"New Testament and Hekhalot Literature: The Journey into Heaven in Paul and in Merkavah Mysticism*

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"New Testament and Hekhalot Literature" is undoubtedly a somewhat odd combination, and a relatively new variant of the question usually subsumed under the heading "Jewish Background of the New Testament". I therefore hasten to add that the sub-title, "The Journey into Heaven in Paul and in Merkavah Mysticism", indicates the actual theme – which I will however use as an occasion to make a few fundamental methodological observations concerning the possibility or impossibility of a comparison between New Testament and so-called Hekhalot literature.

The notorious passage in 2 Corinthians where Paul boasts of having been carried off into Paradise, and the no less notorious story of the four rabbis who enter into pardes, is the prime example of an alleged or supposed connection between the New Testament and Hekhalot literature. The most important advocate of this theory, which has since then occupied a secure place in the relevant literature, is G. Scholem, who has devoted a chapter to it in his book, Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition, entitled, "The Four Who Entered Paradise and Paul's Ascension to Paradise". In parenthesis, Scholem was by no means the first to bring the two texts together. As far as I am aware, it was W. Bousset (whom Scholem does not mention) who did this. Scholem's purpose nevertheless reaches further than research hitherto and is twofold. On the one hand, he is concerned here (as in his book in general) to establish the age of Merkavah mysticism as ecstatic experience. On the other, he sets out to explain certain elements of Christian tradition against their Jewish, and in this case Jewish mystical, background. It goes without saying that both aims are closely linked and postulate one another. Only if Merkavah mysticism is ancient can it provide the background for certain passages in the New Testament; and if certain passages in the New Testament can be

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explained against this background, this is very important indication for the antiquity of Merkavah mysticism.

1. 2 Cor. 12:1-4

1.1. The text

(1) If I must boast - and there is nothing to be gained from it - I will come now to the visions (ἀπαραίης) and revelations (ἀποκαλύψεις) of the Lord (κυρίου).

(2) I know of a man in Christ fourteen years ago - whether in the body I do not know, whether out of the body I do not know, God knows - that this man was carried off (ἀρπαγέντα) into the third heaven.

(3) And I know that this man - whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows -

(4) that he was carried off (ἡρπάγη) into Paradise (εἰς τὸν παραδείσου) and heard words that may not be said (ἀρρητα ῥήματα) which a man is not permitted to utter (οὐκ ἔξον λαλῆσαι).

1.1.1. The opponents of Paul

The text cited is reckoned by scholars to belong to the so-called Epistle of Tears written by Paul between the autumn of A.D. 55 and the spring of 58, depending on the date established for the composition of 1 Corinthians.

This letter is a confrontation with Paul’s opponents in Corinth, whose identity figures among the unsolved and hotly disputed problems of New Testament study. Paul neither names his adversaries nor describes their teaching (this was unnecessary since it must have been known to those he was addressing). What does emerge from a few polemical utterances is very scanty. In connection with their teaching he accuses them of proclaiming “another Jesus”, “another spirit” and “another Gospel” (11:4), and he designates them as “chief apostles” (11:5) and “false apostles” (11:13). In regard to their origin, we only learn that they are “Hebrews”, “Israelites” and “descendants of Abraham” (11:22). It has been correctly deduced from this that they were of Jewish extraction, i.e., Judeo-Christians, who denied Paul’s apostolic authority. A more precise classification of these opponents in the spectrum of primitive Christian groupings is however highly controversial because of the meagreness of the evidence. It extends from the Judaizers attacked in the Letter to the Galatians, through pneumatically orientated envoys of the primitive church of Jerusalem and Judeo-Christian Gnostics, to Hellenistic Judeo-Christian ἠθικοι ἀνδρεῖς or

Hellenistic Judeo-Christians from the circle of Stephen. Of these various hypotheses, the one most in favour at the moment is that they were Judeo-Christian Gnostics or "gnosticising pneumatics similar to those of 1 Corinthians".

This question of the opponents of Paul is of direct importance to our text. Paul opens it by saying that he intends "to boast" (καυχάσθαι), which is obviously the connecting link between his confrontation with them in chapter 11 and the event described in chapter 12. This forms the climax of a long account of incidents and merits of which Paul boasts in a comparison of himself and his opponents. From this it emerges that Paul is pleading, precisely by way of a claim to ecstatic experience, his credentials vis-à-vis his adversaries. This enables us to arrive at conclusions concerning their identity; namely, that they seem to belong to a group of Judeo-Christians who themselves lay claim to ecstatic experiences and play these off against the authority of the apostle.

1.1.2. Particular problems

What does the text say in detail? I shall limit myself to a few observations relevant to our context without striving for an exact exegesis.

