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MYSTICISM AND THE POETIC-LITURGICAL COMPOSITIONS FROM QUMRAN
A Response to Bilhah Nitzan

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In spite of the fact that the academic study of Jewish mysticism has proliferated in this century, indeed represents one of the fastest growing subdisciplines of Jewish studies on the university scene, the fact is that there still is no satisfactory definition of the term. As is well known, Gershom Scholem, the scholar most responsible for the legitimacy and credibility accorded Jewish mysticism in the world of the academy, never attempted to provide a general definition of this phenomenon (if one can properly speak of a singular phenomenon at all) and thus left open the question of what is the common thread that links together the different systems of thought that he grouped together under the rubric of the major trends in Jewish mysticism. No scholar to date has attempted to provide a definition of Jewish mysticism that is both comprehensive and exclusive; we continue to use the term mysticism to refer to the personalities and texts discussed by Scholem without clarifying the use of this terminology. The situation is no more satisfactory with respect to the term "mysticism" in general. A growing consensus has emerged in the last several decades that one should speak only of mysticism in a particular religious context, but there is little agreement regarding the precise nature of the phenomenon that is manifest in the various socio-cultural settings. Definitions of key terms in the history of religions, such as mysticism, messianism, apocalypticism, gnosticism, magic, and so on, are notoriously difficult to determine with any precision. What a scholar can best hope for is a measure of internal consistency, i.e., one must determine how one is using a given term with respect to the limited corpus of material that one has isolated for study.

In my comments on Bilhah Nitzan's paper, "Harmonic and Mystical Characteristics in Poetic and Liturgical Writings from Qumran," I shall focus on the relationship of the word "mystical" and the word "Qumran." That is, in what particular sense is the author using the term "mystical" and how is it appropriate to the body of

writings that represent the sectarian community at Qumran? For the purposes of this response, I am accepting Nitzan's view that the texts she has discussed represent material derived from the community itself and not simply literary sources that were found in the caves of Qumran.

The task of responding to this paper has afforded me the opportunity to raise a larger methodological issue: Do the Qumran sources, together with the more or less contemporary apocalyptic texts to which they are somehow related, provide the scholar with a typology of mystical experience that informs a variety of later trends of Jewish mysticism? Does the spiritual mentality underlying the relevant Qumran and apocalyptic sources offer an alternative to the experience of *unio mystica* that has dominated scholarly examinations of the phenomenon of mysticism in both Western and Eastern religions?[1] In the final analysis, the emphasis on mystical union so frequently invoked by scholars as the *sine qua non* of mysticism represents a tendency rooted in Neoplatonic ontology and epistemology: contemplation of God results in a form of union whereby the soul separates from the body and returns to its ontological source in the One. Insofar as the One is beyond intellect and being, the return to the One is depicted in figurative terms as a mystical merging of the soul in the Godhead. The Jewish sources, beginning with the apocalyptic and Qumran texts, may provide a different model based not on *henosis*, but rather on the "angelification" of the human being who crosses the boundary of space and time and becomes part of the heavenly realm, a motif that likely has its roots in ancient Near Eastern and Mesopotamian mythology.[2] The mystical experience in this framework involves as well a closing of the gap separating human and divine, not, however, by the return of the soul to the One, but rather by the ascension of the human into the heavens. This ascension occasions two experiences that must be viewed as phenomenologically distinct: participation in the angelic liturgy that is accomplished in a standing posture and enthronement in the celestial realm. The latter rep-

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[1] For a recent representative study, see N. Pike, *Mystical Union: An Essay in the Phenomenology of Mysticism* (Ithaca, 1992).

[2] On the transformation of human beings into angels in apocalyptic literature, see the recent analysis in M. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York and Oxford, 1993), pp. 47–71.

resents the fullest expression of the mystical experience, an eschatological ideal of deification that may be realized in this world through the exercise of proper techniques. In my opinion, the word "mysticism" should be used only when there is evidence for specific practices that lead to an experience of ontic transformation, i.e., becoming divine or angelic. Accordingly, it is inappropriate to apply the word "mystical" to the unison or harmony of human and angel if there is no technique or praxis that facilitates the idealization of a human being into a divine or angelic being in the celestial abode.

