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# **The Merkavah in Rabbinic Midrashim**

The Evolution of a Mystical Image

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

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## Digest

The chariot (*Merkavah*) is an image from biblical times. Its importance stems from an implicit suggestion that when prophecy occurred outside of the Temple and the Land of Israel, the *Merkavah* or details of its appearance were often reported. The rabbis observed this, and looking at their own situation of exile, they often spoke about this *Merkavah*, however they spoke of this vehicle in spite of a warning. The rabbis expounded on the details, particulars, and meaning of the *Merkavah* as these applied to their situation in dispersion.

This thesis tries to compile, investigate and summarize all the Midrashim about the *Merkavah* from the time of the Bible until the early Middle Ages. This study follows a historical progression of the Midrashim and the *Merkavah* described in those Midrashim from the pre-midrashic (before 200 C.E.), early midrashic (200-640 C.E.), middle midrashic (640-1000 C.E.), and late midrashic periods (after 1000 C.E.). Each of these different periods has a unique contribution to make towards the understanding of the *Merkavah* and its evolution.

Augmenting this study will be the detail given to the specific language the writers employed in various passages. Similar language and parallels will tell the reader not only the historical progression, but the linguistic progression of certain motifs as well. Earlier Midrashim may concentrate more on using one motif, while later writings might express a combination of motifs. Additionally, parallels which exist in earlier material may begin to be treated separately as the thesis progresses. However, these will be secondary to the question why, in light of danger, the rabbis chose to write about the *Merkavah* in a way which was open for all to read.



## Abbreviatons

AL - Angelic Liturgy scroll

BM - Batei Midrashot

BT - Talmud Bavli

DR - Deuteronomy Rabbah

ER - Exodus Rabbah

GR - Genesis Rabbah

LR - Leviticus Rabbah

MH - Midrash Hagadol

NR - Numbers Rabbah

OM - Otzer Midrashim

PDRE - Pirkei De'Rabbi Eleazar

PDRK - Pesikta De'Rav Kahana

SER - Seder Eliyahu Rabbah

SO - Seder Olam

SOR - Seder Olam Rabbah

SOSR - Song of Songs Rabbah

TB - Tanchuma, Buber

TC - Throne-Chariot scroll

TY - Talmud Yerusalmi

YS - Yalkut Shemoni

YT - Tanchuma Yelamdeinu

## INTRODUCTION

Such then was the appearance of the creatures. With them was something that looked like burning coals of fire. This fire, suggestive of torches, kept moving about among the creatures; the fire had a radiance, and lightning issued from the fire. Dashing to and fro [among] the creatures was something that looked like flares.

As I gazed on the creatures, I saw one wheel on the ground next to each of the four-faced creatures. As for the appearance and structure of the wheels, they gleamed like beryl. All four had the same form; the appearance and structure of each was as of two wheels cutting through each other. And when they moved, each could move in the direction of any of its four quarters; they did not veer when they moved. Their rims were tall and frightening, for the rims of all four were covered all over with eyes.<sup>1</sup>

This passage from Ezekiel 1:13-18 has usually confused most who read it. The passage describes an awesome experience of a Prophet of God with some sort of vehicle that, even with its description, is beyond the imagination of most. In spite of this, for the rabbis this passage represented something more than just a Divine means of transportation for God. For them it was the ability of an exiled Prophet, a Jew, to be touched in his dispersion as one of the messengers of the chosen people of God. In the middle of the desperation of exile, God was still with Ezekiel, and the rabbis and Jewish people have been in search of that reaffirmation throughout the centuries. This was a particular experience, and it centered around a *Merkavah* - a chariot which developed into a type of mysticism whose goal was to reconnect the Jew to the Divine. How the *Merkavah* became a type of mysticism is better appreciated when one considers the background and the evolution of this mystical image.

The word *Merkavah* and what it came to represent in rabbinic literature is a puzzle. Of the many occurrences of *Merkavah* in the Bible, only six of over forty refer to a chariot or vehicle which belongs to God. In addition to these few descriptions, other biblical verses have come to represent the *Merkavah*. While never mentioning the word *Merkavah*, the books of Ezekiel and Daniel were understood by the rabbis to contain descriptions of the *Merkavah* in human words. They described circles in circles and fantastic beings which this world has never known. Other verses were brought into the picture, but in the midst of speculation and attempting to understand these eclectic

passages, Rabbinic tradition issued a warning.

After looking at the passages of the Bible, the Mishnah told the reader that speculation into the *Merkavah* was dangerous. It was so dangerous that it was not to be expounded unless the person doing so "understands from his own discernment." Indeed the rabbinic sources from both of the Talmuds confirmed that there were dangers to speculation, especially to the novice. The Talmuds told of people who were consumed by fire when they speculated about the *Merkavah*. Opposite to this terrible experience were accounts in which the *Merkavah* transported to Sinai the one so engaged so he could experience the giving of Torah.

The purpose of this inquiry is to try to find answers to the questions of how the authors of Midrashim saw and speculated about the *Merkavah* and why they did so in the rabbinic Midrashim. The second of these questions will be answered by the material itself, since the Midrashim will usually hint at the point they are trying to make. The first question of how needs some explanation.

There is a dearth of material about this topic in this time period. Most of the works which deal with *Merkavah* focus on the time after the genre of Midrash ended. Books addressing the seeds of the *Merkavah* do exist, and they are useful for gaining a broad view of *Merkavah*. Authors who have written include Gershom G. Scholem who has written extensively about Jewish mysticism. Most of his work concentrates on the time when the midrashic period had come to an end and *Merkavah* represented a type of mystical speculation. His essay entitled "Merkabah Mysticism and Jewish Gnosticism" in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* is a good synopsis of the *Merkavah* speculations which came from the material which is the focus of this thesis. In addition Moshe Idel's fine work *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* offers a great history of the ideas of Jewish mysticism throughout the ages. It helps the reader to understand the "mission" of the kabbalist to recreate certain experiences, but it does not address the mystical *Merkavah* on the midrashic level.<sup>3</sup>

Works which bring a great deal of insight with them are mainly by two wonderful scholars. *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism*, by Ira Chernus, give in great detail an account of the various Midrashim which deal with Sinai and fire and their connection to the *Merkavah*. This is a good source for finding some parallels on this particular aspect of the *Merkavah*, but there is more literature about *Merkavah* which has little to do with Sinai or fire.<sup>4</sup>

Finally there is David Halperin who has made two great contributions to this subject. Halperin's doctoral dissertation, "Merkabah and Ma'aseh Merkabah,"<sup>5</sup> concentrates most of its focus on the *Merkavah* in the Talmuds and addresses some of the themes and parallels of the *Merkavah* in Midrashim, but it is by no means a complete view as the midrashic writings are not the focus of Halperin's work. Halperin's second and more comprehensive work is *Faces of the Chariot* in which he attempts to address the *Merkavah* and all the themes and characters which relate to the *Merkavah*.<sup>6</sup> *Faces* is a fantastic look at the *Merkavah* and the parallels to it in Jewish and Christian sources. These two works also assisted in giving ideas and themes to look for in the Midrashim.

None of these works specifically address the Midrashim and the *Merkavah* which grew out of those Midrashim. While there is a great deal of literature about the *Merkavah* in many sources, looking at it in the Midrashim helps to show the themes and parallels that developed in a literature which was not just intended for the scholarly elite.

Before getting into the specifics of this investigation, it would be helpful for the reader to know where the sources for this thesis are found and how those sources are translated in the text. Being blessed by technology, the Davka CD-Rom search makes finding many of the Midrashim easier.<sup>7</sup> Many of the works are in the CD-Rom program, but some are not. Finding the other sources is a matter of looking the traditional way by using indexes and thumbing through the tomes for pertinent passages. In addition it needs to be noted that technology is not always as wonderful as it seems. There are passages found which are not included in the editions of the Midrashim on the search program.

Translations were achieved in one of two ways. Several of the midrashic works have standard English translations, and the passages from these translations are cited in the endnotes. Some works have no English translation. In the cases where there were no standard translations, the author either translated the passage and noted this, or left the passage untranslated in those cases where the Hebrew conveyed a better understanding than an English translation could have.

This investigation is looking for themes and parallels in Bible, Talmud, and Midrashim about the *Merkavah*. If a parallel is found to a Midrash in an early period and in a late period, then it can be assumed that this version survived and was the standard Midrash on this verse. If, however, there are many passages which appear to use similar words or reach similar conclusions, then a judgment must be made as to whether or not such an occurrence is a thematic parallel. A direct parallel is easy to identify since all the words and proof texts are in the same order. A thematic parallel exists where two texts are not written in the same way, or do not use the same proof texts, but in spite of this, they share enough words and enough of a common theme or message to be considered parallels.

This inquiry will attempt to follow an historical progression through what most modern scholars consider to be the chronological order of the Midrashim. The Bible will provide the first material since it contains the first occurrences of a Divine *Merkavah*. This is a significant point since the word *Merkavah* is used regarding both terrestrial and extraterrestrial *Merkavot*. After determining which of these are of a Divine nature, the next texts to be addressed will be the Dead Sea Scrolls and some of the apocryphal writings from the intertestamental period. These texts are crucial for understanding the later periods since they provide the only record of the *Merkavah* prior to the year 200 C.E. when the Mishnah was compiled.

The Mishnah and Talmuds, while not Midrashim, are also valuable to this study; they contain the warnings and some of the first accounts of people speculating on the

*Merkavah*. They also provide some of the base material for later parallels. Additionally, this is the time in literary history when the first Midrashim were written. This early period occurred during the years 400-640 C.E. After this early period, the investigation will narrow its focus to major Midrashim. These Midrashim will be grouped in chapters, and these groups and chapters will be determined by their chronological order. The middle period will represent those Midrashim compiled between 640-1000 C.E., and the last period will be those after 1000 C.E.

The benefit to approaching the *Merkavah* in Rabbinic Midrashim in this manner is that it affords an historical understanding and progression of the *Merkavah*. Should there be parallels, the words themselves can determine if the parallels are direct or thematic. If there are parallels which span more than one time period, any differences can be examined with the backdrop of their historical placement in the Midrash, and these differences may display an historical progression in the Midrash.

This is also a time period where *Merkavah* and the speculation on *Merkavah* begins to blossom. There are hundreds of passages in this section which focus on the *Merkavah*, but not all of them are Midrash per se. At this point it was necessary to make decisions on which passages were Midrashim and which were not and the criteria for this will be spelled out at the beginning of Chapter 4 of this work.

After using this method to investigate the various Midrashim, it is hoped that the questions about why the rabbis spoke of the *Merkavah* will be answered. The answer is of particular interest given the prohibition of the Mishnah and, as evidenced by the *Merkavah*'s frequent mention in the midrashic writings, an almost total disregard for the prohibition. Additionally, what was the promise or power which such an experience offered to the Jew who was looking for the reassurance that he was not exiled from his God when he was exiled from the Land of Israel?



1. *Tanakh*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 893-4.
2. Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1974, 3rd ed.), 40-79.
3. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).
4. Ira Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1982).
5. David Halperin, "Merkabah and Ma'aseh Merkabah," doctoral dissertation, (University of California at Berkley, 1977).
6. David Halperin, *Faces of the Chariot*, (Tubingen: Mohr, 1988).
7. *CD-rom: Judaic Classics Library*, 2nd ed. (Israel: The Institute for Computers in Jewish Life and Davka Corp., 1991-1992).

## CHAPTER 1-THE BIBLICAL SOURCES

The word *Merkavah* appears forty-four times in the Jewish Bible according to the *Even-Shoshan Concordance*.<sup>1</sup> The meanings for the word *Merkavah* vary, ranging from the common definition of a chariot or wagon to images on the Ark of the covenant<sup>2</sup> or vehicles of Divine nature.<sup>3</sup> The first of these meanings applies to the horse and buggy used in transportation, or the horse and chariot of war, but the last two do not. The issue for this thesis involves those *Merkavot* which fall into the last two categories.

During the progression of Jewish history, the word *Merkavah* has taken on an expanded definition. Various writers have transformed this word from a modest means of mortal transportation into an essential part of the Divine retinue. God and the heavenly entourage employ the *Merkavah* for various reasons. The *Merkavah* represents a link between the terrestrial and the extraterrestrial. To begin the investigation, it is helpful first to identify those passages in the Jewish Bible where the use of *Merkavah* contains a Divine component.

There are several appearances of the word *Merkavah* in the Bible. As mentioned above, most of these refer to those *Merkavot* which are made and used by mortals. In the first five books of the Jewish Bible (hereafter referred to as Torah) there are only four occurrences of *Merkavah*. Two of these deal with Joseph and his chariot, and the other two come from the destruction of Pharaoh's army at the sea. None of these mentions of *Merkavah* bear any overt hint of a Divine nature.

The next division of the Jewish Bible, the Prophets, contains the vast majority of references to the *Merkavah*. Of the thirty-two mentions of *Merkavah* in this section of the Bible, six have connotations of being more than mortal chariots. The first mention of a *Merkavah* of God comes in Isaiah 66:15, where the prophet forecasts that the Divine legions of God will come to punish those who defile themselves.

See, the LORD is coming with fire-His chariots are like a whirlwind-to vent His anger in fury, His rebuke in flaming fire. <sup>4</sup>



Next are a set of occurrences which come from the prophet Zechariah, who sees chariots and angels coming out from between two mountains. The charioteers are reportedly angels who talk to the confused prophet. When the bewildered Zechariah asks, "What are those?" he is told the horses represent winds which have just left the presence of God.

I looked up again, and I saw: Four chariots were coming out from between the two mountains; the mountains were of copper. The horses of the first chariot were bay, the horses of the second chariot were black; the horses of the third chariot were white, and the horses of the fourth chariot were spotted-dappled. And I spoke up and asked the angel who talked with me: "What are those my lord?" In reply, the angel said to me, "Those are the four winds of heaven coming out after presenting themselves to the Lord of all the earth. (Zechariah 6:1-5)<sup>5</sup>

However, it is not just the angels or legions who drive chariots. The book of Habakkuk reports another dimension of the *Merkavah*. In this instance the situation is different. As opposed to ordering the Divine legions above to wreak punishment, God has a Divine chariot which is for Divine transportation.

Are You wroth, O LORD, with Neharim? Is Your anger against Neharim, Your rage against Yam--That You are driving Your steeds, Your victorious chariot? (Habakkuk 3:8)<sup>6</sup>

So, not only does the *Merkavah* pick up a Divine hint from the prophets, but the *Merkavah* also has different qualities, from being the agent of God, to direct utilization by the Divine.

General consensus has concluded that there are other texts in the Jewish Bible which describe the *Merkavah*. These texts include the first and tenth chapter of Ezekiel and the tenth chapter of the book of Daniel. All of these texts share a description of an object or being which has a color similar to beryl. In addition, each of the texts contains a fantastic supernatural element.