V.1. Besides the link with chapter 11 through the motif of boasting, this verse informs us of the theme of what follows, with its mention of "visions" (δραπασίαι) and "revelations" (ἀποκαλύψεις) of the Lord (κυρίον); i.e., presumably of ecstatic visions and auditory experiences. In v. 7, these revelations are described as "extraordinary", probably in the sense of "unusual", and perhaps also of "exceeding" (τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων). The genitive κυρίον is undoubtedly a genitivus auctoris and not a genitivus objectivus. It refers, that is to say, to "the Lord" (=Christ) as the origin and not the object of the revelation. Paul thus in no way says that he has seen the Lord.

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11 P. Vielhauer, op. cit., (n. 5), p. 150.
12 Cf. the frequent use of "boast" in 11:16-18, 30.
13 The word σπασία is infrequent in the New Testament and does not appear particularly to emphasize the visionary element. Cf. W. Michaelis, ThWNT V, p. 373.
14 Michaelis, ThWNT V, p. 358; J. Jeremias, ThWNT V, p. 768.
Vv. 2-4 are plainly constructed on parallel lines.15 "I know of a man", formulated twice with but little differentiation (v. 2 and beginning of v. 3), is followed twice by the affirmative statement, "that this man was carried off" (ἀρπαγέντα in v. 2 and ὅτι ἠρπάγη in v. 4); thus once in the participle and once in the finite verb. This parallelism, as well as the single time factor ("fourteen years ago"), indicates that the reference is to one and the same event, and not to several.16 The solemn parenthesis, "whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows it", also appears, with insignificant variations, twice. It expressly leaves open the two possibilities of a spiritual and a bodily removal (as with Enoch and Elijah? But neither of these returned but were carried off for good and are expected at the end of time).17 Noteworthy is the linguistic usage describing the procedure of the removal. It is not the "classic" αἱρέων or ἀναλαμβάνειν, but ἠρπάρειν in the passive (ἀρπαγήναι), "to be snatched away", which is not attested in the Septuagint, but only in a few of the Pseudepigrapha.18

Very little is said about the removal itself. We hear firstly about the place to which Paul was carried off. It was the third heaven (v. 2) and Paradise respectively (εἰς τὸν παραδείσοσιν, v. 4). Because of the parallelism, this is also certainly one and the same place and Paradise defines the third heaven more closely. In other words, the Paradise to which Paul was carried off was located in the third heaven. Commentators of 2 Corinthians, Scholem among them,19 unanimously specify the few parallels that mention a Paradise in the third heaven or immediately above it and on which Paul may have drawn. The first of these is the Slavonic Enoch, where it is said of Enoch: "And the two men placed me thence and carried me up on to the third heaven and set me down in the midst of Paradise, and a place unknown in goodness of appearance".20 Shortly afterwards,21 this place is defined as one "prepared for the righteous", i.e., for the righteous dead in the world to come. The second attestation is in the Apocalypse of Moses, where God hands over the dead Adam to the Archangel Michael with the words: "Lift him up into Paradise unto the third Heaven, and leave him

16 Although in verse 1 Paul speaks in the plural of "visions and revelations", here he mentions only one such vision.
17 Cf. EJ VI, pp. 635 ff., 793 f. In the case of Moses, too, the question is discussed whether whether he died or was carried off; cf. K. Haacker – P. Schäfer, "Nachbiblische Traditionen vom Tod des Mose" in Josephus-Studien, Festschrift Otto Michel, Göttingen, 1974, pp. 147-174. Cf. also Philo, Quaest. Gen. I, 86; Mk 9:2-8 par. Mt. 17:1-17; Rev. 11:3-6.
19 Lietzmann, op. cit. (n. 4), p. 216; Scholem op. cit. (n. 2) p. 17.
20 Slavonic Enoch (B) 8,1 (Charles II, p. 433 f.).
21 Slavonic Enoch (B) 9,1 (Charles II, p. 434).
there until that fearful day of my reckoning, which I will make in the world' (i.e., until the Day of Judgement). With this, the comparative material is already exhausted, unless it is possible to turn to an alleged Jewish (original) form of the Testament of Levi, which mentions only three heavens (although there is no question there of a Paradise in the third heaven).

Finally—and this is already the end of the report of his vision—we learn what Paul heard. He heard "words that may not be said" (διδοτα ρηματα). This confirms, firstly, that the removal had rather to do with an auditory experience than with a vision proper, since it is nowhere said that Paul saw anything. The content of what he heard is, of course, not communicated, but is explicitly qualified as something not permitted to man to utter (ουκ εξον λαλησα). On the basis of this meagre information, most commentators fall back on the ancient mystery religions, the secrets of which were equally "not to be divulged". Bietenhard, on the other hand, appealing to a parallel also from the Slavonic Enoch, where Enoch hears a song "which it is impossible to describe", surmises that Paul listened, in the third heaven as the place of the blessed righteous, to the song of praise sung by the angels. This doubtless fits better than the mystery religions the milieu as it is represented, but it in no way tallies with the text. Paul would, in particular, scarcely have spoken of ρηματα if he had meant heavenly song.