I should like to determine in the first instance precisely what Nitzan intended by the word "mystical" in her paper. According to Nitzan, in Qumran poetry one finds clear statements concerning the religious experience of spiritualized communion between human beings and the celestial entourage. Such a religious experience, which is characterized by the desire of the pious to bridge the existential distance between human and divine, is considered mystical. In the author's own words: "In cutting themselves off from worship in the earthly temple . . . and in considering themselves to be like pure priests, they claimed that their praise of God resembles that of the angels and is in unison with them. This manner of approaching God may indeed be considered mystic" (p. 165). For Nitzan, therefore, the mystical dimension in the poetical and liturgical writings from Qumran, which she has isolated for discussion, involves the harmony of communion of human beings and angels expressed in terms of the participation of individuals or the community at large in the angelic choir, which utters hymns and praises before God in the heavenly temple.[3] Thus, in a second passage the "mystical approach" is described as including two aspects—the celestial approach and the communionist approach. The former involves the elevation of the praises and prayers uttered by the celestial entourage above those recited by earthly beings (p. 166). The latter "acknowledges the possibility that those human beings who are righteous and free of transgression (in other words, people who are cut off from the sinful nature of human beings) may recite praises in company with the angels, and thus attain a spiritual experience of communion with the celestial entourage"

[3] The same point is made in B. Nitzan, "Biblical Influence in Qumran: Prayer and Religious Poetry [Hebrew]" (Ph.D. diss., Tel-Aviv University, 1989), p. 293.

(p. 167). The inclusion of these two aspects under the rubric of "mystical approach" is somewhat puzzling insofar as it is clearly only the second that has any direct bearing on the question of mystical experience. Indeed, the so-called "celestial approach" is completely irrelevant to the question of mysticism as it has been understood by historians of religion. To be sure, the status of angelic worship is relevant to the study of mysticism, but this is so only when such a matter is related more directly to questions pertaining to the religious experience of an individual or community. In terms of Nitzan's own classification, this is the second aspect of the mystical approach. In my opinion, therefore, it would have been more appropriate to collapse the two aspects of the mystical approach into one, which essentially involves the participation of human beings in the angelic liturgy and the ontic transformation implied by the participation. The mystical experience entails the "experience of harmony of communion between the chosen earthly and heavenly worshippers" that is "reached through hymns recited by his pure and perfect worshippers" (p. 168).[4]

This motif, as Nitzan notes, is expressed as well in apocalyptic literature and later Hekhalot texts. Focusing especially on the cosmological blessings in 4QBerakhot, Nitzan finds support for her contention insofar as these liturgical hymns and praises are based on the assumption that "all of the created beings in the heavenly and earthly realms are unified and harmonized in blessing God" (p. 174). This harmony is reflected syntactically, philologically, and structurally in the blessings preserved in 4QB^{a} (4Q286) and 4QB^{b} (4Q287). This idea of harmony of the heavenly and earthly worshipper, angels, and righteous members of the sect, provides the conceptual justification for the use of the word "mystical" in this study. Hence, interpreting a passage in 4QB^{a} 7 i 2–7, which asserts that the chosen people, or those who know eternal things, and the

[4] In the original draft of her study Nitzan explicitly used the expression "mystical experience of communion" in conjunction with the phenomenon of angels and humans worshipping in harmony. In the revised version she has deleted the phrase "mystical experience" in an apparent attempt to avoid problems of taxonomy, which I raised in my oral response to her paper at the Qumran conference delivered on May 11, 1993. In spite of her effort to circumvent the problem of definition by eliminating these words, the fact is that she continues in the final draft of the study to identify this experience of harmony and communion as mystical. My original criticism therefore still stands. See following note.

angels of purity, who have knowledge of the appointed times (*qiṣṣe mo^{c}ed*) in which to utter true blessings (*berakhot ^{2}emet*), in unison bless the glorious name in all the heavens of God's kingdom, Nitzan states that "the text of 4QBerakhot reaches a mystical height in its climax" (p. 176). She concludes that the status of the chosen heavenly and earthly creatures is to be considered mystical in two respects: in their superiority over all other worshippers and in their communion (ibid.).[5] Here too one wonders about the appropriateness of this distinction, for the first criterion in and of itself can hardly be considered an indicator of mystical experience in isolation from the second. That is, the superiority of the worshipper in this case is totally dependent on the phenomenon of communion, and it is the latter that justifies the use of the term "mystical" for Nitzan. The parallel description of the heavenly and earthly worshippers suggests a communion of human and angel that bridges the ontological distance between the two realms. The overcoming of this chasm through harmonistic prayer is considered by Nitzan the distinguishing feature of the mystical element in Qumran liturgical poetry.