As I gazed on the creatures, I saw one wheel on the ground next to each of the four-faced creatures. As for the appearance of the structure of the wheels, they gleamed like beryl. All four had the same form; the appearance and structure of each was as of two wheels cutting through each other. And when they moved, each could move in the direction of any of its four quarters; they did not veer when they moved. (Ezekiel 1:15-17)<sup>7</sup>

I could see that there were four wheels beside the cherubs, one wheel beside each of the cherubs; as for the appearance of the wheels, they gleamed like the beryl stone. In appearance, the four had the same form, as if there were two wheels cutting through each

other. And when they moved, each could move in the direction of any of its four quarters; they did not veer as they moved. (Ezekiel 10:9-10)<sup>8</sup>

His body was like beryl, his face had the appearance of lightning, his eyes were like flaming torches, his arms and legs had the color of burnished bronze, and the sound of his speech was like the noise of a multitude. (Daniel 10:6)<sup>9</sup>

The object or being which has a similarity to the color seems to be the connection which makes for the assumption that Daniel and Ezekiel are speaking about the same thing.

Other chapters of Daniel contain descriptions which connect it to the Zechariah text containing *Merkavah*. In the seventh chapter of Daniel there is a description of four great animals who have the ability to stir up the seas. Although the context differs from that of Zechariah, the four beasts are mentioned again.

In my vision at night, I saw the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea. Four mighty beasts different from each other emerged from the sea. The first was like a lion but had eagles' wings. As I looked on, its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted off the ground and set on its feet like a man and given the mind of a man. Then I saw a second, different beast which was like a bear but raised on one side, and with three fangs in its mouth among its teeth; and it was told, 'arise, eat much meat!' After that, as I looked on, there was another one, like a leopard, and it had on its back four wings like those of a bird; and the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it. After that, as I looked on in the night vision, there was a fourth beast--fearsome, dreadful, and very powerful, with great iron teeth--that devoured and crushed, and stamped the remains with its feet. It was different from all the other beasts which had gone before it; and it had ten horns. (Daniel 7:2-7)<sup>10</sup>

This passage contains several parallels to the previous passage from Zechariah 6:1-5.

The connection between the two descriptions is in the winds and their connection to the beasts and horses. While Daniel 10 and the Ezekiel texts contain no direct mention of the *Merkavah*, here a connection between the winds and beasts links the Daniel 7 text to the *Merkavah* via the Zechariah text. Since *Merkavah* is used in Zechariah, it is inferred that at least Daniel 7, if not all the Daniel texts, are describing the same object. The similarities between these biblical texts were apparent even in the days before the Mishnah, as reflected in many of the works not included in the Jewish Bible and the codification of the Mishnah.

#### EXTRA-BIBLICAL WRITINGS

One of the problems with this section will be the lack of coherence between the

differing passages. This is not a problem for this work alone, for it reflects a standing question concerning the dates and origins of these texts. For the purposes of this paper, it is assumed that the Dead Sea Scrolls are dated between 150 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.<sup>11</sup> There exist even greater questions about the dates of the other materials. This section, however disjointed, is useful for the new themes and connections it provides concerning the *Merkavah*.

Several writings have survived which were written during the time between the end of the Jewish Bible and Judah Ha-Nasi's Mishnah. Included in these writings are the Dead Sea Scrolls, Apocrypha, and various Jewish and Christian pseudepigraphic works. It is in this period that some of the themes expressed above in different texts are brought together and augmented by other biblical passages to form a more detailed understanding of the *Merkavah*.

The Dead Sea Scrolls begin this intertestamental period. Some of the scrolls found at Qumran contain passages about the *Merkavah*. The first of these passages comes from Cave IV from a fragment called "the Angelic Liturgy" (AL). This particular passage was translated by and commented upon by David Halperin in his book, *The Faces of the Chariot*.

- 1 They give blessing as they raise themselves;
- 2 A sound of divine silence.
- 3 [ ] and tumultuous chant as they lift their wings;
- 4 A sound of divine silence.
- 5 They bless the image of the merkabah-throne
- 6 Above the firmament of the cherubim,
- 7 And they hymn the splendor of the firmament of light
- 8 Beneath the seat of his glory.
- 9 When the 'ofanim go, the angels of the holy place return;
- 10 The spirits of the Holy of Holies go forth, like appearances of fire, from
- 11 beneath his glorious wheels [*galgalle kebodo*].
- 12 All around are appearances of fiery grain-ears [? perhaps "rivers or
- 13 "paths"] in the likeness of the *hashmal*;
- 14 Constructions of brightness, gloriously interwoven;
- 15 Wondrous colors, mixed in purity -
- The spirits of the living God that travel about perpetually
- with the glory of the wondrous chariots.
- 16 There is a silent sound of blessing in the tumult of their movement,

- 17 And they praise the holy place when they turn back.
- 18 When they raise themselves, they raise wondrously;
- 19 And when they return (?) they stand still.
- 20 The joyfully sound of hymning becomes quiet
- 21 And the silent blessing of God.
- 22 In all the camps of God...<sup>12</sup>

In this short passage there is a collection of several different biblical sources, and it includes allusions to other biblical texts, which until now were not directly associated with *Merkavah*. Though the Qumran passages are outside the scope of the midrashim, they do offer important information concerning some connections made in the midrashim and how the *Merkavah* is viewed before the rabbinic period.

There are many biblical passages alluded to or quoted in the AL from Qumran. A biblical passage, previously not associated directly with the word *Merkavah*, is alluded to in lines 1-6. The reference to the chanting of the wings of the unknown creature is an allusion to Ezekiel 3:12-13 which states

Then a spirit carried me away, and behind me I heard a great roaring sound: "Blessed is the Presence of the LORD, in his place," with the sound of the wings of the creatures beating against one another, and the sound of the heels beside them--a great roaring sound.<sup>13</sup>

Then this passage imports an allusion from Ezekiel 10:9 by referring to the "fire from beneath his glorious wheels." The imagery of this verse is used in lines 9-11. Then in line 13 AL possibly skips to Ezekiel 8:2 in using the phrase, "in the likeness of the *hashmal*." This conclusion could have come by linking the one occurrence in the Jewish Bible where *hashmal*<sup>14</sup> is employed to describe some other fantastic being.

As I looked, there was a figure that had the appearance of fire: from what appeared as his loins down, [he was] fire; and from his loins up, his appearance was resplendent and had the color of amber. (Ezekiel 8:2)<sup>14</sup>

Lines 16-17 bear a resemblance to Ezekiel 10:5, but in AL, the voice of God is absent from the text. 18-20 are tied to Ezekiel 10:15-17 where the prophet describes the ascent of the *cherubim*:

The cherubs ascended; those were the creatures that I had seen by the Chebar Canal. Whenever the cherubs went, the wheels went beside them; and when the cherubs

lifted their wings to ascend from the earth, the wheels did not roll away from their side. When those stood still, these stood still; and when those ascended, these ascended with them, for the spirit of the creature was in them.<sup>15</sup>

From this Qumran passage another biblical passage is introduced into the *Merkavah* theme in the last line of the hymn from the AL. This possibly refers to II Chronicles 31:2 where Hezekiah is reported to have reinstalled the Levitical priesthood after destroying all the competing cults in Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim and Manasseh.

When all this was finished, all Israel who were present went out into the towns of Judah and smashed the pillars, cut down the sacred posts, demolished the shrines and altars throughout Judah and Benjamin, and throughout Ephraim and Manasseh, to the very last one. Then all the Israelites returned to their towns, each to his possession.

Hezekiah reconstituted the divisions of the priests and Levites, each man of the priests and Levites according to his office, for the burnt offerings, the offerings of well-being, to minister, and to sing hymns and praises in the gates of the courts of the LORD (II Chronicles 31:1-2)<sup>16</sup>

AL offers additions to understanding of the *Merkavah*. Since the Bible does not clearly specify this, AL is the first text where the visions of Ezekiel are directly associated with *Merkavah*. It combines several different biblical images, which to this point were not correlated. The passages from Ezekiel and Daniel in the Bible did not contain the word *Merkavah*, though it is widely assumed that they are direct descriptions. The AL adds further examples of this practice. Chapters 3 and 8 of Ezekiel and chapter 31 from II Chronicles are new inclusions as descriptions of the *Merkavah*.

The AL and its mention of the *Merkavah* was not a unique find at Qumran. Among the various fragments was one which Geza Vermes entitled "The Divine Throne-Chariot" (TC). It appears to be a parallel since it contains several of the same images as AL, and it gives new information as a result of the differences.

1           The Cherubim bless the image of the Throne-Chariot above the firmament, and they  
2           praise the majesty of the fiery firmament beneath the seat of his glory. And between the  
3           turning wheels, angels of holiness come and go, as it were a fiery vision of most holy spirits;  
4           and about them flow seeming rivulets of fire, like gleaming bronze, a radiance of many  
5           gorgeous colors, of marvelous pigments magnificently mingled.

6           The spirits of the Living God move perpetually with the glory of the wonderful  
7           Chariot. The small voice of blessing accompanies the tumult as they depart, and on the path



8 of their return they worship the Holy One. Ascending, they rise marvelously; settling, they  
 9 stay still. The sound of joyful praise is silenced and there is a small voice of blessing in all  
 10 the camp of God. And a voice of praise resounds from the midst of all their divisions in  
 11 worship. And each one in his place, all their numbered ones sing hymns of praise.<sup>17</sup>

This hymn appears to be a parallel of AL. If this is the case, then it may be possible to use them together in order to answer some questions about *Merkavah* at Qumran. The undefined "they" from AL lines #1, #3, #5, #7, and 17-19 poses a difficult question of identity. According to TC, these are the cherubim, but AL specifically states that they exist "Above the firmament of the cherubim."<sup>18</sup> Clearly this refers to some extraterrestrial creature and not to humans, but the identity of these creatures is questionable, unless cherubim are allowed to venture beyond their plane of existence.

The next identification which is possible is that between the spirits of the Holy of Holies (AL) and the angels of holiness (TC). Both exist around the wheels of the *Merkavah*. They also have a similarity in that they have the appearance of a bright substance. AL describes their appearance as *hashmal*, but their exact form is illegible according to Halperin.<sup>19</sup> TC also describes these beings as fire, which gives an idea of the exact appearance of *hashmal*. It also describes their form as rivulets, and thus clarifies an illegible part of the text in AL, lines 12-13.

There are also two descriptions of the sound which the cherubim make as they rise and the sound of the blessing of God which is heard in all the camps. AL describes this as a "silent sound," while TC uses the term "small voice."<sup>20</sup>

These two passages from the Dead Sea Scrolls add much to the picture of the progression of *Merkavah* beyond the Bible. First, they tie the Ezekiel texts together with the *Merkavah*, a link which could only be assumed without the key connection of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Next, they offer some identification of the word *hashmal*. By the comparison of the two texts, it is now possible to describe *hashmal* as something which bears a likeness to fire. This is significant as *hashmal* is often used in descriptions of the *Merkavah*.

The Bible begins to lay the foundation for the *Merkavah*, and its later growth as a fixture in the world of the Divine. While Zechariah and Isaiah offer descriptions of the chariots which are at the disposal of God, the Qumran texts describe the *Merkavah* of God. This comports best with the description from Habakkuk where a Divine *Merkavah* is used by God for waging war. The Qumran texts do not describe a *Merkavah* which is employed in battle; however, there is a vehicle which is praised by the angels and propelled by them.

Another post biblical source for the *Merkavah* is the book of Enoch. In *Faces of the Chariot*, Halperin presents the book of Enoch as a critical link to the understanding of the total picture of the *Merkavah*. He reports that the origins of the book of Enoch probably stem come from one source. In James Bruce brought manuscripts acquired on an exploration back with him from Ethiopia. The Ethiopian manuscripts had come from a Greek text, which ultimately came from an Aramaic text which was not discovered until Qumran. Of the five books which make up the text, the oldest, "Book of Watches," and the most recent, "Book of Parables," were included in Halperin's *Faces*, and are pertinent to this paper.<sup>21</sup>

There are references to different themes and aspects of the Throne-Merkavah in Enoch. Many of these deal with the Throne or Castle of God. Of these, chapter 14 of the first book of Enoch contains passages bearing a resemblance to Daniel 7:9-10 in that God is dressed in white. There is also a similarity between the Ezekiel vision in 1:22 and Enoch where there is a transparent throne. This may also bear a similarity to the previously discussed passage from AL:

5       They bless the image of the merkabah-throne  
6                               Above the firmament of the cherubim.  
7       And they hymn the splendor of the firmament of light  
8                               Beneath the seat of his glory.<sup>22</sup>

If the throne or firmament is clear, then it would be possible for the cherubim to behold the glory of God and His throne yet never enter that plane.

*Faces* also deals with a rebuke that Enoch gives to the angels, but it does not overtly pertain to the *Merkavah*. Halperin then moves to Enoch's "Book of Parables" where the phrase "Son of man" is used. Now, for a consideration of the passages that have a greater amount of overt relevance.

One such significant passage draws a connection between Psalm 104 and the fourteenth chapter of the book of Enoch which reads:

Behold, in the vision clouds invited me and a mist summoned me, and the course of the stars and the lightnings sped and hastened me, and the winds in the vision caused me to fly and lifted me upward, and bore me into heaven.

And I looked and saw therein a lofty throne: its appearance was as crystal, and the wheels thereof as the shining sun, and there was the vision of the cherubim. And from underneath the throne came streams of flaming fire so that I could not look thereon.

And the Great Glory sat thereon, and His raiment shone more brightly than the sun and was whiter than any snow.<sup>23</sup>

Compare this with the following passage from Psalm 104.

wrapped in a robe of light;  
You spread the heavens like a tent cloth.  
He sets the rafters of his lofts in the waters,  
and makes the clouds his chariot,  
moves on the wings of the wind.  
He makes the winds his messengers,  
fiery flames His servants. (Psalms 104:2-4)<sup>24</sup>

More features of the *Merkavah* are added to by this Enoch passage. First, there was no direct tie between Psalm 104 and *Merkavah* until this passage. Due to the similarity there are new connections made. To begin, the notion that the *Merkavah* might be made from clouds uses the biblical imagery for the first time outside of the Bible.<sup>25</sup> In addition, this passage from Enoch takes the idea that God wears light as a garment and that the garment is white and thus combines the imagery of the Psalm with Daniel 7:9, "His garment was like white snow."<sup>26</sup> Finally, there is the shared picture of the winds doing the bidding of God. Halperin uses this text to show a direct connection between Midrash Tanhuma and Psalm 104.<sup>27</sup> Enoch is the earliest text which bridges the two. The rest of this discussion will wait for a later chapter.