1.1.3. Summary

Paul refers in 2 Corinthians 12:1-4 to an ecstatic experience which he pleads as evidence of his authority over his opponents in Corinth. These opponents were ecstatically inclined Judeo-Christians difficult to place more precisely (either from the description of the ecstatic experience or from the few direct observations). In particular, there is no hint in Paul's experience of "Gnostics" (of whatever kind) being his opponents. The event itself bears the features rather of an auditory experience than a vision. Its content is unknown and cannot be discovered.

24 The emphasis here seems to be on what is forbidden rather than on what is not possible.
26 Slavonic Enoch (A) 17, 1 (Charles II, p. 439).
2. The four rabbis in pardes

This story has been handed down in various versions, in classical rabbinic as well as in Hekhalot literature.

2.1. Rabbinic literature

The story appears here in three different documents: Tosefta, the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. I cite the text according to the Tosefta.

(3) Four entered (nikhnesu) into pardes: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aḥer and R. Akiba.

One looked (hesis) and died; one looked and suffered harm (nifga); one looked and cut down the shoots (= young plants) (qisses ba-neti'ot); one ascended in peace ('alah) and descended in peace (yarad).

Ben Azzai looked and died. Of him Scripture says, Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his pious (Ps. 116:15).

Ben Zoma looked and suffered harm. Of him Scripture says, If you have found honey, eat only that which does you good (lest you grow tired of it and vomit it out) (Prov. 25:16).

Aḥer looked and cut down the shoots. Of him Scripture says, Let not your mouth lead your flesh into sin (and say not before the angel that it was an oversight. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?) (Eccl. 5:5-6).

(4) Rabbi Akiba entered in peace (nikhnas) and came out in peace (yaša').

Of him Scripture says, Draw me after you, we desire to run, etc. (The king brought me into his chambers) (Song 1:4).

The three versions of the story agree in their layout and in the essential details, with the exception that the Babylonian Talmud contains a passage not extant in any of the other versions of rabbinic literature (in the narrower sense). Directly following the first sentence we read this:

R. Akiba said to them: When you come to the stones of pure marble say not "Water! Water!". For it is written, None who speaks lies may endure before my eyes (Ps. 101:7).

The different versions of the story of the four rabbis in pardes have been

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28 ṬḤag. 2, 3-4.
30 bḤag. 14-15b.
31 See Vienna Ms; the sentence is missing from Erfurt Ms.
32 Vienna Ms: ascended ('alah) . . . descended (yarad).
34 bḤag. 14b.
the subject of many and very controversial interpretations. Without wishing to repeat them here, and without entering into all the details, I would like to draw attention to a few important points.

Firstly, it is indisputable that the above quoted passage traditional only to the Babylonian Talmud is both in form and content out of place; there is no doubt therefore that it is an addition. From this it follows that an interpretation must proceed primarily from the versions found in the Tosefta and the Jerusalem Talmud. If we now examine these versions more closely—as well as the one from the Babylonian Talmud excluding the supplement—a remarkable fluctuation in terminology becomes apparent at the decisive points. Whereas all the versions say at the beginning that the four rabbis “entered” pardes (or “went into” pardes), it is said of R. Akiba once that he “ascended” and “descended” (’alah we-yarad), and once that he “entered and came out” (nikhnas we-yaṣa) in peace.

This terminological difference is of great importance for the interpretation of the text, since it decides whether the story is to be understood as a paradigm of an ecstatic ascent into “Paradise” (in the technical sense) or not. This problem is certainly not clear-cut, and cannot be solved on the basis of what is presumably the final redaction of the text or of the worth of its respective manuscripts. Nevertheless, I wish to declare a clear preference for the reading “entered and came out” in place of “ascended” and “descended”, for the simple reason that it fits in best with the introductory


36 The texts and their interpretations are set out clearly in Halperin, op. cit. (n. 33).

37 Thus tHag. Vienna Ms and bHag. See also the introductory sentence: “One ascended in peace and descended in peace” (thus the Vienna Ms; in the Erfurt Ms the sentence is missing). In yHag we find on the contrary: “One entered in peace and came out in peace”.

34 Thus tHag. Erfurt Ms and yHag.

39 This circumstance which I consider central has not as far as I can see been adequately investigated in the literature; cf. also Wewers, op. cit. (n. 35), p. 175.
phrase, "Four entered into *pardes*."\(^{40}\)

If this observation is correct, it will necessarily also be relevant for the understanding of the word *pardes*. Those who are in favour of the mystical interpretation understand *pardes* rather uncritically in the technical sense of "Paradise". Yet this is by no means self-evident from the context; indeed, it is somewhat improbable. Proceeding from the reading that the four rabbis did not ascend but entered into *pardes*, which is not contested, and that Akiba came out, and did not descend, unharmed, nothing in fact any longer supports the technical understanding of *pardes* in the sense of "Paradise". It is much more likely that *pardes* means simply "garden", or "royal garden",\(^{41}\) to which the going in and out are much better suited that ascending and descending. In addition, *pardes* is, as far as I know, nowhere combined in Hekhalot literature with the technical verbs *'alah* and *yarad*.\(^{42}\)