The same understanding of the term "mystical" is proposed by Nitzan for the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice whose relationship to 4QBerakhot on linguistic and thematic grounds was already noted by John Strugnell and subsequently by other scholars, especially Carol Newsom. Previous scholarship has well noted the influence of merkavah speculation on these hymns that describe in detail the liturgy of the different angelic classes, from the lowest group to the angelic high priesthood, as well as the structure of the heavenly temple, from its outer features to the holy of holies wherein was lodged the divine chariot. Nitzan follows the line of research first suggested by Gershom Scholem and elaborated upon by Lawrence Schiffman and other scholars, that the *shirot ^{c}olat shabbat* have deep affinities with the merkavah images derived exegetically from Ezekiel 1 and 10 and the liturgical hymns employed in later Hekhalot

[5] In the original draft Nitzan employed both the expressions "mystical experience" and "mystical communion" to refer to the experience of harmony between angelic and human worshippers related in 4QB^{a}7 1 2–7. Although she has eliminated these more definitive phrases in the revised version of her study, it is evident that she has not altered her view in any substantial way. That is, she continues to use the term "mystical" to describe this experience of harmony. See previous note.

literature.[6] Acknowledging the striking absence of the recitation of the Qedushah of Isaiah 6:3 in the Sabbath Songs, Nitzan nevertheless concludes that "the descriptions of the heavenly sanctuaries, the chariots, the Throne of Glory, and the angelic hosts may be considered mystical," for they are "described in sublime and numinous wording and style, related mostly to the merkavah vision of Ezekiel, thereby reflecting the mysterious exalted atmosphere of the heavenly kingdom of God" (p. 178). Nitzan provides as an example several phrases from the song of the twelfth Sabbath that describes the cherubim and other elements of the chariot realm, obviously based on Ezekiel's visionary account. Deflecting the potential criticism that these hymns do not relate a mystical vision per se but are merely descriptions of the angelic liturgy based on the language of Ezekiel, Nitzan observes that "a serene and sublime atmosphere is created by such numinous terms and style" (p. 178). Even in the absence of a specific praxis to achieve a visionary ascent, Nitzan is prepared to consider the interpretation of Ezekiel's chariot vision as mystical to the extent that it creates an other-worldly atmosphere.

Underlying this comment is the perspective on the mystical character of the Hekhalot texts enunciated by Scholem who borrowed the term "numinous" from Rudolph Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* to characterize the Hekhalot hymns.[7] By using the word "numinous" to describe the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, Nitzan implies that

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[6] G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1965), p. 128; idem, "Judaism and Gnosticism" [Hebrew] in *Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance*, vol. 2, ed. A. Shapira (Tel-Aviv, 1989), pp. 177–178 (L. H. Schiffman, "Merkavah Speculation at Qumran: The 4Q Serekh Shirot 'Olat ha-Shabbat," in *Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altmann*, ed. J. Reinharz and D. Swetschinski, with the collaboration of K. P. Bland (Durham, 1982), pp. 15–47; idem, "Hekhalot Mysticism and the Qumran Literature" [Hebrew], in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6, 1–2 (1987): 121–138; C. Newsom, "Exegesis in the Qumran Sabbath Shirot," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38 (1987): 11–30; D. J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Tübingen, 1988), pp. 49–55. Mention should also be made of the study by J. M. Baumgarten, "The Qumran Sabbath Shirot and the Rabbinic Merkabah Traditions," *RQ* 13 (1988): 199–213; and D. Dimant and J. Strugnell, "The Merkabah Vision in *Second Ezekiel* (4Q385 4)," *RQ* 13 (1988): 331–348.

[7] See *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1954), p. 57; *Jewish Gnosticism*, p. 21. Nitzan (p. 23, n. 5) refers to the latter source, and in that context she also mentions explicitly Otto's work. Nitzan also refers to Otto in the third footnote of her study.

they too attempt to reproduce in language the *mysterium tremendum* that surrounds the glory of God and hence presuppose the mystical experience of ascent even if it is not specified explicitly. Nitzan also considers the possibility that the use of particular numerical structures and sequences—what she calls "typological numbers"—could be seen as mystical and magical. That is, the liturgical repetition of typological numbers, especially the number seven, can be viewed as the means that elevate the spiritualized admiration and exaltation of God through the heavenly kingdom. Nitzan refers to this act alternatively as mystical or magical, without really providing an adequate definition of either term. In the final analysis, according to Nitzan, the Sabbath Songs should be considered "as a medium for creating an experience of mystic communion between the earthly and the heavenly worshippers" (p. 183). The "mystical experience" of harmony and communion between the earthly and heavenly kingdoms of God is reached either through the liturgical compositions such as 4QBerakhot or the angelic liturgy of the *shirot ʿolat shabbat*.

The theoretical model for Nitzan is the description of the mystical experience offered by Scholem in the opening pages of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. It will be recalled that the mystical experience, according to Scholem, involves a direct and intimate consciousness of the divine Presence that, in the most extreme cases, eventuates in union with God. Despite his typological classification of mysticism as the romantic restoration of the broken unity of mythic consciousness, Scholem expressed doubt regarding the place of mystical union in the various historical manifestations of Jewish mysticism. The logical implication of this is that from Scholem's own standpoint the vast majority of Jewish mystical sources fall somewhat short of the ideal that he himself set up, which involves unitive experience. The point is particularly relevant with respect to Hekhalot mysticism, which after all has served as the model for all those who would employ the word "mystical" to characterize the blessings and hymns in the Qumran fragments. The mystical aspect of Hekhalot literature, according to Scholem, involves the "ascent of the soul to the celestial throne where it obtains an ecstatic view of the majesty of God and the secrets of His realm."[8] Scholem placed the visionary ascent at the center of the

[8] *Major Trends*, p. 5.