There are also three ascension texts, so named for their contents. These texts share the common theme about biblical heroes ascending to the heavens. The first of these describes the ascension of Adam, but this text only echoes some of the previous imagery of a "chariot like the wind and its wheels were fiery."<sup>28</sup> The other two texts, "Ascension of Moses" and "Ascension of Abraham," are from Greek translations and have no exact dates. The "Ascension of Moses" does not disclose any significant new material about *Merkavah*. The "Ascension of Abraham" does bring new information about Abraham's vision, the covenant of the pieces, and links the *Merkavah* to Sinai.<sup>29</sup> According to this text, Abraham had an experience much like that of Ezekiel. The two birds which Abraham did not slaughter were supposed to have flown up to the heavens. Apparently carried up with or by the birds, Abraham sees some of the wonders of the Divine places.

[Chapter] XVI. And I said to the Angel: "Why hast thou brought me up here now, because I cannot now see, for I am already grown weak, and my spirit departeth from me?" And he said to me: "Remain by me; fear not! And He who thou seest come straight towards with a great voice of holiness - that is the Eternal One who loveth thee; but Himself thou canst not see. But let not thy spirit grow faint [on account of the loud crying], for I am with thee, strengthening thee"

XVII. And while he yet spake (and ) lo! fire came against us round about, and a voice was in the fire like a voice of many waters, like the sound of the sea in its uproar. And the angel bent his head with me and worshipped. And I desired to fall down upon the earth, and the high place, on which we stood, [at one moment rose upright,] but at another rolled downwards.

And he said: "Only worship, Abraham, and utter the song which I have taught thee," because there was no earth to fall upon. And I worshiped only, and uttered the song which he had taught me. And he said: "Recite without ceasing."<sup>30</sup>

As the text above indicates, when Abraham arrives there are many wondrous things. First, there is an angelic tour guide who reassures him that he will not die. Then the narrator (Abraham) describes the experience of hearing the speech of God. Fire encircles Abraham and the angel; this fire is directly tied to the voice of God. The voice Abraham describes is "like a voice of many waters."<sup>31</sup> In later texts, the fire descending around Abraham and the angel was a common sign of dabbling in the *Merkavah*.<sup>32</sup> In this context, it is equated with the reception of prophecy, or the voice of God. This is very much in line with the rabbinic assumption that if one studied the Scriptures correctly,

revelation could occur by reading the pages of the text.

This fire and other images from this description also implicate a new chapter from the Bible, Psalm 29.

Ascribe to the LORD, O divine beings,  
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.  
Ascribe to the LORD the glory of His name;  
bow down to the LORD, majestic in holiness.  
The voice of the LORD is over the waters;  
the God of glory thunders,  
the LORD over the mighty waters.  
The voice of the LORD is power;  
the voice of the LORD is majesty;  
the voice of the LORD breaks cedars;  
the LORD shatters the cedars of Lebanon.  
He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,  
Sirion, like a young wild ox.  
The voice of the LORD kindles flames of fire;  
the voice of the LORD convulses in the wilderness;  
the LORD convulses the wilderness of Kadesh;  
the voice of the LORD causes hinds to calve,  
and strips forests bare;  
while in His temple all say "Glory!"  
The LORD sat enthroned at the Flood;  
the LORD sits enthroned, king forever.  
May the LORD grant strength to His people;  
may the LORD bestow on His people wellbeing.<sup>33</sup>

The statement in the Psalm that the voice of God "kindles flames of fire" cannot be fully appreciated without the connection it shares with other biblical verses ascribed to *Merkavah*. The exact term used in the Hebrew is *hotzeiv lahavot eish*. This is significant since the *lahavei eish* appears in Isaiah 66:15 where it was first learned that God had *Merkavot*.<sup>34</sup>

Another picture which comes from this beginning is "like a voice of many waters" (Ezekiel 1:24). Halperin notes that this "many waters" is from Ezekiel 1:24, but it also draws a further connection of Psalm 29 to the *Merkavah*. The "Ascension of Abraham" reports two different occurrences of waters as does Psalm 29. The voice of God is described as having a "voice of many waters" in chapter 18 of "Ascension of Abraham," then it proceeds to tell the reader that the sound was like waters in a tumult. Psalm 29

also has two descriptions of its waters. The first is a regular reference to water, *mayim*, but the second describes a great amount of water, *mayim rabim*. The Psalm places the voice of God in opposition to the waters, while the "Ascension" combines the images of fire and water for the purpose of describing the voice of God.

Finally, the beginning of Abraham's ascension and the end of Psalm 29 share a common theme. That theme is that the faithful of God, God's people, are granted strength by the Divine. This comes out at the beginning of the ascension when the angel assures his mortal guest that he is there to strengthen him. Likewise, in the Psalm the common theme of God doing this for all of Israel is expressed, "The Lord will give strength unto His people" This further buttresses the Psalm's connection to the "Ascension of Abraham," and more important for this investigation, it adds Psalm 29 to the list of possible biblical prooftexts for *Merkavah*.

These biblical and extra-biblical texts come to show certain common themes and connections between themselves and the *Merkavah*. This body of literature paints a picture of the *Merkavah* as well as showing some of the earliest methods for textual associations which are used by authors to create a collage of biblical verses about *Merkavah*. The picture of the *Merkavah* is one of a great and mighty vehicle of God. It has fantastic wheels which either emit fire or have beings made of fire which cause the *Merkavah* to move. The *Merkavah* or the plane on which the *Merkavah* exists is clear, or made of transparent substances.

However, just as important are the textual connections presented by the second layer. These connections are crucial to understanding the methodology of the pre-Rabbinic writers. For example, the connection between the word *Merkavah* and Ezekiel is only conjecture without Qumran to tie them together. Similarly there is no connection of Psalm 104 without Enoch, nor is Psalm 29 a part of the picture of the *Merkavah* without the account of Abraham's ascension. Most of these jumps employ a word association between one or more themes or words that two texts use; to use a Rabbinic term, *gezera*

*sheva*. These *gezeirot shavot* will become more important, as the next level of this investigation begins--the early rabbinic period.

- <sup>1</sup> *Evan-Shoshan Concordance* ( Jerusalem: Kiryat-Sefer, 1990), p.712.
- <sup>2</sup> I Chronicles 28:18.
- <sup>3</sup> Isaiah 66:1.
- <sup>4</sup> *Tanakh*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 760.
- <sup>5</sup> *Tanakh*, 1087.
- <sup>6</sup> *Tanakh*, 1068.
- <sup>7</sup> *Tanakh*, p.894.
- <sup>8</sup> *Tanakh*, p.904.
- <sup>9</sup> *Tanakh*, p. 148.
- <sup>10</sup> *Tanakh*, p.1482.
- <sup>11</sup> G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1990) xiv-xv.
- <sup>12</sup> David Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1988), 51-52 (line numbers are author's addition).
- <sup>13</sup> *Tanakh*, 896.
- <sup>14</sup> i.e. חֲשָׁמֶלָה
- <sup>15</sup> *Tanakh*, p.901. Although the JPS translation ends the verse, "the color of amber," the Hebrew is כְּמַרְאֵה-זָהָר כְּעֵין הַחֲשָׁמֶלָה. This use of *hashmal* assumes the reader knows what it is.
- <sup>16</sup> *Tanakh*, 1614.
- <sup>17</sup> Willis Barnstone ed., *The Other Bible*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 705-706.
- <sup>18</sup> Halperin, pp.51-52.
- <sup>19</sup> op. cit.
- <sup>20</sup> This small voice echoes the appearance of God to Elijah in I Kings 19:12. *Merkavah*.
- <sup>21</sup> *Faces*, Halperin, pp.78-86.

<sup>22</sup> op. cit. p.78.

<sup>23</sup> op. cit. p.79-80.

<sup>24</sup> *Tanakh*, p.1229-1230.

<sup>25</sup> The term רכובו is interpreted to be a chariot, על-כנפי- השם-עבדים רכובו המהלך על-כנפי-  
רוח:

<sup>26</sup> *Tanakh*, 1482.

<sup>27</sup> *Faces*, 81-84.

<sup>28</sup> op. cit. p.97.

<sup>29</sup> op. cit. p.105-109

<sup>30</sup> op. cit. p. 107.

<sup>31</sup> op. cit. p.106-107.

<sup>32</sup> As in Leviticus Rabbah 16:4.

<sup>33</sup> *Tanakh*, 1137-1138.

<sup>34</sup> In Psalm 29:7 וְנִשְׁעֲרוּ בְּלִהְבֵי-אֵשׁ, קול-יהוה חָצַב לְהַבּוֹת אֵשׁ, and in Isaiah 66:15, וְנִשְׁעֲרוּ בְּלִהְבֵי-אֵשׁ.

## CHAPTER 2 - THE EARLY RABBINIC PERIOD

During the early rabbinic period, the *Merkavah* was developed and expanded in talmudic and midrashic sources. This period also presents the further development of *Merkavah* into a type of activity. Among the writings which have survived from this period are the Mishnah, Talmud Yerusalmi (TY), Talmud Bavli (TB), and some of the major Midrashim. All of these works contain some reference to the *Merkavah*. The *Merkavah* or contemplation of the *Merkavah* which takes place during this time receives mixed reactions from different sources.

### MISHNAH & TOSEPHTA

In the Mishnah of Rabbi Judah the Prince, speculation about the *Merkavah* is strictly warned against.

Do not seek knowledge of forbidden sexual matters in the company of three, nor of the works of creation in the company of two, and no one may seek out the *Merkavah*, except in those cases where the person is wise and has understanding from his knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

The passage is terse and confusing, but given the context, the *Merkavah* was considered one of the most censured topics. Why it was censured is unclear from the Mishnah, it is less clear when the Tosephta tells of praise, while the Talmuds present more dangers.

Tosephta recounts a story of Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai riding on a donkey led by Rabbi Eleazar ben 'Arakh. Rabbi Eleazar asks Rabbi Yoḥanan to teach him a chapter about the *Merkavah*. Citing *Hagigah* as his reason, Rabbi Yoḥanan does not grant Rabbi Eleazar's request. At this point Rabbi Eleazar begins to expound the *Merkavah* before his master, and Rabbi Yoḥanan is so moved that he descends from his donkey and kisses his student. From the Tosephta's account it might be possible to assume that a student could dabble in *Merkavah*, even if his master warned him against such practices.<sup>2</sup>

### TALMUD YERUSALMI

The warning which Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai cited had no negative effects in the Tosephta, but in TY the benefits and the dangers become more apparent. In TY

*Hagigah* 2:1, p.77a there is an account and a hint of the danger. The account in TY begins much as in the Tosephta, then TY adds new material to the account from Tosephta.

- [III.A] Not the Chariot before one. Is this also according to R. Aqiba?
- [B] [No!] It is the opinion of all [the sages], in order that a man might know that he should have consideration of the glory of his Creator.
- [C] Has not Rav said, "A man is not permitted to speak on [this] subject in the presence of his master unless he has approved or unless he has served [his apprenticeship]"?
- [D] How does one proceed?
- [E] First his master summarizes for him the chief points of the chapters, then he approves [to the disciple expounding the rest].
- [F] R. Hiyya in the name of R. Yohanan: "Rabbi had a distinguished disciple, and he expounded one chapter in the Work of the Chariot without Rabbi's permission. He was smitten by a skin disease."
- [G] This teaching is like two paths, one of fire and one of snow. If one inclines to this side, one dies by fire; to that side, and one dies by snow. What should one do? Walk in the middle.
- [IV.A] Once Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was going on the road, riding on an ass, and R. Eleazar ben Arakh was walking behind him. [Eleazar] said to Yohanan, "Master, teach me a chapter in the Work of the Chariot."
- [B] [R. Yohanan] said to him, "Have not the sages taught thus: *Nor the Chariot unless he is a sage and understands of his own knowledge?*"
- [C] [R. Eleazar] said to him, "Master give me permission to speak about the subject in your presence." He said to him, "Speak!"
- [D] As soon as R. Eleazar ben Arakh opened [his discourse] on the Work of the Chariot, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai got off the ass, saying, "It is not right that I should be hearing about the glory of my Creator while still seated on an ass!" They went and sat down under a tree.
- [E] Then fire fell from heaven and surrounded them, and the ministering angels skipped before them like wedding guests rejoicing before the bridegroom. An angel answered from the midst of the fire and said, "According to your words, Eleazar ben Arakh, is the Work of the Chariot."
- [F] Immediately all the trees opened their mouths and sang, "Then shall all of the trees of the wood sing for joy." (Ps. 96:12).
- [G] When R. Eleazar ben Arakh finished [expounding] the Work of the Chariot, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai stood up and kissed him upon his head and said, "Blessed be the Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who has given to Abraham our father a wise son who knows how to expound on the glorify of our father who is in heaven. Some expound well, but do not fulfill well; some fulfill well, but do not expound well. Eleazar ben Arakh expounds well and fulfills well. Happy are you, Abraham our father, that Eleazar ben Arakh has come forth from your loins."
- [H] When R. Yose the Priest and R. Simeon ben Nathanel heard [about it], they also began [a discourse] on the Work of the Chariot. They said: it was a day in the summer season, and the earth shook and a rainbow appeared in the cloud. And a [heavenly] echo came forth and said to them, "Behold, the place is vacant for you and the dining couches laid out for you. You and your disciples are destined for the third heaven."<sup>4</sup>

From this lengthy account several new things are learned about the *Merkavah* and its study. The first relates to III.F where it is related that a brilliant, yet unnamed student of Rabbi dabbled in *Merkavah*. The important detail to note is that he did not have permission from his teacher and as a result contracted leprosy. The account of Rabbi's



star student gives a hint of Divine dislike for those who dabble in *Merkavah* without going through proper channels. This differs from the two accounts which follow. In the first, Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh gains the permission of his teacher before speaking. In the last account it may be assumed that these were master teachers since they never asked permission to speak. This is followed by two descriptions of the benefits for those who conduct their contemplation of *Merkavah* well.

The next account of speculation on the *Merkavah* comes when Rabbi Eleazar is leading the donkey of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. Rabbi Eleazar requests to expound the *Merkavah* before his teacher, and Rabbi Yohanan reminds him of the Mishnaic prohibition. Then Rabbi Eleazar pleads with Rabbi Yohanan, and the reluctant teacher grants him permission. In the middle of Rabbi Eleazar's discourse, Rabbi Yohanan dismounts for he claims that it is not proper for him to continue riding while hearing about the glory of his Creator. As soon as the two are seated beneath a tree, fire descends from heaven. The ministering angels are said to have appeared and affirmed the words of Rabbi Eleazar.

This story bears a similar theme to Psalm 29, discussed in Chapter 1. When the psalmist gave a description of the voice of God it too included fire.