The most reasonable interpretation of the story is therefore the one first expressed by E. E. Urbach, that what we have here is an allegory, in which the first (general) part constitutes the allegory itself (*mashal*, "image-half"), and the second (concretely related to the four rabbis) is its interpretation (*nimshal*, "subject-half").\(^{43}\) This means that the *mashal* is to be understood metaphorically, and that the metaphors\(^{44}\) are explained in the *nimshal*. No equivalent for the metaphor *pardes* appears in the *nimshal*. We do not learn explicitly what *pardes* (= royal garden) stands for, or what the rabbis looked at in this garden. Urbach, who primarily objects to an interpretation in the sense of an *ecstatic* mystical experience, nevertheless considers it as established that the object of their vision in the "garden" is the Merkavah, but as the outcome of exegetical endeavours.

This explanation is however not cogent at all.\(^{45}\) It rests on an unproved association, namely, that the verb *hešiq* is to be to a certain extent automatically connected with the Merkavah. But there is not a single attestation of this in "classic" rabbinic writings. Not until Hekhalot literature do we find an association of *mešiq* and *be-yofyo* (i.e., the beauty of the king on the throne)\(^{46}\) and *šefiyat ha-merkavah* (the vision of the

\(^{40}\) Cf. Wewers op. cit. (n. 35), p. 185. It is also striking that the use of *'alah* and *yarad* does not correspond to the technical linguistic usage, which as a rule uses *yarad* precisely for "ascending". This too indicates a secondary adaptation of the original *nikhnas - yasa* to esoteric terminology, which in this case, however, could not be effected consistently. There would be no sense in making Akiba first "descend" into *pardes* and then "ascend" again. I.e., the technical *yarad* in the sense of the Hekhalot texts is not exactly applicable to *pardes*.

\(^{41}\) Attestation of *pardes* see in Halperin, op. cit. (n. 33), p. 91 and especially p. 95.

\(^{42}\) With the exception of the Hekhalot version of the narrative of the four rabbis (see below) as well as Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, ed. P. Schäfer, Tübingen, 1981, § 597 (here the introductory formula is without doubt dependent on the story of the four rabbis in *pardes*). These passages are the only instances in which the word *pardes* occurs in Hekhalot literature.

\(^{43}\) Urbach, op. cit. (n. 35), p. 13.

\(^{44}\) *pardes*, *hešiq*: *mer*, *nifga*, *qišeq*.

\(^{45}\) So also Halperin, op. cit. (n. 33), p. 90, n. 97.

\(^{46}\) Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, § 173; cf. also § 102; Geniza-Fragment T. -S. K 21. 95. c, 2a/25.
Merkavah), and this by no means as frequently as one might expect. In "classic" rabbinic literature, the root šiš in the hif"il means no more than "to look closely", and in a wholly "profane" context at that. This finding certainly does not allow the conclusion that hesiš in our text has something to do with the vision of the Merkavah.

There remains, then, only the verse from the Song of Songs 1:4, allocated to Akiba, from which a connection with the Merkavah may be deduced, and in effect "chambers" in Song 1:4 (hevi'ani ha-melekh ḥadaraw) is interpreted "chambers of the Merkavah" (ḥadre merkavah). But since the expression even in Hekhalot literature occurs in one passage only (as raz ḥadre hekhal ha-merkavah), and then without any relationship to the Song of Songs verse, it can hardly be described as significant. It would consequently be more than risky to conclude, solely on the basis of the citation of Song 1:4, that the Merkavah is the central theme of our story.

It is nevertheless correct that apart from the names of the four rabbis, only the biblical verses cited present an exegesis of the allegory (i.e., represent the "subject-half"), whereas pardes and "looking", with the consequences of "dying" and "suffering harm", "cutting down shoots" and "coming out", are part of the image. It is therefore only, if at all, from the biblical verses that something concerning the intention of the story is to be learnt. Now the verses illustrate quite manifestly the differing consequences of the vision. Ben Azzai died: "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his pious". Ben Zoma came to harm: "lest you grow tired of it and vomit it out". Aher cut down the shoots: "Let not your mouth lead your flesh into sin". Akiba came out: "Draw me after you, we desire to run" (the drawing out and running away is thus the key-word from the verse of the Song, not the chambers of the king!). But the decisive question is whether the subsequent verses wish to communicate something about the object and the content of the vision, and this cannot be answered conclusively. The only pointer is given in the continuation of the story in the Jerusalem Talmud concerning Aher = Elisha b. Avuya, where it appears that the redactor at least understood the "sin" of Elisha, and therewith the "cutting down of the shoots", as sins against the Torah: or in concrete