Hekhalot literature, viewing it as the most essential and primary element in this corpus. For the present purposes we may bracket the critique of Scholem's position by several scholars, including, most importantly, Peter Schäfer and David Halperin, who have challenged what they contend is Scholem's privileging of the mystical-visionary over the magical-adjuratory component. What is critical to stress here is that Scholem refers to this corpus by two names: "merkavah mysticism" and "Jewish gnosticism." Scholem's contention that the merkavah visionaries cultivated a "rabbinical gnosticism," i.e., a "form of Jewish Gnosticism which tried to remain true to the Halakhic tradition,"[9] is based on his understanding of gnosticism as a "religious movement that proclaimed a mystical esotericism for the elect based on illumination and the acquisition of a higher knowledge of things heavenly and divine."[10] That is to say, therefore, that the term "gnosticism" denotes for Scholem knowledge of a supranatural illuminative character. Similarly, the appropriateness of the term "mystical" relates specifically to the visionary encounter between man and God. Hence, according to Scholem, in some fundamental sense the terms "gnosticism" and "mysticism" as they relate to the Hekhalot literature bear the same connotation. The experiential (and decidedly visual) underpinning of the esoteric knowledge bestowed upon the *yorde merkavah* no doubt explains Scholem's referring to Hekhalot material as a Jewish gnosis or a Jewish concomitant to Gnosticism.[11]

The ecstatic vision of the glory functionally replaces the ideal of union as the peak mystical experience. Scholem thus emphasized that in the Hekhalot texts there is no experience of *unio mystica* whereby the ontological gap separating human and divine is overcome.[12] It is certainly the case that in the Hekhalot sources there is no union of man and God in the way that Scholem described it. However, as I noted above, this typology of unitive experience has

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[9] Ibid., p. 65.

[10] *Jewish Gnosticism*, p. 1.

[11] Cf. "Judaism and Gnosticism," p. 181. In that context Scholem draws three major parallels between the Hekhalot texts and gnostic sources, to wit, the pleroma, the visionary ascent, and the magical practices necessary for the ascent to the pleroma. It is evident, therefore, that the visionary experience is seen as central in both merkavah mysticism and Gnosticism. Scholem equates the expressions "Jewish gnosticism," "Jewish esotericism," and "mysticism of the *yorde merkavah*."

[12] See *Major Trends*, pp. 55–56.

its intellectual roots in Neoplatonism, which is completely irrelevant to the corpus of Hekhalot mysticism. If one applies the Neoplatonic idea of union to the Hekhalot, it is obvious that one will not succeed in finding any passage to confirm such an ideal. I submit, however, that there is another model of mystical experience that is germane to Jewish and later Christian apocalyptic as well as the Hekhalot sources, a model that from its own vantage point involves the narrowing of the gap between human and divine. The model to which I refer is that of the ascension to heaven and transformation into an angelic being who occupies a throne alongside the throne of glory. The apocalyptic tradition of the ideal human becoming an angel reaches its logical conclusion in 3 Enoch where the prototype of the merkavah mystic, Enoch, is transformed into Metatron, the vice-regent of God who sits upon a throne adjacent to God. The mystical experience expressed in the Hekhalot, which of course varies widely from one textual unit to another (or what Schäfer calls macroforms that are made up of smaller tradition-complexes called microforms), involves ascension and enthronement. In a separate study I have argued that in the three major textual units in the Hekhalot corpus that describe the visionary ascent, Hekhalot Rabbati, Hekhalot Zuṭarti, and the genizah fragment called by the scribe Ḥotam ha-Merkavah and by scholars the Ozhayah text, a critical part of the ascent experience is the enthronement of the *yored merkavah*, either on the chariot itself or on a throne alongside the throne of glory. Despite the slight differences in detail between these three literary witnesses, there is a common core to the experience as it is related textually: the heavenly ascent culminates in the enthronement of the mystic that transforms him into an angelic being, a transformation that facilitates his vision of the glory and the hypostatic powers of God that are active before the throne.[13] The extent to which this aspect of the mystical experience was neglected by Scholem can be guaged from the following comment that comes right after his statement that the gap separating man and God is not bridged or blurred in the experience of the merkavah mystic related in the Hekhalot literature: "The mystic who in his ecstasy has passed through all the

[13] E. R. Wolfson, "*Yeridah la-Merkavah*: Typology of Ecstasy and Enthronement in Ancient Jewish Mysticism," in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics and Typologies*, ed. R. A. Herrera (New York, 1993), pp. 13–44.

gates, braved all the dangers, now stands before the throne; he sees and hears—but that is all."[14] Well not exactly; Scholem has forgotten one small item: according to the major texts in this corpus that describe the ascent, the mystic is said to be seated in the seventh palace before the throne of glory. Essentially, Scholem has obscured the most important detail of the mystical experience reported in these sources, indeed the detail that in my opinion most precisely qualifies these texts as mystical. The vision of the glory and the divine attributes normally withheld from both angelic and human creatures results from the enthronement of the mystic. In that sense one can speak of the enthronement as a quasi-deification or angelification that renders possible the mystical vision.