The voice of the LORD breaks cedars;  
the LORD shatters the cedars of Lebanon.  
He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,  
Sirion, like a young wild ox. \*  
The voice of the LORD kindles flames of fire;

Thus one may conclude from the description of the results of Rabbi Eleazar's exposition that the voice of God was involved in praising the words of Rabbi Eleazar.

Then there is the second account involving Rabbi Yose the Priest and Rabbi Simeon ben Nathanel. In this instance there is also approval of the speculation, but the sign of approval is not the same as in the previous passage. Here the appearance of a rainbow from a cloud and the heavenly voice echoes Ezekiel 1:28.

Like the appearance of the bow which shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. That was the appearance of the semblance

of the Presence of the LORD. When I beheld it, I flung myself down on my face. And I heard the voice of someone speaking.<sup>5</sup>

The common element between these passages is that by speculation on the *Merkavah*, each achieves a connection to a biblical encounter with God. Both hint at the fact that when they expounded on the forbidden *Merkavah* correctly they were rewarded with prophecy as in the days of the Bible. Thus the *Merkavah* in this instance becomes the vehicle whereby the learned student and teachers were able to reenact a direct connection to the Divine.

#### BABYLONIAN TALMUD

The Babylonian Talmud (BT) presents the text of the *Hagigah* 2:1 Mishnah on page 11b; then the discussion about the *Merkavah* resumes on page 13a. Here there is a debate over what the statement from Mishnah *Hagigah* 2:1, "before one," indicates. Then the passage moves to a discussion about the secrets of Torah and who can know them. Finally the speculation of the *Merkavah* becomes an issue when Rabbi Eleazar goes to Pumbedita and has an audience with the elders there. In an exchange of information the elders tell Rabbi Eleazar about the works of creation, and he instructs them in the *Merkavah*. Important in this instruction is his linkage of the sexual prohibitions from the Mishnah with the prohibition of the *Merkavah*. Rabbi Eleazar tells the elders that the common theme between both of them is that it is better to keep your clothes on (and not discuss the topic) rather than investigate and reveal that which the public should not see. Then there is a piece of anecdotal evidence which reports that a child burned to death when he speculated on the *Merkavah*.

Here too we can see caution about the *Merkavah*. The matter is said to be better left unmentioned in public. To drive the point home Rabbi Eleazar quotes Song of Songs 4:11, "things that are sweeter than honey and milk should be kept under your tongue."<sup>7</sup>

BT proceeds from this idea and attempts to explain passages from Ezekiel 1. BT explains verse 14 by describing the fire as molten metal which is red hot, yet pliable. The discussion then moves to verse 4 which takes up the issue of the four winds. According to

the rabbis it is these winds which go to defeat Nebuchadnezzar. In verse 15 there is a description of a huge creature. A comment from an earlier tradition tells the reader that this is the angel Sandalphon who has a height equal to a journey of five hundred years and makes crowns for God. Ezekiel 3:12 is explained as describing the actions of the creatures whose appearance is described in 1:10. Then the discrepancy between 1:10 and 10:14 is mentioned. This is reconciled when Resh Lakish attributes to mercy the change from the face of an ox in 1:10 to the face of a cherub in 10:14 since the face of the ox brings to mind the golden calf.\*

This passage shows that the rabbis wrestled with the idea of the *Merkavah*, its imagery and inconsistencies. The image of angels being created from a fiery stream every day is offset by Psalms 33:6 which claims that God's voice creates angels. This seems to say that the Bible should not be read literally when it comes to the divine realm. BT also proceeds to discuss chapter 7 of Daniel in an apparent attempt to explain the difficult verses by offering examples to counter the possible claims made in the text. Verse 9, which describes the garb of God as white, is offset by Song of Songs 5:11 which describes it as black. Again, the message seems to be against a literal reading of Scriptures. This causes the BT to bear a great resemblance to TY.

In BT the story of Rabbi Yohanan b. Zakkai exists and appears to be a close parallel of the TY until the praise is given to Eleazar b. 'Arakh. Here there is an addition between the beginning of the praise and the end, when Rabbi Yohanan says

There is one who expounds well but does not carry out well, carries out well but doesn't expound well, but you expound well and you carry out well. Happy are you, our father, Abraham...<sup>9</sup>

Thus in addition to the praise issued forth from the heavens, and the praise recorded in TY, the BT adds to the praise of Rabbi Eleazar. Echoing several passages from chapter 5 of Mishnah Avot, Rabbi Eleazar is said to have wonderful qualities since he both expounds, *derash*, and upholds, *m'kayaim*.<sup>10</sup>

Then, as in TY, the text jumps to the account of two other rabbis who hear of these expositions. A minor difference between TY and BT at this juncture is that Rabbi Simeon is replaced by Rabbi Joshua. The major difference is that Rabbi Yose reports to Rabbi Yohanan the wonders which their speculation produced. Rabbi Yohanan replies,

"Happy are you and happy is your mother, happy the eyes that have seen such a thing. And so, too, you and I in my dream were reclining on Mount Sinai, and an echo came forth from heaven to us, saying, 'Come on up here, come on up here, here are great banquet halls and fine dining tables set up for you; you, your disciples, and your disciples' disciples all are destined for the third rank [firmament of heaven].'"

The Talmuds and other halakic works in this section offered new information about the *Merkavah*. First there are the dangers of the *Merkavah*. The star student of Rabbi Yohanan contracting leprosy and the child who was burned to death after dabbling in *Merkavah* exemplify the risk. On the other hand, the *Merkavah* is now a course of study or a type of study. This study is suppose to be limited to the select few, that is, the one who is "wise and has understanding from his knowledge." Therefore, the students and teachers who fall into this category, namely Rabbis Eleazar, Yohanan, Yose and Simeon, benefit from this speculation since it appears to be a source of prophecy. Prophecy from the Psalms and the Prophets comes in TY and BT, but when Mount Sinai is mentioned by Rabbi Yohanan in BT it is discussed from a different angle. Speculation in *Merkavah* can now bring an experience to the learned which is tantamount to Torah from Sinai.

This brief mention of the *Merkavah* in the Mishnah, Tosephta, and Talmuds is necessary in order to lay the groundwork for the tension which existed over *Merkavah*. As mentioned in the section on the Mishnah, the *Merkavah* was so dangerous that only the select could possibly study it, and then only one at a time. Against this are several accounts in the following works which recount at least two people, if not an entire school, participating in a discussion of such matters. Still, according to the accounts, the danger was mentioned and existed.

Coupled with the accounts from the period preceding the early rabbinic period, the following ideas about the *Merkavah* are presented. The *Merkavah* is Divine. It has characteristics of fire, either around it or in it. The *Merkavah* has something to do with the voice of God, in that the voice of God can cause fire or angels to issue forth from *Merkavah*. Fire and angels together certainly explain the Rabbi Eleazar stories. Now, in spite of the danger, Rabbi Yohanan in BT connects *Merkavah* to Sinai, where there were fire and prophecy as well. More of these images and issues will become increasingly apparent as the focus of this paper turns to the *Merkavah* in a body of literature known as Midrash.

#### GENESIS RABBAH

The basis for the discussion of *Merkavah* in Genesis Rabbah (GR) comes from the Talmud Yerusalmi. There are three Midrashim found in GR which contain references to the *Merkavah*. All of these Midrashim are attributed to Resh Lakish. Two of them are direct parallels of each other, and though the third is stylistically different, it is a thematic parallel. The main theme of these Midrashim is that the patriarchs serve to carry or lift up God. It is by them that God is able to go up; hence they are equated with the *Merkavah* since they are the devices by which God ascends.

Resh Lakish said: The Patriarchs are [God's] Heavenly Chariot. Thus it is written, AND GOD WENT UP FROM UPON ABRAHAM; again, *And God went up from upon him* (Gen. XXXV, 13); further, *And, behold, the Lord stood upon him* (ib. XXVIII, 13).<sup>12</sup>

The Midrash arrives at this interpretation by suggesting an alternative reading for biblical texts. There is a common phrase found in most of the prooftexts in which the Hebrew verb "to ascend"<sup>13</sup> is used in conjunction with a conjugation of the Hebrew phrase "from on," *mei'alav*.<sup>14</sup> The use of *mei'alav* could describe a person taking leave of another. However, it could also indicate movement (probably upwards) from an object. According to the interpretation ascribed to Resh Lakish, he chooses to employ the latter meaning of movement away from an object. *Mei'alav* was also used to describe how a



person entered and exited a *Merkavah*. Thus by a *gezeira shava*, the Midrash interprets the phrase to suggest that God used the patriarchs as divine vehicles due to the use of such verbs of action in other circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

The other verb which is used in both Midrashim is *nitzav* which is used in conjunction with the prepositional phrase *alav*.<sup>16</sup> This particular phrase translates as "on it" or "on him." The verse from Genesis 28:13 would read that God stood upon a pillar of stone, but Resh Lakish's Midrash would translate that God stood upon the patriarch Jacob. In the previous two prooftexts, God removed Himself from the patriarch, and this Midrash indicates that God stood upon Jacob.

The only difference between the Midrashim here is the way in which they are presented to the reader. The GR 47:6 and GR 69:3 passages begin with Resh Lakish's statement that equates the patriarchs with the *Merkavah*. Then they proceed to offer the prooftexts to support their claim. GR 82:6 states the exegetical verse first, then proceeds to offer the comments of Resh Lakish on this section. The difference between the two is in the style of their presentation. GR 47:6 and GR 69:3 have a style akin to that of Pirkei Avot, where statements are often made by rabbis, then prooftexts are provided for the rabbi's assertion. GR 82:6 has a greater likeness to exegetical Midrash where the Midrash begins with the verse of exposition, then proceeds to interpret the verse. Thus the only difference is in style, but not in the message of the Midrash.

#### LEVITICUS RABBAH

Next in chronological order is the work known as Leviticus Rabbah (LR). As indicated by the name, this text deals with various Midrashim about passages from the third book of the Bible. The date for this work is between the fifth and the beginning of the sixth century of the common era.<sup>17</sup> In LR there are only two direct references to *Merkavah*, and both have some connection to BT.

The first of these is from LR 2:8 where the text is commenting on the phrase from Leviticus 1:2.

Speak to the Israelite people, and say to them: When any of you presents an offering of cattle to the LORD, he shall choose his offering from the herd or from the flock.<sup>18</sup>

The text uses the Hebrew *adam*, and it is this word which LR uses to fashion its Midrash. *Adam* in this verse is tied to the use of *ben adam* in Ezekiel 2:1, and this is how the *Merkavah* is tied by the Midrash to Leviticus. Then the Midrash proceeds to offer a *mashal*.<sup>19</sup>

Another interpretation: 'Son of man': This may be compared to the case of a human king against whom his wife and children rebelled. He thrust them away, and banished them from his house. After a time he sent and brought a son that was with her, and said to him: 'O son of that woman, come let me show you my house and my court which I have without your mother. Have my glory and my court diminished aught, even though your mother remains outside?' Similarly did the vision appear to Ezekiel.<sup>20</sup>

In this midrash the Ezekiel passage is introduced to show that God is not affected by Israel's inability to offer sacrifices. Israel is likened to a woman who was expelled from her house by her royal husband who, even without his wife remains a king with all his honor and glory. When Ezekiel envisions the *Merkavah* while in exile it is proof that God's power and glory have not been affected by the fall of Jerusalem. The Midrash appears to tell the reader that sacrifices have no theurgic effect upon God. The benefit of sacrifices lies solely in Israel doing the command. Thus this Midrash understands the *Merkavah* as a symbol which proves the enduring grandeur of God to Ezekiel and defines the role of sacrifices in the eschatological scheme of the world.

The other mention of *Merkavah* is in LR 16:4. Here there is no material which was not mentioned in the Talmudic material above. The text, discussing the leper, brings up Psalm 50,

And to the wicked, God said:  
"Who are you to recite My laws,  
and mouth the terms of My covenant,  
seeing that you spurn My discipline,  
and brush My words aside?"<sup>21</sup>

Then the Midrash skips to the account of Ben Azzai in which the student is studying and suddenly a fire springs up around him. Those around Ben Azzai ask if he is involved in

studying the *Merkavah*, which Ben Azzai denies. He simply states that he is studying the words in the Torah and their parallels in the Prophets. Then he states,

and the words of the Torah are joyful even as they were on the day they were being given at Sinai, and they were originally given in fire, as it is said, *And the mountain burned with fire* (Deut. IV, 11).<sup>22</sup>

Here *Merkavah* is tied to Sinai (as above in BT). In addition, the text is set among texts talking about leprosy. This is significant in light of the BT report that leprosy was the punishment for improper speculation about the *Merkavah*.

LR gives additional information about the *Merkavah*, in that the *Merkavah* seems to be understood as something eternal and dangerous. The first mention of *Merkavah* in LR is used to teach the reader an important theological fact about the efficacy of sacrifice and the limits thereof. From this we also learn that the *Merkavah* is not just used once or twice, but it is a permanent part of the Divine retinue. The second text is set in the middle of texts about the Divine punishment of leprosy. Ben Azzai died from speculation into risky matters when he peered into the *pardes*, but the text accuses him of speculation into the *Merkavah*. Ben Azzai claims that he was only engaged in simple text study and did not realize what he was doing. Although he connects back to Sinai, as seen above, the fire and Sinai are connected by Psalm 29 which connects the speech of God with fire. In addition, Sinai was said to be surrounded by fire when the Torah was given. The fire which surrounds Ben Azzai appears to be connected to the *Merkavah* by these two statements by Ben Azzai, even though he was unaware of what he was doing.

#### PESIKTA DE'RAV KAHANA

Though the previous texts have hinted at the connection between the *Merkavah*, prophecy, and Sinai, none are as pronounced during this time period as the one from Pesikta de-Rab Kahana (PDRK). In *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism*, Ira Chernus presents these themes and ideas in his first chapter where he probes the depths of the imagery and meaning behind this Midrash.<sup>23</sup> Chernus discusses a sermon from the Midrash which



begins with the exegetical verse from Exodus 20:2. The author of this Midrash pulls together many themes which until this point had been separate. The Midrash begins by pointing to Psalm 68:18 which reads that

God's chariots are myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them as in Sinai in holiness<sup>24</sup>

Then the Midrash takes Exodus 20:2 where the Israelites are at the foot of Sinai and links it to the Psalm. This is possible since it appears that the Psalm describes the theophany from the human perspective, whereas Exodus 20:2 is from the Divine perspective, "I am the Lord your God." These two views of Sinai are combined in the following passage

Another comment: "The chariots of God" two myriads and two thousand angels. With the Holy One there came down twenty-two thousand chariots, and each and every chariot was like the chariot which Ezekiel saw. Proof of this statement comes out of a text that was brought from Babylonia in which it is asserted that twenty-two thousand chariots--so Elijah, ever remembered on good occasions, taught--came down with the Holy One.