47 *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, § 225.
48 The evidence is already exhausted with the passages given.
49 In the Bible, cf. only Song 2:9.
50 Cf. tḤag; 2:6; tBB 1:5; tOhal. 16:13; bBer. 16b; bShab. 134a; bPes. gb=bAZ 42a=bNid. 15b/16a; bYom. 35b; bYom 67a=bRSh 31b; bRSh 22b; bBB 2b; bBB 22b; bSan. 59b; bḤul. 47b; bNid. 31a.
51 Song R. 1, 4 § 2 end on Song 1:4; cf. also Lev. R. 16,4 (p. 354) = Song R. 1, 10 § 2 and Tanh. B. *toledot* § 22 (p. 71a): without any relation to the verse from the Song of Songs. Cf. Y. Dan, "Ḥadre ha-merkavah", *Tarbiz* 47, 1978, pp. 49-55.
52 *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, § 556 (Ma‘aseh Merkavah).
53 Cf. also Halperin, *op. cit.* (n. 33), p. 91, n. 106.
54 So also Halperin, *op. cit.* (n. 33), p. 90.
terms, as sins against the young Torah students (Aher's "mouth" leads his "flesh", i.e., the "shoots" of his people into, "sin"). If this interpretation were transferred to all four rabbis, the Torah and its application would be the object and content of the rabbis' vision, with differing consequences in each case. Ben Azzai dies the death of the pious who has attained to perfect knowledge of the Torah and whom God for that reason takes to himself. Ben Zoma attains to only an imperfect knowledge; he is the type of Torah teacher who is unable to do justice to his subject and who does better to cease teaching. Aher is the type of false teacher who spreads false teachings and thereby leads himself and others into sin. And finally, Akiba is the kind of Torah teacher who acquires a correct knowledge and knows how to communicate and apply it correctly. Without a doubt, the passage referring to him represents the climax of the story and corresponds to what is otherwise well known concerning Akiba. Needless to say, this interpretation is hypothetical, but it seems to me to lay claim to at least as much, and perhaps more, probability than the Merkavah interpretation.

2.1.1. Summary

The story of the four rabbis who enter into pardes seems in its presumed original form—insofar as it is possible to trace this—to be an allegory, the interpretation of which had at first nothing to do with Merkavah mysticism, either in an actual ecstatic sense, or as an exegetical discipline. A conceivable explanation of the allegory is that it was meant to demonstrate four different types of Torah teachers and, by way of the type represented by Akiba, to show the desirable model. The various versions of the story show, however, that in the process of transmission, a mystical interpretation came to be superimposed on the original metaphorical one, but it must remain open whether this was in the beginning "only" understood exegetically or also ecstatically. The end of this development is reached in the Babylonian Talmud version, which through its insertion clearly wishes to be understood as a description of an ecstatic ascent into pardes (here = "Paradise" in heaven).

2.2. Hekhalot Literature

The pardes narrative comes down in essentially two versions: once in the basic form of the "allegory" with its exegesis on the four rabbis which I have analyzed above, and once in the combination of this "basic form" with the water episode, known up to now only from the Babylonian

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55 yHag. 2, 1, fol. 77b. I cannot follow Urbach's interpretation (op. cit. [n. 35], p. 14) with the help of Esther R. 10, 9. Wewers, op. cit. (n. 35), p. 186, also takes up the explanation relating to Aher, but thinks that in the tradition as a whole the intention is "zwischen Rechtgläubigkeit und Unvermögen bzw. Häsies zu trennen". This seems to me to be argued too much for Aher's side and therefore to be conceived too narrowly.
Talmud. In addition, still another version of the water episode exists, handed down in the context of the testing of an adept and independent of the *pardes* story.

2.2.1. The basic form of the *pardes* narrative

The nucleus of the *pardes* narrative (i.e., the allegory with its application to the four rabbis) is handed down independently also in Hekhalot literature and is almost identical with the version found in Tosefta and the Jerusalem Talmud. Since it is said here too (as in Tosefta/Yerushalmi) that the rabbis "entered" into *pardes* (*nikhnesu*), and even that Akiba "entered" (*nikhnas*) and "came out" (*yas'a*), instead of the terms rather to be expected in Hekhalot literature, *'alah* and *yarad*, the story was clearly incorporated into the Hekhalot text as an already distinct unit. It is even possible to suppose that the Tosefta/Yerushalmi version was the immediate model for integration into Hekhalot literature. Supporting this is the disparate context, with no recognizably meaningful structure, in which the story is set in Hekhalot literature.

Beyond the basic form of the narrative, a few variants are plainly perceptible as secondary additions. This is valid in regard to the familiar text, which appears also in the Babylonian Talmud and in 3 Enoch, according to which Aher on his ascent saw Metatron sitting on the throne and assumed that there were "two powers" (*shetey reshuyyot*) in heaven, as well as to the indication that Akiba was not the only one to go in and out in peace because he was greater than his companions but because of his "deeds", which allowed him to fulfil the words of Mishnah, "Thy deeds bring thee near and thy deeds remove thee far (again)".

