one is scorched by the fire;hh
but if one walks on the side of the snow,
lo, one is stricken by the cold.ii
What should one do?
Let him walk between the two of them
and take care of himself,
lest he be scorched by the fire
or stricken by the cold.

B1
B2
B3
B4
B5
B6
B7
B8
B9

C1
C2
C3
C4
C5
C6
C7
C8
C9
C10
C11
C12
C13
C14
C15
C16
C17


Tosefta, MS London, omits A4–A5.

Tosefta, MS Erfurt, omits A6–A10.

Tosefta, MS London: "Ben Zoma."

Ps 116:15.

Prov 25:16.

Tosefta, MS London: "Ben Azizai."

Tosefta, MS London, completes the verse, as in the Babylonian Talmud.

The Babylonian Talmud, MS Vatican 134, adds: "to the sages"; MS Oxford adds: "to his disciples."

The Babylonian Talmud, MS Vatican 171 and London: "Beware! When..."

The Babylonian Talmud, MS Vatican 134, omits "pure."

Ps 101:7.

The Babylonian Talmud, MS Vatican 171: "and was cut off."

Tosefta, MS Erfurt: "Aber."

Qoh 5:5. The verse continues: "... and say not before the angel (LXX: τούτον τούτον) that it is an error. Why should God become angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?"

Allusion to Qoh 5:5 (see the previous note).

Tosefta, MS Erfurt: "... went in... and came out..."

Cant 1:4a.

The Babylonian Talmud, MS Göttingen: "... went in... and came out..."

Halperin reports (Merkabah, 78 n. 41) that a text of Song of Songs Rabbah cited by R. Martini (Paglio Fidei [Leipzig: n.p., 1687] 320) has: "... went up... and came down..."

Song of Songs Rabbah (edition): מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה. Martin's citation (see the previous note) omits מְרוֹפֵּה. MS Vatican 76,3 supports the edition. MS Munich 50,2 reads: מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה. Parallels in Hekhalot Zawiya tend to support the inclusion of מְרוֹפֵּה. See Halperin, Merkbah, 78 n. 42.

m. Ed. 5.7.

Cant 1:4b.

Tosefta, MS Vienna, omits: "They employed."

Halperin (Merkabah, 67, 73, 93, etc.) translates מְרוֹפֵּה as "balcony," but this is conjectural. See further above, p. 207.

Tosefta, MS Erfurt: "Only look."


The bekhelot parallels read מִרְאוֹת מְרוֹפֵּה ("to behold") for מְרוֹפֵּה. See further above, p. 199 n. 81.

Tosefta, MS Erfurt: "Another saying—they employed a parable."

זֶרֶם מְרוֹפֵּה.

Tosefta, MS Vienna: מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה; Tosefta, MS London: מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה; Tosefta, MS Erfurt: מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה; ARN(a): מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה, which could mean either (as translated above) "a courtyard" or "a military troop" (these are two different words with the same spelling). Jacob Neusner (trans., The Tosefta [6 vols.; New York: Ktav, 1977–86] 2. 313) evidentially adopts the ARN(a) reading and renders: "platoon."

Tosefta (all MSS) and ARN(a): מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה; the Jerusalem Talmud: מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה.

Tosefta, MS Vienna, reads מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה; "is exalted (perhaps: "exceeds") in the fire." However, Lieberman follows the other MSS and the printed edition, which give מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה, as does ARN(a).

Tosefta: as previous note, save that MS London omits the word completely here. ARN(a): מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה מְרוֹפֵּה.

Tosefta, MS Erfurt: "... and let him not turn aside, this way or that way."

The context in which this parable appears in 'Aboi de-Rabbi Natan (a) is indicated by the immediately preceding passage, which reads, "Rabbi Judah ben Ilai says: Everyone who makes words of Torah primary and worldly affairs secondary will be made primary in the world to come. (He who makes) worldly affairs primary and words of Torah secondary will be made secondary in the world to come."