Reading the verse "The chariots of God--myriads, thousands multiplied" (Ps. 68:18), R. Tanhūm bar R. Hanilai said: There were thousands multiplied by thousands, myriads multiplied by myriads, to a number which only a mathematician can calculate.<sup>25</sup>

This text also reflects the ideas in one of the BT passages. Rabbi Yohanan stated in one of the passages, "And so, too, you and I in my dream were reclining on Mount Sinai, and an echo came forth from heaven to us"<sup>26</sup> Here the connection between Sinai and the *Merkavah* is reinforced by the linkage of these two verses. Even a greater sense of the connection between *Merkavah* and Sinai is demonstrated by where this passage appears. The sermon in this Midrash is the Shavuot sermon where Moses goes up and receives the Torah on Sinai. Haftara for this day is Ezekiel, chapter 1, and only the twelfth verse of chapter 3. Thus the connection of Sinai to the *Merkavah* is stated explicitly in the Midrash, and implicitly by the use of this passage for the holiday of giving of Torah, and the Haftara connected to the holiday. All of this is further tied back to the Isaiah 66:15 passage from the first chapter of this work which told the reader that God had chariots.

To arrive at the number twenty-two thousand, the rabbis counted the numbers from the Psalm. The Psalm refers to *rebotayim* and *alpei*, which amounts to at least

twenty two thousand. However, the very next passage by R. Tanhūm tells the reader that the number could be astronomical.

This Midrash begins to tell the story of the power which is behind the *Merkavah*. Here it is not just mentioned in passing, but it is viewed as an essential motif to the connection between heaven and earth. Before, GR presented the idea that the patriarchs were the *Merkavah*. Now the role of the *Merkavah* is expanded beyond a mere transport or connection to terrestrial beings. Due to this Midrash, one may assume that the *Merkavah*, and activities concerning it, are directly linked back to the theophany at Sinai.

#### PESIKTA RABBATI

The last set of Midrashim in the early rabbinic period is Pesikta Rabbati. The first of these is 20:3 where there is another mention of Sandalphon in connection with the *Merkavah*. The report again appears as in BT, that this angel is a five hundred year journey tall and weaves crowns for God, with slight variations. However, in this context, it is tied to Exodus 34:6 where God makes an appearance.

The LORD came down in a cloud; He stood with him there, and proclaimed : "The LORD! the LORD! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness<sup>27</sup>

This harkens back to Psalm 104:2-4 where the following description of an entrance of God is described.

wrapped in a robe of light,  
You spread the heavens like a tent cloth.  
He sets the rafters of His lofts in the waters,  
and makes the clouds His chariot,  
moves on the wings of the wind.  
He makes the winds His messengers,  
fiery flames His servants. (Psalms 104:2-4)<sup>28</sup>

The idea of the *Merkavah* having a quality like clouds is brought into this Midrash. Then the Midrash proceeds to link the Exodus passage to Ezekiel 3:12, the common element between the two being that they extol God's praises and greatness.

Later in the same 20:3 passage from Pesikta Rabbati there is another mention of

the *Merkavah*. In this passage the various creatures which sing the praises of God are named and the wheels of the *Merkavah* are among them. The only significance which this adds at this time is that the wheels are not just round objects but alive or animated in some way. Before in Ezekiel 10:12 it was told that the wheels of the *Merkavah* were covered with eyes. Now, those eyes have mouths as well, which sing the praises of God.

The last appearance of *Merkavah* in *Pesikta Rabbati* is in 21:6. Here, as in *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*, the number of twenty-two thousand *Merkavot* descending with God to Sinai is told in conjunction with Psalm 68:18. The only difference between the two is that unlike the *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*, here there is no mention of Babylonia as a source for the text.

This time period demonstrates another level of understanding for the *Merkavah*. For the first time the *Merkavah* is viewed as dangerous for the unlearned. From the accounts about Ben Azzai in the Talmuds and LR it can be assumed that *Merkavah* was dangerous, since a person could connect to its power without knowledge of what his actions would produce. The *Merkavah* is dangerous, but it is also wonderful, as many of the other Midrashim from this period tell.

First there is the account in TY and BT of wondrous consequences when Eleazar ben 'Arakh is able to bring down angels from heaven. The account which follows this story in both Talmuds is equally incredible. BT, however, follows these stories with a mention of Sinai by Yohanan ben Zakkai. It is this mention which is of further relevance in other Midrashim.

GR equates the *Merkavah* with the patriarchs, as if to say that the *Merkavah* is responsible for carrying the message of God to the world. LR presents the passage about the sages accusing Ben Azzai of dabbling in the *Merkavah* in the midst of a discussion on leprosy. This may not add much to the discussion, except leprosy was punishment in BT for the student of Rabbi who did not speculate well about the *Merkavah*. Again the image of fire is presented in association with the *Merkavah*, but the Midrash does not stress anything significant about the fire.

Finally in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, the connection between fire, *Merkavah*, and Sinai is flushed out from its mention in BT. The Midrash clearly connects the fire of

*Merkavah* to the fire at Sinai. This shared fire is the key between the two. This union of the two teaches the reader that God descended to Sinai with *Merkavot*. Were it not clear enough, the two texts complement each other, and the rabbis further stressed the point with the holiday of Shavuot. It is this holiday which has the Exodus 20:2 passage for a Torah reading and the first chapter of Ezekiel, plus chapter three, verse 12 for the Haftara. With minor differences, this connection is stressed again in *Pesikta Rabbati*.

At this point *Merkavah* is no longer just a figure in the Divine realm. It is an essential ingredient at Sinai when Israel met God. It also remains an essential connection for the rabbis. It was an important vehicle of contact between Adonai and Israel at Sinai, and for the rabbis it is still the connection between heaven and earth, God and Israel, learned rabbis and Moshe Rabbeinu.

1. Mishnah *Hagigah* 2:1.
2. David Halperin, "Merkabah and Ma'aseh Merkabah" (Ph. D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1977), 127-29.
3. "Merkabah and Ma'aseh Merkabah", 133-34.
4. Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Talmud of the Land of Israel-Haggigah and Moed Qatan*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1986), 20:42-44.
5. *Tanakh*, 894.
6. Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Talmud of Babylonia, XII: Hagigah*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1984), 58.
7. Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia, XII: Hagigah*, 58.
8. *Ibid.*, 53-54.
9. *Ibid.*, 58.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 59.
12. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman, trans., *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis 47:6 (New York: Soncino Press, 1983), 1:403.
13. ע.ל.ה.
14. מעל
15. See I Kings 20:33, II Kings 10:15, and Chronicles 10:18.
16. עליו
17. Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 316.
18. *Tanakh*, 153. Note: The translation does not show that אָדָם is in this verse.
19. משל, rabbinic term for a parable.
20. Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah*, Leveticus 2:8, 4:25-26.

21. *Tanakh*, 1165.
22. Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah*, Leviticus 16.4, 4:205
23. *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism*, Ira Chernus, (Berlin, Walter De Gruyter, 1982), 22-23.
24. *Tanakh*, 1184.
25. Braude and Kapstein trans., *Pesikta De-Rab Kahana*, Piska 12.22, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1975), 243-244.
26. Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia, XII: Hagigah*, 59.
27. *Tanakh*, 139.



## CHAPTER 3-THE MIDDLE PERIOD

The next period of writing contains a vast amount of material from the various Midrashim written during this time. Beginning this section are the rest of the compilations of Midrashim from Midrash Rabbah.

### EXODUS RABBAH

The compilation entitled Exodus Rabbah (ER) contain four references to the *Merkavah*. These mentions of *Merakvah* begin in the chapter 15 of ER. In a discussion about I Chronicles 29:23, the Midrash comments on the verse, "And Solomon sat upon the throne of the Lord as king." Seeing the seeming problem with a mortal occupying a Divine space, the rabbis rushed to find an answer. To do this the rabbis link several verses showing that the kingship and dominion of Solomon were only the terrestrial parallel of the extraterrestrial kingdom of God. The connection of the *Merkavah* in all of this comes when I Kings 7:29,33 is shown to be a parallel of the Divine realm as reflected by Ezekiel 1:10.

and on the insets within the frames were lions, oxen, and cherubim. Above the frames was a stand; and both above and below the lions and the oxen were spirals of hammered metal. (I Kings 7:29)

The structure of the wheels was like the structure of chariot wheels; and their axletrees, their rims, their spokes, and their hubs were all of cast metal. (I Kings 7:33)<sup>1</sup>

Each of them had a human face [at the front]; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right; each of the four had the face of an ox on the left; and each of the four had the face of an eagle [at the back]. (Ezekiel 1:10)<sup>2</sup>

The rabbis use the parallel of the *Merkavah* to prove their contention that Solomon's kingdom and reign were human parallels to the Divine realm. They end this Midrash with the statement that after Solomon the dynasty began its decline.

The next Midrash appears to be a further bolstering of the wisdom of Solomon and his understanding of the *Merkavah*. Commenting on the passage "I will sing to the Lord,

For He is highly exalted" from Exodus 15:1, the Midrash begins a discussion of the four great beings of the terrestrial realm. This passage points to the eagle, ox, lion and human as the greatest of birds, domesticated animals, wild animals and living beings. Then the Midrash looks at Ezekiel 1:10 to point out that all of these beings are beneath the *Merkavah*. The Midrash then points to the wisdom of Kohelet (which by no mere coincidence was written by Solomon) to quote that God is highly exalted. This serves to teach the reader about the lower place of the species which exist on earth. The various beings may be the greatest of their type, but they are subservient to God who is highly exalted above any being on earth. Thus another lesson is attributed to the unequalled wisdom of Solomon.

Later in chapter 33, ER again mentions the *Merkavah*, but the question it answers this time is different than the previous two concerns. Here the parallels between heaven and earth, Divine world and terrestrial world are mentioned. Again the connection between I Kings 7:33 and Ezekiel is mentioned, but the point that the Midrash teaches is different. Previously this connection was made to prove the wisdom of Solomon. In this section the I Kings/Ezekiel parallel is just one among many which, according to the Midrash, was made by God as an act of mercy for the world of mortals.

Last, there is a mention of *Merkavah* in ER 23:14. This Midrash mentions the wheels of the chariot and speaks of Divine intervention which brought the Israelites over the sea. However, there is not a clear mention of the *Merkavah* outside of it being a type of Divine bridge. This is also a parallel to Song of Songs Rabbah, and perhaps more will be understood by looking at it in that context later in this chapter.

In general the passages in ER attempt to show why the Divine world parallels the earthly domain. To accomplish this they indicate the many parallels between heaven and earth, then give a reason for such symmetry. Solomon is praised as the greatest mortal king and, according to the rabbis, is the best parallel of the King of Kings ever to live. The other parallels between mortal and immortal worlds are understood as examples of

Divine mercy. The rabbis imply the rhetorical question in ER 33:4, "Why else would God wish to be among us?"

## NUMBERS RABBAH

There are two references to *Merkavah* in Numbers Rabbah (NR). The first of these occurs in chapter 12 where the *Merkavah* is associated with the sun. In fact, the sun is said to ride on a *Merkavah* as it travels across the sky.

'Chariot' signifies the sun, which is set on high and rides on a chariot, lighting up the world. This accords with the text, The sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, etc. (Ps. XIX, 6).<sup>3</sup>

This comports with chapter 1 where Isaiah 66:15 tells the reader that God has chariots, but this is the first mention of the sun using one of them.

The other mention of *Merkavah* comes in NR 23:12 where the Midrash tells the reader that all the curses which David wished upon Joab visited the house of David. This unfolding of curses includes King Rehoboam in I Kings 12:18.

King Rehoboam sent Adoram, who was in charge of the forced labor, but all Israel pelted him to death with stones. Thereupon King Rehoboam hurriedly mounted his chariot and fled to Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup>

There is no explicit mention of a Divine chariot here, but there may be an implicit one. One of the curses which David cast upon Joab was leprosy. This curse came back to visit Uzziyahu. Leprosy was also one of the punishments for improper speculation in *Merkavah* (see chapter 2). However, if this passage has any connection to the Divine *Merkavah*, that connection is not specifically mentioned.

## DEUTERONOMY RABBAH

The only mention of *Merkavah* in Deuteronomy Rabbah (DR) deals directly with the Divine *Merkavah*. The example which is given surfaces among a series of fantastic events. DR recounts the incredible things which Moses did to attempt to stop death from coming to him. According to the Midrash he prayed 515 times, a number which in gematria is equal to  $\text{נִצְחָנוּ}$ . God commanded the angels to bolt the gates of heaven for

Moses is about to storm the heavens. The Midrash describes how the prayer of Moses is like a sword cutting through everything; its power emanating from the name of God which Moses has learned from the Divine scribe Zagzagel. Then the Midrash mentions the *Merkavah*. The passage begins with a question as to the meaning of Ezekiel 3:12, "Blessed be the glory of God from His place." According to the Midrash, the only way for Moses to be suppressed in his efforts is for God to order the angels to refrain from hearing Moses' prayer. DR gives this as the response of the angels to God's stopping Moses.<sup>5</sup>

On one level this is a fascinating passage since it echoes a previous non-rabbinic text. In chapter 1 the Throne-Chariot scroll (TC) contained the following description of the wheels of the chariot.

The Cherubim bless the image of the Throne-Chariot above the firmament, and they praise the majesty of the fiery firmament beneath the seat of his glory. And between the turning wheels, angels of holiness come and go, as it were a fiery vision of most holy spirits; and about them flow seeming rivulets of fire, like gleaming bronze, a radiance of many gorgeous colors, of marvelous pigments magnificently mingled.<sup>6</sup>

According to the account of the *Merkavah*, the wheels are beneath the seat of God's glory, and it is from this place that God is blessed. Here the point of origin for blessing which was first mentioned in TC recurs in DR, but in the latter text the blessing is only uttered by cowering angels. This theme makes the message of this Midrash more fascinating.

Until now the material surrounding the *Merkavah* has been of a descriptive nature. The BT material may have hinted at some sort of travel or transfer of the wise sage to Sinai. The *Merkavah* is dangerous in other places. For the first time, here there is a blatant admission of a theurgic value to something in which a mortal being would engage. When the only recourse of God is an exhortation for the angels to cease listening to the prayers of Moses, the power of Moses and the potential power for all mortals is raised to a new level. This is a power which even the angels have no ability to withstand. The prophet of God is beyond their power. They are relegated to staying behind the wheels of

the *Merkavah* and can only praise God for stopping Moses, since he has, in some way, risen above them.

### SONG OF SONGS RABBAH

The Song of Songs Rabbah (SOSR) contains some references to the *Merkavah*. In SOSR 1:10 the word is used, but in this case a mortal chariot is being described. In 1:49 there is another mention of the chariot. In this case the chariot is the source from whence the winds blow. In a discussion of the splitting of the Red Sea the following discussion arises.