2.2.2. The combination of the *pardes* narrative with the water episode

The basic form of the *pardes* narrative is extended at two points by means of the water episode, one of which obviously cites the version from the Babylonian Talmud. In the other, we read following the introductory sentence:

Ben Azzai looked into the sixth *hekhal* and saw the ethereal radiance of the marble stones with which the *hekhal* was covered. His body was unable to bear [the sight] and he opened his mouth and asked them (= the angels): Those waters, what is the meaning of them? And he died. Concerning him Scripture

58 Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, § 339 (Hekhalot Zutarti); § 672 Ms. Oxford (Merkavah Rabbah); cf. also § 338, 344, 671 (Mss. New York and Oxford).
59 Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, § 20.
60 Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, § 672.
61 Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, § 338, 344, 671; the citation comes from mEd. 5, 7.
62 Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, § 672.
63 Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, § 345.
says, Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his pious (Ps. 116:15).
Ben Zoma looked at the ethereal radiance of the marble and thought that it
was water, yet his body was able to bear [it]; so he did not ask them, but his
mind was unable to bear [it] and he was smitten . . .

Here we quite clearly have two separate traditions combined, which
cannot originally have been in this form. Either Ben Azzai died as the
perfectly righteous man, for which he is praised in the verse of the psalm, or
his death was a punishment for thinking that the shining marble stone was
water. Together, they do not fit. Without doubt, therefore, the alteration,
as it is presented here, of the tradition of the ascent of Ben Azzai (pardes =
the sixth hekhal), and its association with the water episode, is redactional
and thereby secondary.

2.2.3. The water episode in the context of the testing of the adept

Finally, the water episode is encountered in yet another context clearly
independent of the pardes narrative, namely in the testing of the adept:64

The sixth hekhal looks as though hundreds of thousands and myriads of waves
of the sea poured over him (= the adept), whereas there is not a single drop
of water in it, but [this impression is given] by the radiance of the marble
stones with which the hekhal is covered and the radiance [of which] is more
terrible than water. And do not the servants (= the angels) stand before him
(= the adept)? If he now says, Those waters, what is the meaning of them?,
they immediately run around behind him to stone [him] and they say to him,
[You] fool! Now you shall not see with your eyes! Are you of the seed of those
who kissed the golden calf? You are unworthy to see the king in his beauty! . . .
He comes not away from there where they wound his head with iron
stakes.65

A warning follows to behave correctly at the entrance to the sixth hekhal66 and
subsequently (as a dictum of Akiba) the example of Ben Azai, who was unable
to stop himself from calling “Water, water”, and whose head the angels
immediately struck off, to bury him under eleven thousand pieces of iron.

However this remarkable water episode should be interpreted,67 the literary
development seems clear. The original Sitz im Leben was certainly the
examination of the adept and not the pardes story. It was first combined
with the pardes story in the course of its alteration to the account of an
ascent in the sense of Merkavah mysticism. This is attested by the version

64 Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, § 408-410 (Hekhalot Zutarti); § 259 (Hekhalot
Rabbati).
65 Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, § 408.
66 Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, § 409.
67 Cf. on this the literature mentioned in note 35, above all Joël, op. cit., p. 167; Bacher,
op. cit., p. 333; Scholem, op. cit., pp. 14-16 (Jewish Gnosticism); Urbach, op. cit., pp. 15-16;
Goldberg, op. cit., pp. 20-23; Wewers, op. cit., p. 187; Gruenwald, op. cit. (n. 1), pp. 87-88;
Halperin, op. cit. (n. 33), pp. 87-88.
analysed above (2.2.2), which is only comprehensible in association with the testing of an adept, by the renewed application to Ben Azzai68 in this text, as well as by the version of the Babylonian Talmud cited at the very beginning.69 Admittedly, this does not yet determine the relationship between the versions of Hekhalot literature and the Babylonian Talmud. Scholem was of the opinion that they belong to the same "continuous stream of tradition" and supplement one another.70 He did not doubt that Merkavah mysticism (the nucleus of which he dates to the second century) is much more ancient than the Babylonian Talmud and that the same relationship is valid for the water episode. "The authenticity of the story's core, the ecstatic's vision of water, hardly requires proof. Nothing could be more far-fetched than to treat it as a post festum interpretation of the Talmudic passage".71

D. Halperin, following E. E. Urbach, recently argued against this interpretation, suggesting that on the contrary the Hekhalot version of the water episode is more likely to be an attempt at an interpretation of the Babylonian Talmud version than an independent and early tradition.72 But Halperin thereby amalgamates in an unreliable way the problems of independence and of early dating. Even if the episode does possess its own Sitz im Leben in Hekhalot literature—and in my opinion there is little justification for arguing that the whole testing of the adept derives from the brief dictum on the part of Akiba in the Babylonian Talmud—this does not mean that for that reason it chronologically precedes the Talmud version. In other words, even if the literary relationship of the Babylonian and Hekhalot versions are to be regarded as reversed, and the Babylonian Talmud "cites" a tradition preserved more extensively and "more originally" in Hekhalot literature, this tradition is not necessarily in any way more ancient than the Babylonian Talmud (as Scholem presupposes). It is very possible, and even probable, that the tradition as a whole is late. Halperin appears to be so predisposed by his (justified) rejection of an early dating for ecstatic Merkavah mysticism that he does not differentiate sufficiently here.