I submit that it is this enthronement and the consequent vision that justifies the use of the term "mystical" to characterize the ascent experience of the Hekhalot texts. The narrative description of the glory, throne, attendant angels, and the rest of the celestial realm is not in and of itself sufficient to be classified as mystical. The use of the latter term should be reserved for texts that describe the experience of ascent, enthronement, and vision. Are such factors operative in the Qumran material discussed by Nitzan? While it is certainly plausible and likely that the motif of angelic transformation would have been known by members of the Qumran community as is attested by the experience of relevant apocalyptic fragments in their library (even though the critical passage of Enoch's transformation at the end of the Parables [1 Enoch 70–71], has not been documented at Qumran),[15] the question before us is, do the texts discussed by Nitzan indicate unequivocally the belief in the translation to heaven and consequent transformation into an angelic being either by participating in the heavenly liturgy or actually sitting upon a throne? Most important, do we have any indication in these documents of a mystical praxis that would bring about these extraordinary experiences?

Prima facie, it would appear that lacking in the Qumran texts is anything remotely resembling a visionary ascent to the throne culminating in the enthronement of a mystic in the celestial realm.

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[14] *Major Trends*, p. 56.

[15] See J. T. Millik, *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumran Cave 4* (Oxford, 1976) and F. García Martínez, *Qumran and Apocalyptic: Studies on the Aramaic Texts From Qumran* (Leiden, 1992).

That Nitzan is acutely aware of this major discrepancy between the sectarian literature and later Hekhalot texts is evident from the following observation: "There is no such descent to the merkavah in the Qumran writings, nor recitation of the Qedushah before the heavenly throne and among the earthly worshippers. However, an experience of harmony and of communion between the chosen earthly and heavenly worshippers is reached through hymns recited by his pure and perfect worshippers" (p. 168). Toward the end of her study Nitzan reiterates this critical point: "Indeed, the religious experience of the people who wrote or used the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice was not analogous to that of the mystic experience of the later descenders to the merkavah" (p. 183).[16] In spite of this difference Nitzan insists that the experience of communion between the earthly and the angelic worshippers related in the Qumran fragments may be considered mystical insofar as this experience presupposes the bridging of the ontological gap that separates human and angel. In support of this contention it might be recalled that on several occasions in the Hodayot scrolls the possibility of the worshipper taking his place among the angels so that he may praise God's name in the heavenly realm is affirmed; the members of the sect see themselves as liturgical partners with the angels (see 1QH 3:22; 11:13; fragment 2:10; 10:7). In a similar fashion in several passages in 1QSb the priests are blessed with the blessing that they join the angelic priesthood in the heavenly abode (iii 25–26; iv 24–26). On the other hand, it should be noted that other passages in Qumran writings suggest that the sectarians believed that angels joined their earthly community (1QS 11:7b–9a); indeed, the community was envisioned as a kind of temple wherein the divine Presence dwelt in the form of angels or the singular angel attached to the "sons of light," i.e., Michael, the Prince of Light (1QS 3:20; 1QM 17:6b–8a).

The belief in an angelic presence in the midst of the community necessitated, from an halakhic perspective, that those with either physical deformities or ritual impurities had to be removed from the congregation (see 1QSa ii 8b–9a; 1QM 7:6; 1QH 6:13). Terms used to refer to the community such as the "holy council" or the

[16] This comment did not appear in the original draft of Nitzan's study and, I believe, it was added in response to my initial criticism regarding this point presented orally at the conference.