He said, 'Wicked one has thou winds, hast thou a cherub, have they wings?' Whence did God launch them? R. Judan says: God loosened them from between the wheels of the chariot and hurled them on to the sea. R. Hanina b. Papa said: When a human beings rides, he rides on something that carries him, something tangible, but not so the Holy One, Blessed be He; He carries His chariot and rides on something which is not tangible.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in concert with the visions from Zachariah, the fact that God's vehicle is the source of the wind is mentioned again. In addition, the idea that God has a chariot, first mentioned in Habakkuk, is repeated. However, in this case the anthropomorphism of God needing a vehicle is, almost literally, turned on its head as God carries the *Merkavah* from place to place.

In addition, in stark contrast to Moses (see above, DR), Pharaoh is defeated by the beings loosened from between the wheels of the chariot. Thus the wicked are affected by such beings, but the righteous cause them to flee in terror. These beings can pursue the wicked, but they are cut down by the prayers of the pious Moses.

The last mention of the *Merkavah* in SOSR is in 1:53. This parallels the episode from the BT of Ben Azzai and the fire which springs up around him. However, it is of interest to note that this mention of Ben Azzai comes amidst a discussion of Sinai and the theophany.



## MIDRASH PROVERBS

The mention of *Merkavah* in Midrash Proverbs is a bit different from the previous cases. The Midrash addresses the student (בני) and proceeds to tell him the following about study and *Merkavah*.

The one who has the Talmud of the Holy One Blessed be He, say to him, "boy, since you have engaged in the study of Talmud, observe the *Merkavah*, observe in majesty, for it does not exist in the world except when wise students sit and engage in Torah."<sup>8</sup>

Thus the *Merkavah* which is referred to in this passage has an old theme with a new twist. As was seen in the story about Ben Azzai, engaging in certain types of study can fire the student in more ways than one. Here the stimulation for study is that *Merkavah* is a reward reaped by all individuals who engage in the study of Torah. The danger expressed in the BT associated with *Merkavah* is absent from this Midrash. Here *Merkavah* is only the reward for studying the Talmud of the Holy One Blessed be He.<sup>9</sup>

## MIDRASH PSALMS

There are three passages in Midrash Psalms which contain a reference to *Merkavah*. The first of these is in the section on Psalm 5. In a discussion in verse 6 of the fact that foolish or wanton people cannot stand in God's sight, the following Midrash occurs:

R. Hanina bar Papa read the verse "The iniquities shall not stand in Thy sight" as referring to Jeroboam who at one time was the equal of Ahijah of Shiloh in understanding, for it is written of them "And the two were alone in the field" (I Kings 11:29), as if to say that only these two could make clear the mystery of the divine chariot. When the ministering angels stood up before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said: "Master of the universe, a person like Jeroboam who will one day set up two calves for worship—wilt Thou reveal the mystery of the divine chariot to him?" God asked: "At this moment, what sort of person is he? Righteous or wicked?" They answered: "Righteous!" God said, "I do not judge a man except for what he is at the time I am judging him!"<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, as in Midrash Proverbs, the *Merkavah* is the blessing which is bestowed on the righteous person. Even though there is a time when Jeroboam will be counted among the wicked, the reward for his deeds is *Merkavah*, and he can stand in the sight of God until he engages in evil activities.



Echoing the image from SOSR, Midrash Psalms 18:15 mentions the *Merkavah* at the crossing of the Red Sea by Israel, and at the war which God fought with Pharaoh. As opposed to releasing the cherubim to fight against Pharaoh, God takes a cherub and rides it into battle against Pharaoh. The cherub comes from between the wheels of the *Merkavah*. This is the same place where the cherubim hid in DR and came from in SOSR, again reinforcing the previously mentioned notion that against the wicked, the cherubim have power. Different this time is the absence of the *Merkavah* from battle, now being a kind of stable for the Divine livery.

The last passage to address *Merkavah* in Midrash Psalms parallels and then proceeds to present a variant reading to the passage from PDRK. Midrash 68:10 begins with a discussion of Psalm 68:18 and presents the idea from PDRK that 22,000 *Merkavot* descended to Sinai with God at the giving of the Torah. Then the Midrash proceeds to play with the gematria of the word *ham* (בם). The Midrash takes the numerical value of this word and claims that 42,000 *Merkavot* descended with God to Sinai.<sup>11</sup> This new number is attributed to rabbis from Babylonia who realized that the phrase from Psalms 68:18 (רָכַב אֱלֹהִים רִבְתִּים אֶלְפֵי שָׁנָאן) could denote a higher number.

#### PIRKEI DE'RABBI ELEAZAR

Many mentions of *Merkavah* exist in section 4.1 of the Midrash Pirkei De'Rabbi Eleazar (PDRE). This section begins with a description of the four ministering angels and their places in the heavens. Then the Midrash proceeds to describe the legs of the Divine throne which is found in the middle of the camps of the various angels. Finally, on the legs of the throne and apparently underneath the throne are references to the *Merkavah*. Much of this passage contains parallels which originated from the Dead Sea Scrolls discussed in chapter 1. There are various creatures which go in and out from beneath the *Merkavah*-Throne. When the *Merkavah* moves PDRE describes a sound,

And from the screaming voice the wheels of the chariot issue forth a resounding thunder to the world.<sup>12</sup>

The PDRE adds something which was previously missing from the Scrolls text, the relationship of this vision to mortals. According to the end of the section, the great extra-terrestrial world which was described by the Midrash is the kingdom of the God who stands for one people, Israel. The Midrash reports that when Israel recites the Shema, it garners the protection of Adonai who saves it from all occurrences of dire straits (מכל צרה). Thus, if the Midrash is correct, recitation of the Shema protects the people Israel who garner merit from its daily recitation, i.e., the act of saying this prayer has a theurgic value.

The other mention of *Merkavah* in PDRE 5:1 parallels the first mention of *Merkavah* in Numbers Rabbah. Both discuss the sun. NR speaks of the power of the sun to make rain and PDRE discusses the changing of the guard between the angels which serve the sun during the day and those which serve it at night. In both cases the sun rides in a *Merkavah*, and its appearance is exemplified by the Psalm 19:6 proof-text.

וְהוּא כְּחֵתָן יֵצֵא מִחֻפְתּוֹ יְשִׁישׁ כְּגִבּוֹר קָרוֹץ אֶרֶץ: (תהלים יט:)

## SEDER ELIYAHU RABBAH

The Midrash Seder Eliyahu Rabbah (SER) contains a couple of passages which reveal new insights on some of the previously discussed material. The first mention of a Divine *Merkavah* comes in 18:11. This section begins with an exegetical verse from Jeremiah 17:8.

He shall be like a tree planted by waters,  
Sending forth its roots by a stream:  
It does not sense the coming of heat,  
Its leaves are ever fresh;  
It has no care in a year of drought,  
It does not cease to yield fruit.<sup>13</sup>

The text of SER equates this statement with Torah. Then it tells the reader that the holiday on which Torah is studied is Sukkot, and the text proceeds to explain to the reader the vast smorgasbord which the word Torah encompasses. The Midrash then indicates that the person who engages in learning ten things, whether they be Halakah, Talmud,

Midrash or *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, has elevated himself. According to the Midrash, that person can expound mysticism in the same way that Isaiah did. The proof-text for this idea can be found in Isaiah 50:4-7.

The Lord God gave me a skilled tongue,  
To know how to speak timely words to the weary,  
Morning by morning, He rouses,  
He rouses my ear  
To give heed like disciples.  
The Lord God opened my ears,  
And I did not disobey,  
I did not run away.  
I offered my back to the floggers,  
And my cheeks to those who tore out my hair  
I did not hide my face  
From insult and spittle,  
But the Lord God will help me--  
Therefore I feel no disgrace;  
Therefore I have set my face like flint,  
And I know I shall not be shamed.<sup>14</sup>

SER then attributes all of these words to the House of Study (בית מדרשות) which Isaiah the prophet taught.

Here again, *Merkavah* pops up as one of the elements associated with Torah and Sukkot. In light of the other courses of study which are mentioned in the Midrash, *Merkavah* is significant. Among Torah, Halakah and Midrash, *Merkavah* is placed as a discipline of study associated with the holiday of Sukkot, yet until this point *Merkavah* has never been among the regular subjects.

The next passage, SER 29:18, deals with the *Merkavah* and why it has two different descriptions from the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel 1:10 and 10:14 parallel each other in many ways since they both describe the faces which appear in the vision. The order of the animals is the same, with the exception of the ox in chapter 1 being replaced by a cherub in chapter 10. The authors of SER wrote that the change occurs due to the sin of Israel at the golden calf.

When Israel sinned with the calf, God brought the Cherub and affixed it in place of the calf.<sup>15</sup> Thus, according to the rabbis, the reason for the change in the verses is to not remind

Israel of the disgrace of worshipping the golden calf

SER 29:19 briefly mentions the *Merkavah* in a corrupted passage. It is difficult to determine the meaning of the passage as it appears to make little sense. In *Seder Eliahu Rabbah*, p. 162, Friedman translates this as follows.

[In connection with the imparting of the secret lore of the chariot], the Sages taught: If you see a man whose eyelids are fair and whose eyes are light, know that he is wicked and sinful before our God, [and therefore the secrets of the chariot are not to be imparted to him] <sup>16</sup>

In section 21 of the same chapter the importance of man is questioned by the angels, and the *Merkavah* is central to God's answer. The angels use Psalm 8:5 ff. to ask God why man is so important. God begins to answer by stating that the angels are correct in their initial perceptions that man is only one of the four faces on the divine throne. However, by the *Merkavah* God says that they will know the importance of man for man will have greatness upon him. Thus is man's position as one of the four animal groups at once confirmed and his special relationship to God explained by this Midrash.

#### SEDER ELIYAHU RABBAH, SEDER OLAM AND SEDER OLAM RABBAH

There are mentions of *Merkavah* in these works, but they seem to have little connection to the understanding of the Divine *Merkavah*. The first in 15:3 of Seder Olam Rabbah (SOR) is a reference to a mortal chariot and thus is of no significance. The next *Merkavah* mentioned is a parallel between Seder Olam (SO), Seder Olam Rabbah and SER. In SO and SOR it occurs in the thirtieth chapter, coming in section 1 of SO and section 12 of SOR. SER describes the parallel in 30:1. All make reference to a verse from Daniel 2:22 which mentions Amikata and M'satrata (עֲמִיקָתָא וּמִסְתְּרָתָא). The former is then equated by the Midrash to refer to the *Merkavah*, and the latter is associated with *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. There appears to be nothing else worth noting in this instance.

#### TANCHUMA

It must be mentioned at the outset of this section that there are two major collections referred to as Tanchuma. The first text is referred to as Tanchuma Yelamdeinu

(YT), and the second text is known as the Buber Tanchuma (TB). It is significant that these two works contain parallels with each other on the material dealing with *Merkavah*.

The first mention of *Merkavah* in both of these works comes as three different passages parallel each other. There is one in YT Tzav 12, and two in TB Yitro 14, Tzav 16. The texts, even though they are parallels of each other, contain different orders, and even some assumptions of each other. Chernus translates the lone YT passage in the following manner.

Said Rabbi Yanai if so from now on the tribe of Levi it is written, "God rode on 22,000 chariots. What is it that God rode on? 22,000 chariots came down with the Holy One Blessed be He, and with each and every chariot there was a chariot like the one that Ezekiel saw. And it caused fortitude, these were the acts of miracles. Said the Holy One Blessed be He of the enlarged mountain, and I will suffer and accept the children of your people. And thus you will find in the world to come that the Holy One Blessed be He extended Jerusalem as it is said, "And the side chambers were broader as one circled higher and higher;" (Ezek. 41:7) until it rises to the heavens. And there is nothing higher than the heavens as it is said, "Your great mercy reaches unto the heavens," (Psalms 57:11)."

It is of interest to note that Psalm 68:18 is not to be found in this Midrash. The Midrash proceeds to mention the Levites and the vision of Ezekiel, but there is no Psalm. The emphasis of this Midrash does not seem to be Sinai but Jerusalem, and it is the city, not Sinai, to which the chariot holds a connection.

TB Tzav 16 and TB Yitro 14 are thematic parallels of each other in that they do not follow each other verbatim, but they do maintain similar progressions of themes. Both of them begin with the steadfast oath of Levi, thus tying the number 22,000 to the number of male Levites in the camp. Then both texts quote Psalm 68:18 as another possible source for the number 22,000 and tell the reader that each chariot was like the one that Ezekiel envisioned.

R. Abdima of Haifa said . . . R. Berakiah Ha-cohen said that it is related to the camp of the Levites. The Holy One blessed be He foresaw that none of them would be steadfast in their oath except the tribe of Levi, and therefore 22,000 descended, like the camp of Levites. Another interpretation [*dabar 'aher*] : "the chariots of God, twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands." It teaches that 22,000 chariots descended with the holy One blessed be He, and each and every chariot was like the chariot that Ezekiel saw. "The chariots of God." [Yitro 14]



R Berakiah Ha-cohen said that the Holy One blessed be He foresaw that none of the tribes would be steadfast in their oath except the tribe of Levi. Therefore they descended [in a number] equivalent to the camp of Levi. R. Yannai said: If so, what is the significance of "the chariots of God, twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands?" Rather, it must be the case that 22,000 chariots descended with the Holy One blessed be He, and each and every chariot was like the chariot that Ezekiel ben Buzi saw. [Tzav 16] <sup>18</sup>

With this said, it also helps to look back at the other parallels to this passage in PDRK and Midrash Psalms. Midrash Psalms is a thematic parallel of the TB passages in that it starts with the Levites as a source for the number then proceeds to Psalm 68:18. However, it adds the number 42,000 derived from using the gematria of the word *bam* and multiplying it by 1,000. This is unique to this text. In PDRK, the other parallel, the only mention for 22,000 is Psalm 68:18. This text contains no mention of Levites. The comment is made that the words used to denote the number 22,000 are only read in the most minimal sense, when in fact they could indicate infinity. Thus, Midrash Psalms and the TB passage seem to follow a common format with shared themes and progressions. PDRK seems to know of the story but does not record it with a mention of the Levites. YT knows the number, but does not offer the reader a source for arriving at 22,000 aside from the Levites, and it seeks to push for a rebuilding of Jerusalem.

YT Masei 12 contains a passage which mentions a *Merkavah*. But there is no overt connection of this chariot to the Divine vehicle.

TB Toldot 22 has a reference to the *Merkavah*, or specifically, the chambers of the *Merkavah* (חדרי מרכבה). In this instance, the *Merkavah* is a source for the quaking of Isaac at the binding. The *Merkavah* appears to be of minor importance here as it is only the stimulus for the quaking. The real message the rabbis are driving home is a pun on the words חדר (chamber) and חרד (shake). This makes a wonderful pun, but has very little direct connection to this discussion of the *Merkavah*.