2.2.4. Summary

The combination of the pardes narrative with the water episode is redactional and thereby secondary. This is valid for Hekhalot literature as

63 Only in the New York Ms.; all the other manuscripts have peloni almoni, yet the reading "Ben Azzai" should be more meaningful; so also Halperin, op. cit. (n. 33), p. 88, n. 79.
64 See above p. 6.
71 Scholem, op. cit. (n. 35: Major Trends), p. 53. Gruenwald, who claims for himself, against Scholem, the classification of the Hekhalot tradition as preceding the Bavli tradition (op. cit. [n. 1], p. 88) has wrongly interpreted what are in fact Scholem's misleading statements.
well as for the one Talmudic attestation (bHag 14b). The original *Sitz im Leben* of the *pardes* narrative is the rabbinic school; the *Sitz im Leben* of the water episode is Merkavah mysticism. The latter observation is of course still very vague. It says nothing about whether Merkavah mysticism as an exegetical discipline is involved (the connection should be noted in all the manuscripts with Ez. 1:27), or as actually practised (ecstatic), or as a literary form (as a late style of the ecstatic form?). Present-day research is far from providing an answer to these questions. Finally, even less is it possible to assert anything concerning the age of this tradition in the context of Merkavah mysticism, although the fact that it appears in “classic” rabbinic literature only in the Babylonian Talmud, and not in the earlier sources, suggests a relatively late dating.

3. Comparison

I come now to the last section of this paper, a comparison of 2 Corinthians 12:1-4 with the rabbinic *pardes* narrative, and will begin with a brief recapitulation of Scholem’s interpretation.

He depends primarily on the common use of the term *pardes* by Paul and the rabbinic story. Although, according to Scholem, the rabbinic version employs the term in the joint sense of “orchard” and “Paradise” attached to the word, it is clear that the technical meaning of a heavenly “dwelling-place of the righteous” predominates. This proves that the talmudic baraita uses the same terminology as Paul. Scholem undertakes no further analysis of the text but cites the attestation referred to above from the Slavonic Book of Enoch and Vita Adae et Evae (or The Apocalypse of Moses), and then goes on: “The familiar idea that the ecstatic sees in his lifetime what other people see only after death recurs, therefore, in Paul’s as well as the rabbis’ journey to heaven”. He admittedly refers to a “significant difference” between Paul and the rabbis, namely, that Paul was “carried off” into Paradise whereas the rabbis “entered” into it, but believes that this difference is to be traced to the simultaneous metaphorical linguistic usage of the rabbinic story. Concerning the findings as a whole, there can in consequence be no doubt: ecstatic heavenly journeys appear throughout Jewish literature from the early apocalypses to the writings of Hekhalot literature. “Paul’s testimony is a link between these older Jewish texts and the Gnosis of the Tannaitic Merkavah mystics”. The main weakness of this “comparison” is obvious. It is the arbitrary and selective choice of basically one term only, from which far-reaching conclusions are drawn. An exact and solid literary analysis is entirely missing.

73 Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, § 407 and § 258.
But even on the plane of verbal comparison, if it is possible so to describe the method applied by Scholem, his interpretation is inadequate. He mentions, as has been noted, that Paul speaks of being "carried off" (ἀποφαίνειν) whereas the rabbis talk of "entering" (lehiḳkanes) into pardes, but he plays this difference down. In effect, there exists neither in classic rabbinic nor in Hekhalot literature a term comparable to Paul's ἀποφάινειν, to say nothing of the fact that no attention is paid to the peculiarity of Paul's linguistic usage. Furthermore, nothing at all is said about Paul's experience being focused on "hearing" (Paul hears "words that may not be said") whereas the rabbis' heavenly journey has essentially to do with seeing "the king in his beauty upon the throne". The Merkavah mystics certainly also hear something in their ascent into heaven (above all songs and chanting), but we learn nothing of what Paul hears. It is even possible to go still further than Scholem and compare the "words that may not be said" with the often incomprehensible and "stuttering" (reminiscent of glossolalia) nomina barbarum of Hekhalot literature; but a direct comparison of this nature would be equally inappropriate. Finally, as has been indicated already, the rabbinic pardes cannot be compared without further ado with the Pauline παρὰδεικνύον in the third heaven. It is also not correct that the word pardes in the rabbinic narrative can mean orchard as well as Paradise, but rather that two different layers of tradition overlap in the story.