"eternal fellowship" indicate, as Michael Knibb pointed out, that "the members believed that their life already formed a part of the life of God's heavenly council."[17] This observation is very important as it underscores a significant element in the spiritual composition of the sect, one that is immediately relevant to evaluating the extent to which implicit in these writings is the belief that human beings were translated to heaven and transformed into angels. It would appear from the literary remains that there was a genuine confusion of time and space in the religious beliefs of the sectarians. I note parenthetically that Ben Zion Wacholder discussed a similar blurring of temporal and spatial boundaries, the present and the eschatological endtime, on the one hand, and the heavenly and earthly domains, on the other, in the book of Ezekiel which he claimed served as the major source for many ideas and terms found in the sectarian literature.[18] The eschatological future had not yet come, but to some extent it was already being enacted in the ritual life of the community.[19] Similarly, the space of the earthly community was clearly distinguishable from the celestial retinue of angels; however, the lines were blurred both by the fact that the community believed that the angels were joined to their mundane dwelling and that they in some sense had already been transformed into angelic beings. Nitzan has proposed that the means for that transformation consisted of liturgical recitation of blessings and hymns. The point is expressed as well by Newsom: "It is in relation to the idea of the community as a temple that the allusions to communication with the angels are primarily to be situated. The nature of that communion is conceptualized in various places as common worship and as shared priestly service."[20]

According to Newsom the description of the angelic liturgy in the Songs of Sabbath Sacrifice should be taken as prescriptive of an experience of translation to the heavenly temple realized through recitation of hymns. In addition to being midrashic elaborations of

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[17] *The Qumran Community* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 90.

[18] B. Z. Wacholder, "Ezekiel and Ezekielianism as Progenitors of Essenianism," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Forty Years of Research*, ed. D. Dimant and U. Rappaport (Leiden and Jerusalem, 1992), p. 188.

[19] See L. H. Schiffman, *The Eschatological Community of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Atlanta, 1989); idem, *Law, Custom and Messianism in the Dead Sea Sect* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1993), pp. 268–311.

[20] *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice: A Critical Edition* (Atlanta, 1985), pp. 62–63.

the chariot-vision in Ezekiel as well as Ezekiel's description of the future temple,[21] these songs seem to have provided the sectarians with a vehicle to be translated heavenward to participate in the angelic liturgy, an experience alluded to in other Qumran documents as I noted above.[22] The position articulated by Nitzan basically accords with the view expressed by Newsom: the subject matter of the Songs of Sabbath Sacrifice is the liturgical worship of the angelic priests in the celestial temple that parallels the priestly sacrificial rite in the earthly temple. In lending expression to this heavenly worship, the sectarians forged an experiential link with the angels. In short, these hymns are a liturgical-ritualistic substantiation of the theoretical and abstract idea expressed in other sectarian literature concerning the participation of the community with the angels.[23]

The orientation of Newsom challenges the interpretation expressed by earlier scholarship, e.g., Strugnell and Schiffman,[24] that the angelic liturgy involved no heavenly ascent or visionary journey, but consisted rather of a speculative description of the events in heaven without any necessary link between the celestial and earthly liturgies. Reflecting on the two fragments published by Strugnell, Schiffman concluded that this material is derived primarily from "an exegesis of the merkavah visions of Ezekiel and related biblical texts," but there is no indication of an "incubation or preparation for a mystical journey." The songs of praise described in the Qumran texts are uttered in the heavenly abode and thus do not function as the "means to bring about ecstasy or mystical experience."[25] By contrast, Newsom, who of course had the advantage of utilizing all the relevant fragments, emphasizes the

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[21] See *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, p. 52.

[22] Ibid., p. 64. See M. Weinfeld, "The Heavenly Praise in Unison," *Meqor Ḥayyim: Festschrift für G. Molin* (Graz, 1983), pp. 427–437, and idem, "Prayer and Liturgical Practice in the Qumran Sect," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Forty Years of Research*, p. 244: "a liturgical composition called Song of Sabbath *Olah* . . . centers around the mystical idea of the joining of the congregation of Israel in the singing of the angels in the heavenly Temple."

[23] See "Biblical Influence in Qumran," pp. 302, 306, 307–308.

[24] See J. Strugnell, "The Angelic Liturgy at Qumran—4Q Serek Širôt 'Olat Hassabat," *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* 7 (1960): 318–345, esp. 320 and 335; Schiffman, "Merkavah Speculation at Qumran, pp. 18–19.

[25] "Merkavah Speculation at Qumran," p. 45.

ecstatic and visionary implications of the Sabbath hymns. "The entire composition seems at times to be a rhapsody on the sacred number seven, so that one may simply have in the Shirot a fluctuation between a vision of heaven as one and as seven holy sanctuaries."[26] While Newsom too would acknowledge that the Sabbath Songs do not amount to a visionary tour as one finds in the apocalyptic and Hekhalot sources, she notes that the last five songs describe a progression through the structure of the heavenly temple and thus presuppose some element of an ecstatic journey. Indeed, Newsom characterizes the cycle of the *Sabbath Shirot* as a "quasi-mystical liturgy designed to evoke a sense of being present in the heavenly temple."[27] In these Songs, according to Newsom, "one does finally encounter something like the cultivation of a mystical communion with the angels."[28] From a formal perspective these texts should not be understood as a revelation of secrets about the heavenly realm, as one finds typically in apocalyptic materials, but rather as an act of worship.[29]

Newsom in a sense follows the suggestion of Johann Maier that the Qumran Sabbath Songs should be understood in the context of priestly self-understanding,[30] i.e., the social context that best explains this liturgical cycle is the need for the members of the priesthood at Qumran, the *bene ṣadoq*, to justify their claims to being the legitimate heirs to the high priesthood outside the confines of the Jerusalem temple.[31] This need for legitimacy would also explain the main purpose of the Songs according to Newsom, i.e., the cultivation of the experience of being present in the heavenly temple in order to stand together with the angelic priests who serve there. Newsom puts the matter as follows: "It is, I suspect, in order

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[26] *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, p. 49.