This section of Midrashim changes somewhat from the *Merkavah* mentioned in the early period. The material from the Rabbahs indicates a *Merkavah* which is in some way tied to the piety of a person. Solomon's world and realm are the parallel of the Divine world, and thus the *Merkavah* is used as a compliment of the wise king.



In another section the effectiveness of the *Merkavah* is determined by the person who is opposed by God. Moses is able to defeat angels as the *Merkavah* in DR becomes the hiding place for the hosts when Moses storms the heavens. The Divine creatures have no recourse against Moses as he was a pious person. The wicked person, Pharaoh, has all the cherubs loosed against him at the sea, and according to one account, God rides a cherub into battle against Pharaoh. Thus the ability of the human to ascend higher than angels and *Merkavah* is tied to the amount of piety which can shield them from all powers, save God.

The theme of Sinai is carried over from the early period, but it is modified. Here there is a vehicle whose emphasis is still towards Sinai, but the emphasis changes. In the last section the *Merkavah* could be bane or beneficial; here it is only referred to as beneficial since it is mentioned as the reward for the study of Torah. Even Jeroboam, infamous villain, is allowed to have an understanding of the *Merkavah* when he has not yet sinned.

Shema and Sinai again arise from the *Merkavah*. The Tanchuma literature is filled with parallels of the fact that *Merkavot* descended to Sinai. They were of some number either tied to Psalm 68:18 or to the number of Levites. SER comes to teach a theurgic lesson about the value of saying the Shema (something tied to Sinai) since recitation offers Divine protection from all dire straits.

The connection to *Merkavah* is only beneficial in this section, whether it be to Sinai or to study or the two together. *Merkavah* has become the reward for study and Shema. Its only negative usage comes against the evil and wicked who would destroy Israel.

1. *Tanakh*, 529.
2. *Tanakh*, 893.
3. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman, trans., *Midrash Rabbah*, (New York: Soncino Press, 1983), vol. 3:458, 12:4.
4. *Tanakh*, 542.
5. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman, trans., *Midrash Rabbah*, (New York: Soncino Press, 1983), vol. 7:182, 11:10.
6. Barnstone, *Other Bible*, 705-6.
7. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman, trans., *Midrash Rabbah*, (New York: Soncino Press, 1983), vol. 9:70, 1:49.
8. Midrash Proverbs, 10:2, author's translation.
9. It is possible that this is a polemic against the Karaites. Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash by Strack and Stemberger mentions that this work contains several anti-Karaite works. Thus the reference to "the Talmud of the Holy One" may serve to make the distinction between the rabbis' Talmud and what the Karaites called a Talmud. The rabbinical Talmud is the one which leads to *Merkavah*.
10. William Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1959) 89, 5-8.
11. Chernus, *Mysticism*, pp 27-28.
12. PDRE, 4:1, author's translation.
13. *Tanakh*, 808.
14. *Tanakh*, 726-727,
15. SER, 29:18, author's translation.
16. *Tanna debe Eliyyahu*, Braude and Kapstein eds., (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981) p. 391, 29:19.
17. Chernus, *Mysticism*, 29-30.
18. Chernus, *Mysticism*, 28-30.

## CHAPTER FOUR-THE LATER MIDRASHIC ANTHOLOGIES

The works in this section, Midrash Hagadol (MH), Batei Midrashot (BM), Ozar Midrashim (OM) and Yalkut Shemoni (YS) are anthologies of the earlier material presented. There is a change in this level of the Midrash because the *Merkavah* develops into a type of Kabbalistic practice during this period. According to Scholem the mystics who speculated in the *Merkavah* called themselves *Yordei Merkavah*. This group claimed to draw its beginnings from Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. Looking back to chapter 2 of this paper, there are several sources which refer to *Merkavah* and Rabbi Yohanan.<sup>1</sup> The difference between the Midrashim and the medieval literature was summed up by Peter Schäfer.

One must even go a step further. God already becomes dependent on man through the heavenly journey, as the *yored merkavah's* heavenly journey reveals that God, too, is dependent on the liturgical communion with Israel. This idea is not necessarily new: such a disposition is already present in rabbinic Judaism, for example in the dependency of God's kingdom on the liturgical acknowledgment by Israel. However, with man's theurgic power over God as expressed in the adjuration, a quality has been reached that far surpasses that which is possible in classical rabbinic literature. The *yored merkavah* who knows the names commands not only the Torah and the world, but finally God as well. By allowing the *yorede merkavah* to dismantle the borders between heaven and earth, God himself, in the end, has succumbed to their power. In a hardly surpassable manner, the "distant cosmocrator" has surrendered his fate to man.<sup>2</sup>

Granted the ability of prayer to have a theurgic value has appeared in some of the Midrashim prior to this chapter, but the literature which Schäfer describes is a new realm of possibilities for the *Merkavah* mystic in the Middle Ages. The problem will arise that some of the anthologies in this section contain passages about the *Merkavah* which fall into the category of classical Midrashim and others are tied to the *Yordei Merkavah*. Thus many passages will be omitted, since they fall outside of the defined scope of Midrashim for discussion in this paper. The passages dealing with *Yordei Merkavah* imply something related to, but beyond, the Midrashim this paper is examining.

### MIDRASH HAGADOL

The Midrash Hagadol (MH) also contains parallels to the earlier material. In GR

there were three midrashim, two of which were exact parallels of each other, and a third which was a thematic parallel. While MH remains thematically parallel, its authors made their own changes.

GR mentioned the *Merkavah* when it discussed Genesis 17:22. This discussion is also paralleled in MH, but the later passage tells a little more than the original. The discourse begins with Gen 17:22 as the exegetical verse. Then the text tells the reader that the prophesy which was given to the patriarchs was not like that which was given to other prophets. According to this Midrash, God employed other devices such as animals, *Merkavah* and other types of glorious things to speak to the other prophets. The patriarchs were spoken to with the *Shekinah* (Divine presence) over them.

The parallel to GR begins with the statement that the patriarchs are the *Merkavah*, then proceeds to give the relevant prooftexts. The MH passage presents new material that the patriarchs were sanctified (מקודשין) for the steeping presence of the *Shekinah*. Then the Midrash tells the reader that the rest of the prophets received revelation only according to their ability.

According to the Margolis critical edition, the above Midrashim are separate and have two different sets of parallels. The mention of the *Merkavah* in the first paragraph is paralleled in MH Shemot 6:3.<sup>3</sup> The second passage has parallels in the GR passages from chapter 2 of this thesis as well as Lekak Tov (at the passage about this verse) and Yalkut 247:82.<sup>4</sup>

Next there is a mention of the same parallel to MH Genesis 17:22 and GR in MH Genesis 28:13. As in the previous MH passage, the Midrash begins with the statement that the patriarchs are the *Merkavah*; then it proceeds to tell the reader exactly why they are the *Merkavah*. The passage states:

Said Rabbi Shimeon ben Lakish, "The patriarchs, they are the *Merkavah*. This is due to the fact that the image of the *Merkavah* was engraved upon their hearts, and the *Merkavah* proved that there was a Rider. Thus they were called *Merkavah*.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in this work which was written several hundred years after GR, the answer of why the patriarchs were considered the *Merkavah* is answered. However, according to Margolis, the reason given is attributed to the compiler of MH.<sup>6</sup>

#### BATEI MIDRASHOT

Batei Midrashot (BM) contains several references to *Merkavah*. As was mentioned at the outset of this chapter, there are some which refer to the *Merkavah* of the Midrashim and others which refer to the mystical speculation of the Middle Ages. The first of these *Merkavot* seems to fall into the category of those *Merkavot* which are mentioned with the verb ירד, descend. BM II 1:6 contains several instances when the verb ירד is used with *Merkavah* to designate God's presence on earth. Six different mentions of the verb with as many prooftexts mention the descent of God to the terrestrial world. This section appears to be similar to Maimonides' mention of the same verb in section I, chapter 49 of the *The Guide of the Perplexed*.<sup>7</sup> In BM the discussion of the verb and its various appearances seems to be an attempt by the author to tie the verb to the *Merkavah* by *gezeira shava*.

There are nine references to *Merkavah* in BM II 1:92 which refer to prayer and the connection it has to the Divine realm. Here the minutia of the *Merkavah* and the actions of God while being worshiped are described.

BM II 1:12 has a connection to the description of the *Merkavah* in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In chapter one, both of the passages from Qumran described the great noise which was made when the *Merkavah* moved. Here in BM the same description of a great noise is reiterated and associated with the movement of the letter *chaf* (כ) from the crown of awesomeness of God.

The final mention of *Merkavah* which has a direct connection to the *Merkavah* of the Midrashim is in BM Midrash on Two Crowns 1:1 where the prohibition against speculation into the *Merkavah* is a direct parallel.

## OTZER MIDRASHIM

OM also contains several Midrashim which fall into the scope of this paper. Beginning with chapter 27 of OM section 75, there is a direct parallel of PDRE 4:1. Both discuss the wheels of the chariot and how there is a great sound made by them. This image echoes one found in the Angelic Liturgy of the Dead Sea Scrolls since there the great sounds of the chariot were first described (see chap. 1, p. 4). OM 27:75 does omit a small section of PDRE 4:1.

And when he looks upon the earth, his Merkavot on the Offanim<sup>8</sup>

This change seems to be made in order to separate the world of the Divine from the world of mortals. Both of these passages are echoed by a thematic parallel in OM 356:17. In this parallel the same words are used, but in this passage Israel is likened by the angel Samael (סמאל) to the angels serving the *Merkavah*. Samael pleads with God not to send him forth against Israel for he is certain to fail. His reason for failure will be that Israel is as powerful as the angels who serve the *Merkavah*, and due to their praise of God's name, Samael is doomed to defeat.

In OM 66:3 there is a thematic parallel to the parallel which appeared in SO, SOR and SER in chapter 3. There the terms *עמיקתא ומסתרתא* were identified with *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. In OM the same root of *עמיקתא* is present (נסתרות) and applies to *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Thus this root becomes an idiom for *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. However, *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is referred to by name, and the root of *עמיקתא* does not become an idiom for *Ma'aseh Merkavah* as *נסתרות* for *Ma'aseh Bereshit*. Versions of this thematic parallel recur in OM 66:4.

OM 107:5 and 107:8 contain the word *Merkavah* and information about the Divine retinue. There seems to be no overt significance for the *Merkavah* in 107:5. OM 107:8 does not have an impact on the *Merkavah*, but it mentions that the term "the land" (הארץ) is representative of the place where the four faces on the *Merkavah* dwell.

The meeting of two different motifs from previous material occurs in OM 107:18.



Here there is a partial thematic parallel to the story from TY which uses similar language to speak about the fire descending when Rabbi Eleazar b. Arakh expounded the *Merkavah* before Yoḥanan ben Zakkai. In this passage another theme enters from Isaiah 66:15 when the passage uses the phrase *להבה סובבת שלחבת*. Thus the previous material from the Bible and earlier Midrashim are being combined here into one passage.

The majority of passages about *Merkavah* after those mentioned above refer to the *Yordei Merkavah* which, as indicated above, are outside of the focus of this paper. The next reference to *Merkavah* which is relevant to this discussion is in OM 107:40. Here there is a thematic parallel to SER 18:11 (chap. 3). The passage in OM reads

Twelve days he went to all the measures of Torah what were sought whether from Scripture or from Oral law or to envision the *Merkavah* for it was in a pure way that he went.<sup>9</sup>

Here again the speculation of the *Merkavah* is equivalent to the study of Torah and Talmud which brought merit to the student in the SER passage.

Later in OM 107:43 there is another thematic parallel to a previous passage, but this time it appears to go back to the Dead Sea Scrolls. There are several parallels to the AL scroll (chap. 1). First there are the camps of God in the AL, and in this OM passage there are *מחנות ומחנות* of God. Second, AL refers to the great sound made by the rising of the angels which is followed by blessing. This idea is repeated in OM

בקול רעש ובנעימה ומשמשי המרכבה בקול שירות ותשבחות ותהלות

With a great voice and with pleasantness and they service the *Merkavah*, and a sound of singing and great praise<sup>10</sup>

These are some of the strongest connections between the OM passage and the AL of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the parallel is clear both in language and in theme.

In addition to the parallel with AL there are also parallels to Psalm 68. In chapter 3 there were several Midrashim which attempted to calculate the numerical value of the phrase *רבתים אלפי*. Of the opinions mentioned, there was one by Rabbi Tanḥum bar R. Hanilai who essentially stated that the number was beyond the ability of the average

person, and only a mathematician could compute a figure. In this OM passage the opinion of Rabbi Tanhum bar R. Hanilai from PDRK seems to be the one which is accepted as expressed by the phrase,

השוכן במרכבה ועומדים כתות כתות של אלף אלפי אלפים וטירות של רבוא רבבות ומחנות מחנות שאין להם חקר וצבאות לאין מספר

Then the same Midrash brings a mention of Sinai and the passage from Isaiah 66:15 in the next phrase.

וכמה הרים של אש וגבעות של להבה לפני כסא הכבוד ובאותה שעה יושב הקב"ה על כסא הכבוד וכבודו מלא כל הארץ שנאמר מלא כל הארץ כבודו

This passage demonstrates the combination of several different motifs and textual passages.

The mixing of the several different ideas into one passage serves to demonstrate a few things. First is that the Midrash understands the number referred to in Psalm 68:18 as approaching infinity. Second, the idea that *Merkavot* came down to this world at Sinai is demonstrated by mountains being ablaze and the use of להבה as the reference for fire on the hills. This להבה is the connection of Isaiah 66:15 to Sinai. Third, there is the influence from the AL of the Dead Sea Scrolls which resurfaced here in the Middle Ages. Last, the writer of all these themes was mixing them with great dexterity. He did not concentrate on a particular verse or a line, but moved back and forth over thousands of years of text and evolution of the *Merkavah*. Thus, the idea that *Merkavah*, along with the mystical and scriptural force that went with it, was sanctioned or hidden is not prevalent here, in a source which many could read.

OM 285:3-4,6,7,20,22 are the account of an ascension text and are related to the mystical speculation of the *Yored Merkavah*.

OM 306:3 is a parallel to the BT. It is a restatement of the size of the angel Sandelphon being a 500 year's journey. Additionally, his employment as the weaver of crowns for God is mentioned, but no new material appears.

OM 311:14 is a parallel to NR chapter 12. There is no new information about the

*Merkavah* mentioned here. This is followed by Om 356:17 which is a thematic parallel to OM 27:75; the thematic parallel of not being able to go against Israel is repeated in 356:20.