The somewhat inconsistent method employed by Scholem of an arbitrary verbal comparison thus entirely fails to support his far-reaching thesis that Paul's ecstatic experience participates in the wide stream of Jewish (and finally Christian) mystical experience, and even as connecting link between apocalyptic and Merkavah mysticism is of not inconsiderable importance (indirectly at least) for the early dating of Merkavah mysticism favoured by Scholem. The next and without doubt more suitable methodological step of the literary analysis carried out above defines and establishes this negative result. It has been shown that the rabbinic pardes narrative is to be understood as originally metaphorical, and that it only came to be interpreted as an account of an ascent in the sense of Merkavah mysticism in the course of a long process of tradition. We do not know when this change began, but it was certainly a great deal later than the time at which Paul wrote his letter. By contrast, it can hardly have been by chance that the very motif that was most probably native to Merkavah mysticism - the water episode - is absent from Paul's account, since this lacks in general any reference to the threats and testing of the adept so characteristic qua motif of Merkavah mysticism.

It is therefore incomprehensible to me how Scholem (op. cit. [n. 2], p. 16) can see, precisely in the threat motif of the baraita, although "under a different aspect", a connection with Paul's account of his ascent in Corinthians. It may simply be a question here of a somewhat unsuccessful rhetorical figure of speech with which Scholem leads over from the previously cited Hekhalot texts to Corinthians.
a form of Merkavah mysticism, however more closely defined, provides the background for Paul's famous account: that is to say, Merkavah mysticism does not yield the key, either, to the interpretation of the ecstatic experience to which Paul laid claim.

4. Methodological reflections

With this negative outcome of a single isolated comparison, is the relationship between the New Testament and Merkavah mysticism also determined negatively as a whole, and is the topic thereby closed? This would in my opinion likewise be a wrong conclusion to arrive at, not only because there may be other points of contact between the New Testament and Hekhalot literature (e.g., Revelation, especially chapter 4), but above all from basic methodological reflections. I would like, therefore, to end with a few methodological remarks in regard to the relationship between the New Testament and Hekhalot literature — and in the last resort this is valid for the whole of rabbinic literature — and to the "place value" in general of Hekhalot literature within ancient Jewish literature.

What Scholem has demonstrated is nothing but a classic example of what S. Sandmel called "parallelomania". Parallels taken from different contexts and different writings are placed in relation with one another, and from these associations great correlations are reached concerned with the history of ideas. By contrast, the analysis carried out above examines and subsequently compares a (presumed) common motif in its respective literary context. But this method is also unsatisfactory, though not because the finding in the present case was negative, since in another instance it might be positive. The outcome, whether positive or negative, is in principle irrelevant to the correctness or incorrectness of the methodological process. The cause of unease is much more that even as careful an analysis of a motif as possible, paying full regard to its literary domain, is unable to arrive at any conclusion on the place-value of the motif in the respective literature. We cannot assess this until the relevant literature as a whole is subjected to analysis, and its various themes, formulations of problems and points of emphasis are examined. In other words, even a comparison of individual motifs is only really strong enough for assertions to be made within a comparison of complete literary systems. This does not mean that the comparison of isolated motifs is foolish, but that it can always only be provisional, since a comparison of motifs presupposes in the last resort a comparison of systems, and not vice versa.

The consequences for our theme are manifest. It is only possible to make a reliable assertion concerning the relationship of Hekhalot literature and

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78 Cf. on this Gruenwald, op. cit. (n. 1) pp. 62-69.
80 I can therefore subscribe only with qualifications to G. Stemberger's statements in BuL 56, 1983, p. 9.
the New Testament (as also of Hekhalot literature and rabbinic literature in the narrow as well as the apocalyptic sense, to say nothing of Gnosis), and indeed in regard both to systems as well as to individual motifs, if the respective literatures are analysed in their own structure. This means, too, that it is firstly a question of taking account of the fact that we have to do with differing literatures, and therefore that the individual motifs are communicated only through the medium of the literature and for that reason allow no direct historical conclusions to be drawn (a circumstance also not taken sufficiently into consideration by Scholem). Where the New Testament is concerned, we are fortunate in possessing a relatively accessible literary complex, research into which is incomparably more advanced than into rabbinic literature, let alone Hekhalot literature. Scrutiny of Hekhalot literature has still only just begun. However pioneering Scholem's work has been in this field, and although it is his merit to have directed attention to this genre of literature, it must now be stressed that as a complex it has to be subjected to an inner analysis; i.e., its own formulations of problems have to be ascertained and endogenous patterns of interpretation outlined. Hasty comparisons are an obstacle here. The tracing of widely-spaced lines here and there, the big sketch of the history of ideas, is rather dangerous since it basically produces only clichés that are the more willingly accepted by neighbouring fields of scholarship the more generalised they are, and the more they elude verification.\footnote{A typical example is also the undifferentiated use by Scholem of the concept "Gnosis", a phenomenon pertaining to the history of religion insufficiently clarified as to its presuppositions. Cf. also the title of the book by J. Maier, \textit{Vom Kultus zur Gnosis}, Salzburg 1964.}