[27] Ibid., p. 59.

[28] Ibid., p. 71.

[29] See C. Newsom, " 'He Has Established for Himself Priests': Human and Angelic Priesthood in the Qumran Sabbath Shirot," in *Archaeology and History in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. L. H. Schiffman (Sheffield, 1990), p. 114.

[30] J. Maier, *Vom Kultus zur Gnosis* (Salzburg, 1964), pp. 133–135.

[31] *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, pp. 65–72; " 'He Has Established for Himself Priests'," pp. 114–115. On the cultic substitution of prayer in the community of the Covenanters for the sacrificial worship of the Jerusalem Temple, see S. Talmon, "The Emergence of Institutionalized Prayer in Israel in Light of Qumran Literature," in *The World of Qumran From Within: Collected Studies* (Jerusalem and Leiden, 1989), pp. 200–243.

to create and maintain this sense that the text avoids explicit reference to the human community after one brief reference early in the cycle. The result, then, is to provide the community that recites and hears these songs not only with a model for their priesthood but also with an experiential validation of their legitimacy as those permitted to share in the experience of heavenly worship."[32] This experience does not entail the obliteration of the earthly liturgy nor the merging of the human and angelic communities. It signifies rather a symbolic relationship between the two realms and maintains the possibility that man legitimates his worship by being present with the angels in their worship. Although the Songs do not explicitly speak of actual co-participation in the conduct of the cult of the heavenly temple, it is presumed that the language of the Songs and their recitation invokes and makes present the angelic worship. The liturgy, therefore, creates the virtual experience of being present in the heavenly temple and thereby mutes the religious anxiety associated with the inadequacy of human worship. The experience provided by these hymns serves to authenticate human worship and allows for a proleptic transcendence of its limits.[33]

It must be noted that, for the most part, this remains a conjecture that is not fully supported by the extant texts. Newsom does cite one passage from the early part of the cycle, 4Q400 2 b, to support her contention that the effect of the Songs was the translation of the worshipper to the heavenly temple: "How shall we be considered [among] them? And how shall our priesthood (be considered) in their habitations?" It is probable that this passage expresses the same sentiment that is found in other documents concerning the desire of the sectarians to join the angelic hosts above. Nevertheless, the comments of Schiffman are still valid and ought to be kept in mind: in these Songs there is no explicit description of a mystical journey and no self-conscious articulation that the recitation of the hymns serves as the practical means to achieve such a journey. Indeed, in another study Newsom herself rejects the label "mystical" for these songs in a statement that basically concurs with the formulation of Schiffman: "While there is much to be explored in the relationship between the *Sabbath Shirot* and *merkavah* traditions, the differences are as important as the similarities. For all their

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[32] " 'He Has Established for Himself Priests'," pp. 115–116.

[33] Ibid., p. 117.

vivid evocation of the heavenly realm, the *shirot* do not speak of ascents or use the technical vocabulary of mystical praxis."[34] As much as I am inclined to see the cycle of Sabbath Songs as a kind of visionary recital, some caution seems to me to be in order.

It must be noted, moreover, that in none of the sources discussed by Nitzan is there evidence for the other essential component of the mystical experience—the enthronement in the heavenly realm. Interestingly enough, however, there is one Qumran fragment—col. 1 of 4Q491—which according to the reconstruction of Morton Smith does in fact relate the ascension and enthronement of a select individual of the sect. Smith challenged the identification of this text as a "canticle of Michael" and argued instead that the speaker was one of the sectarians who claimed to have been taken up and seated in heaven like one of the angels. In short, Smith sees in this fragment "the influence of speculation or deification by ascent towards or into the heavens, speculation which may have gone along with some practices that provided extraordinary experiences understood as encounters with gods or angels."[35] In a second study Smith reiterates his view in a slightly more colorful and playful tone: "Now, to my amazement, the Qumran fragments have provided a little poem by some egomaniac who claimed to have done just what I conjectured Jesus claimed, that is, entered the heavenly kingdom and secured a chair with tenure, while yet commuting to earth and carrying on his teaching here."[36] Assuming the correctness of Smith's reconstruction, this fragment does indeed affirm, in far more explicit terms than any other Qumran text that has yet surfaced, the transformation of a human into a semi-divine or angelic being. The passages in other Qumran writings that intimate the joining of the sectarians with the angelic hosts never use the image of occupying a throne. On the contrary, the prevalent image is that of standing together with the angels—hence the verb that is frequently used is *yaṣav* or *lehityaṣṣev*, which has the connotation of standing together. This is entirely appropriate to the liturgical context insofar as the angels, like their human counterparts, utter

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[34] Ibid., p. 114.

[35] "Ascent to the Heavens and Deification in 4QM[a]," in *Archaeology and History in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, pp. 187–188.

[36] "Two Ascended to Heaven—Jesus and the Author of 4Q491," in *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (New York, 1992), pp. 294–295.

praises, hymns, and blessings in a standing position. In the text discussed by Smith, by contrast, the image is that of sitting above: "ʾEl ʿElyon gave me a seat among those perfect forever, a mighty throne in the congregation of the gods." The seated posture indicates full deification or angelification, a motif that is found as well in apocalyptic sources and figures prominently in the Hekhalot corpus, as I have remarked above.

In summary, it is evident that chariot speculation was an essential aspect of the religious worldview of the Qumran sect. This interest should be seen as part of a much larger phenomenon that involves the profound impact that the book of Ezekiel had on the sectarians. The particular interest in the chariot vision of Ezekiel is attested as well in Second Ezekiel (4Q385 4), which, as Devorah Dimant and John Strugnell have shown,[37] is rich in exegetical elaborations of the biblical text, in a way reminiscent of the tannaitic *maʿaseh merkavah*. The major methodological question is, however, was this interest in the chariot merely speculative or midrashic in nature? Or was it, by contrast, related to very specific liturgical practices that enabled the sectarians to bridge the gap between human and angel? Was this gap closed in the minds of the sectarians by the angels descending to join their camp or by the humans ascending to join the angels in the heavenly heights? The study of Nitzan suggests that the merkavah speculation at Qumran had a deeply mystical component linked especially to the liturgical act, but the extant sources do not demonstrate conclusively that the recitation of the hymns facilitated the translation of the worshippers to heaven and their translation into angels. On the other hand, the Qumran fragment as reconstructed and analyzed by Smith tends to support this approach insofar as the heavenly ascension culminates in the enthronement of the adept. If the reconstruction and interpretation of Smith be accepted, then we have a text that should be labelled "mystical" in the technical sense that I described above. In the absence of these two essential elements, ascension and enthronement, I would refrain from using the word mystical to describe any of the Qumran texts.

In spite of my misgivings, the importance of the Qumran material in the history of Jewish mysticism cannot be overstated. There can be no greater evidence that the hymns embedded in the Hekhalot

[37] See reference cited above in n. 6.

compositions have their roots in late Second Temple Judaism. Recent attempts to assign the Hekhalot to a later date in Jewish history may be valid from a redactional point of view, but this should not blind us from the fact that incorporated in these texts are much older materials. A sophisticated form-critical approach to the Hekhalot literature demands a nuanced distinction between the older textual units and the later redactional setting. In particular, the role of hymns in Qumran literature, discussed by Nitzan in this study and in her other work,[38] provides an important perspective for the evaluation and dating of the Hekhalot texts. Finally, the connection between the priestly ritual and the angelic liturgy that is made in the Qumran texts is a very important piece of evidence that may help us discern the provenance of the later Hekhalot writings. As a variety of scholars, including Johann Maier and Ithamar Gruenwald,[39] have already noted, there is a strong priestly component in the Hekhalot compositions. Future research should continue to exploit this connection in an effort to determine who the *yorde merkavah* were within Jewish society in the tannaitic and/or amoraic periods. Despite the rabbinic attribution in the Hekhalot sources it seems fairly obvious that the visionary ascent to the heavenly throne and the participation in the angelic liturgy would have been a preoccupation of a priestly group who, in the absence of an earthly temple, turned their attention to its celestial counterpart. The philological similarities of the Qumran hymns and the liturgical poems contextualized in the larger redactional settings of the Hekhalot corpus may provide important clues for determining the identity and social standing of the composers of the latter. On the other hand, a comparison of the two bodies of literature underscores the significant difference between them: no mystical praxis is related explicitly in the Qumran material. The fragments redeemed from the caves of Qumran supply scholars of Jewish mysticism with keys to open some doors and to lock others.

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[38] Nitzan, "Biblical Influence in Qumran," pp. 175–202, esp. 189–197; idem, "Hymns from Qumran—4Q510–4Q511," *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Forty Years of Research*, pp. 53–62.

[39] See the work of Maier cited above in n. 30 and I. Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988), pp. 125–173. On the priestly character of the heavenly ascent in apocalyptic literature, see Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, pp. 29–46.