The last passage from OM<sup>11</sup> is a restatement of the original prohibition from Mishnah *Hagigah*, 2:1. Oddly, it is at the end of the passages about the *Merkavah*, rather than at the beginning. Perhaps this is purely speculative, but its placement seems to display the attitude towards the *Merkavah* which permeated all the literature, namely, that in spite of the prohibition, *Merkavah* was discussed. Thus, as an afterthought it is the last mention of *Merkavah* in this work.

#### YALKUT SHEMONI

The last work to be discussed, Yalkut Shemoni (YS), contains some parallel references to the previous material from GR and YT, TB, and Midrash Psalms. The GR passages are those which were found to be tied by *gezeira shava* to the various uses of the word נָעַל which appeared in Genesis 17:22, 28:13, and 35:13. As in the previous passages, these passages equate the patriarchs with the *Merkavah*, the only difference is that the last mention of this parallel contains no prooftexts.<sup>12</sup>

The last of the parallels compares the passages from the various Tanhuma texts and Midrash Psalms. The YS passage is most like the passage from TB Tzav 16 and TB Yitro 14 where the progression of the discussion starts with the exegetical verse from Psalm 68:18 and proceeds to mention that God rode on such a *Merkavah*, 22,000 descended with Him, and all the *Merkavot* were like the one seen by Ezekiel.<sup>13</sup> Thus in this work, this was the Midrash which became the standard and survived its various parallels to be the one included in YS.

This age of anthologies of the major Midrashim competes with the coming of the discipline of *Yordei Merkavah* as mystical speculation. While the mystical practice uses some of the motifs from the earlier material, there is not a clear continuation of Midrash on the *Merkavah* as the emphasis has shifted from reading and studying about *Merkavah*

to actually venturing to the dangerous places mentioned in the Mishnah. The Midrashim from this period do tell the reader which survived from the older periods and which did not. It may also be possible to look at the various images used in the literature of the *Yordei Merkavah* to determine the impact of the classic materials from antiquity about the *Merkavah* on the new speculation.

The gleanings from this period still exist to add to the understanding of the *Merkavah* in the Midrashim. The fact that MH felt it necessary to change the Midrashim about the patriarchs being the *Merkavah* indicates that the writers in the Middle Ages were uncomfortable with the repetition of the same story. According to Margolis, the author of MH changed the Midrash from its classic form for some reason which allowed him to have an easier time with telling of an old story. The Tanhuma passage was determined to be the one from TY Tzav 12 and TB Yitro 14, but in this same period there is the OM 107.43 which states that the number derived from רבתיים אלפי cannot be calculated. Thus here too there is disagreement, at least on the number indicated from this phrase in Psalm 68:18.

In the same passage the most telling piece of evidence exists which seems to exemplify most of the material from this time period. In a space of about ten lines, over four different sources from the Bible to the Midrash from the middle period are represented in a description of the *Merkavah* and the Divine retinue. They are mixed together as if the author knew of them but had no historical appreciation for them. Without a historical appreciation, he used their motifs and images to craft a passage which literally made sense and beauty for him.

1. Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd ed. (New York:

1. Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1974), 47.
2. Peter Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 166.
3. Margolis ed., *Midrash Hagadol*, Genesis, (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1966), vol. I:170.
4. Ibid, 279.
5. Ibid, 504-505.
6. Ibid, 504, see last note on line 19 under the section of parallel texts entitled הערות.
7. Shlomo Pines ed., *The Guide of the Perplexed*, (Chicago: Chicago Press, 1963), 108-10.
8. *Pirkei De'Rabbi Eleazar*, 4:1, author's translation.
9. *Otzer Midrashim*, 107:40, author's translation.
10. *Otzer Midrashim*, 107:43, author's translation.
11. The passage does not contain the chapter number, it reads אוצר מדרשים פרק פסקה ג.
12. *Yalkut Shemoni*, Genesis (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1973), vol. 2:699.
13. *Yalkut Shemoni*, Exodus, I:439.

## CONCLUSION

After applying this approach to the study of the *Merkavah* in rabbinic Midrashim there are some observations which can be summarized by looking back at some of the topics this thesis addressed. At this point, themes, issues and transformation of the *Merkavah* in the Midrashim begins to become clear.

Fire and its connection to the *Merkavah* is a good place to start since it is a common theme in the sources from every age. Beginning with the Bible and continuing to the OM, there were references to fire. This fire accompanied the *Merkavot* of God in Isaiah 66:15 and sprang up as one of the attributes of God when He spoke in Psalm 29 (להבות אש). In the Dead Sea Scrolls, flame raced through the *Merkavah*. Moving on to the Talmuds, this fire was the punishment for the child who speculated improperly and the reward for a *Merkavah* when speculated upon correctly. In PDRK the *Merkavah* was associated with the giving of Torah at Sinai as both motifs comported with the fire and clouds of that day on the mountain. The middle period provided more material tying Sinai to the *Merkavah* with passages from Tanhuma and Midrash Psalms. Finally, in the latter period OM 107:43 showed that the theme of fire was combined with several others in this passage. Fire then is one of the dominant themes of the *Merkavah* throughout its progression. The descriptions of the voice of God causing fire to spring forth allows the writers of the Midrash to make word analogies to other places in the Bible, and thus the *Merkavah* is tied to places where it was never mentioned.

The next connection we see is the mutation of Midrashim into variant parallels. This is particularly interesting when applied to the Midrash about 22,000 *Merkavot* coming down to Sinai and the connection of this to Psalm 68:18. Starting with PDRK, there is a mention that a number of *Merkavot* descended to Sinai and that they were all like the one which the Prophet Ezekiel saw. Psalm 68:18, רָכַב אֱלֹהִים רֶבֶתִּים אֶלְפִי, was understood by the rabbis as counting the number of *Merkavot* which descended to Sinai. Beyond their common themes it is important to understand the parallels and their order.



The first account from PDRK gives the number 22,000, tells the reader that they were like the chariots of Ezekiel and that this tradition is linked to Elijah by the Babylonian tradition. Immediately following this statement, there is another reading by R. Tanhum bar R. Hanilai who disputes the number for he considers it to be astronomical. Midrash Psalms also gives an account which is a close parallel of PDRK, then proceeds on a unique tangent. The word **בס** appears in the Midrash. Midrash Psalms then takes this word and counts its gematria, multiplies it by 1,000 and creates a new tangent which states that 42,000 angels descended to Sinai. Later in this period the TB presents different themes for this Midrash. TB Tzav 16 and TB Yitro 14 parallel each other and PDRK, but these Tanhuma passages bring a new reason for 22,000. The new accounting which allows them to arrive at 22,000 is that there were 22,000 in the camp of Levi. Then both continue by repeating that 22,000 comes from Psalm 68:18 and claiming that all the *Merkavot* were like the one Ezekiel saw. The YT passage knows about the 22,000 *Merkavot* and that this comes from the tribe of Levi, however in stark contrast to the other passages, it does not mention the passage from Psalms. The mountain in this passage is not Sinai, but Jerusalem, and the rest of the passage is a vision of a return to Jerusalem. At this point it seems that all the passages are parallels in some way. However the question of which survives as the particular tradition which is carried on in a later period might be a mystery without OM.

OM 107:43 clarifies a piece of this puzzle by giving an account of the number of *Merkavot* which descended to Sinai. This passage reiterates the opinion of R. Tanhum bar R. Hanilai from PDRK, namely that the number derived from the phrase from Psalm 68:18 **רָכַב אֱלֹהִים רֶבֹתִים אֲלָפֵי**, has not a number which can be calculated. In this passage the parallels have stopped, and OM tells the reader the number without attribution to Rabbi Tanhum. It does not, however, record any of the other information from other passages.

Then there are the Midrashim from GR which refer to the Patriarchs from the

Bible being the *Merkavah* of God. This motif is not repeated again until the MH, a span of nearly 1,000 years, yet something about the repetition of these Midrashim made the author feel the need to change them. So, by the time the stories reach the Middle Ages the author of MH has given them separate meanings while maintaining the original statement by Resh Lakish.

Beyond the textual criticism there is a grander level of understanding of the *Merkavah* and its place in history. In the earliest literary level, there is a *Merkavah* which exists with some prooftexts and the accounts of the Bible, Dead Sea Scrolls, Enoch and the Ascension of Abraham. These texts combine to create the foundation for the later Midrashim and show some of the earliest connections as well as providing for the idea that the *Merkavah* transported the individual as in the Ascension of Abraham.

In the earliest writings of the Midrashic and Talmudic period, the *Merkavah* assigns a danger as well as a greater reward. The danger, as was previously stated was death if the speculation of the *Merkavah* was not done correctly. However, when done correctly, the *Merkavah* had the greatest of rewards to offer. When Rabbi Eleazar speculated, he was actually able to get the voice of God and the angels to come down and dance around him and his teacher. Yohanan ben Zakkai was able, it seems, to travel in time, either in his mind or possibly physically back to Sinai and have the experience of the Torah being given before his eyes. This connection to Sinai is reinforced by the connection that the rabbis made between Shavuot, the holiday celebrating the giving of Torah, and the Ezekiel passage which serves as the Haftara for this day. This period brings the *Merkavah* from heaven to earth and makes it one of the vehicles used by God and rabbis to travel from realm to realm.

In the middle period of Midrashim, the qualities of the person who could have contact with the *Merkavah* was further defined. In the earlier period it was the wise sage, and now the qualifications begin to be more defined. This period uses Solomon as the greatest and wisest king which makes the rabbis use the *Merkavah* as one of the analogies

which describes Solomon's kingdom. Other mortals who know of the *Merkavah* are Jeroboam who merited the *Merkavah* based on the piety of his early days as king, even though his later days were filled with sin. Thus the reward of the *Merkavah* in the present was not an assurance of the person's character in the future. The *Merkavah* is also tied to Sinai in this period, and the fact that four Midrashim survived with different accounts may serve to affirm that this was a common theme and motif. This period also introduces a theme which was not explicit until now. The idea that *Merkavah* has some theurgic value connected to it is pronounced in SER. Indeed, the ability of *Merkavah* to afford protection is a new issue.

The last period comes to reiterate as well as show where the theme of the *Merkavah* was headed. There are many references to the *Merkavah* during this period, but these references were increasingly towards a speculation about the *Merkavah* which allowed for mystical experiences. The material from this period demonstrates this turning point for *Merkavah*. First there are the Midrashim which still hold to their original forms as a genre of material that can be defined as Midrash. Then there are passages like OM 107.43 which demonstrate the combination of several different Midrashic sources about the *Merkavah* which relay the message but no longer have the form of Midrashim. Finally there is the rest of the material which discusses the word *Merkavah* but only with regard to a speculation that people engage in when they are trying to ascend to the heavens.

Thus did the *Merkavah* move through the levels of rabbinic understanding in the Midrashim. It took on different forms at different times and proved to be a durable motif for several different connections. It brought rabbis to Sinai and help to Jews who were pious. The *Merkavah* was one of the major connections between heaven and earth for the rabbis of antiquity. The Prophet Ezekiel could see the vehicle with wheels of eyes go up and down from the heavens. The rabbis sought to be its passengers and to call upon it in times of their greatest needs. The voice said to Ezekiel at the beginning of chapter 2:

"O mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, that nation of rebels, who have rebelled against ME --They as well as their fathers have defiled Me to this very day; for the sons are brazen of face and stubborn of heart. I send you to them, and you shall say to them: 'Thus said the Lord GOD'--whether they listen or not, for they are a rebellious breed--that they may know that there was a prophet among them.  
(Ezekiel 2:3-5)<sup>1</sup>

So too did the rabbis try to connect back to that day in the exile when the Divine voice would again promise their generation that they had not been abandoned. They wanted to feel the presence of the Lord and to know that Sinai was a pledge forever. It was by the *Merkavah* that they sought to reassure their faith and have the promise of their continuance as a people of God strengthened.

1. *Tanakh*, 895.

## Appendix: The Midrashim

### מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה מז פסקה ו

ויכל לדבר אתו תני הנפטר מחבירו בין גדול בין קטן צריך ליטול ממנו רשות, ממי נלמוד מאברהם, פעם היה אברהם מדבר עם הקב"ה באו מלאכי השרת לדבר עמו אמר להם ניפטר מו השכינה שהיא גדולה מכס ואחרכן אדבר עמכם, כיון שדיבר עם הקב"ה כל צרכו אמר לפניו רבון העולמים צריך אני לדבר אי"ל הפטר בשלום הה"ד ויעל אלהים מעל אברהם. אר"ל האבות הן הן המרכבה שני' ויעל אלהים מעל אברהם ויעל מעליו אלהים (בראשית לה: יג) והנה ה' נצב עליו (שם כח: יג)

### מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה פב פסקה ו

ויעל מעליו אלהים אמר ר"ל האבות הן הן המרכבה שני' (בראשית יג) ויעל אלהים מעל אברהם ויעל מעליו אלהים (שם כח) והנה ה' נצב עליו ויצב יעקב מצבה וגו' ויסך עליה נסך ויצק עליה שמן כמלא פי הפך:

### מדרש רבה ויקרא פרשה ב פסקה ח

ד"א בן אדם למה"ד למלך בשר ודם שמרדה עליו אשתו ובניו. עמד ודחפן מביתו והוציאן לחוץ לאחד מכאן שלח והביא בן אחד מאצלה אמר לו בן פלוני בא ואראך ביתי ובית שבונתי שיש לי חוץ מאמך כלום פחת כבודי ושונתי אע"פ שאמך עומדת מבחוץ כך נדמה ליחזקאל בן בוזי הכהן שנאמר (יחזקאל א) ויהי בשלשים שנה ברביעי בחמשה לחדש (שם) היה היה דבר ה' זו שיטה ראשונה ובשניה הוא אומר (שם) והנה רוח סערה באה מן הצפון מאחר שהראהו כל המרכבה אמר לו בן אדם זהו כבודי שהגבהתי אתכם למעלה מאומות העולם כלום פחת כבודי ובית שכינתי לכם שנאמר (שם מג) ואם נכלמו מכל אשר עשו צורות הבית ותכונתו ומוצאיו ומובאיו שמא תאמר אין לי מי שעובד אותי כבר יש לי לפני ד"י מאות ותשעים וששה אלפים של מלאכי השרת שהם עומדים ומקדשים שמי הגדול בכל יום תמיד

### מדרש רבה ויקרא פרשה טז פסקה ד

ד"א זאת תהיה תורת המצורע הה"ד (תהלים ג) ולרשע אמר אלהים מה לך לספר חקי ותשא בריתי עלי פיך בן עזאי היה יושב ודורש והאש מלהטת סביבותיו אמרו ליה שמא בסדרי מרכבה אתה עוסק אמר להן לא אלא מחריז דברי תורה לנביאים ונביאים לכתובים ודברי תורה שמחין כיום נתינתן בסיני עיקר נתינתן באש ניתנו הה"ד (דברים ד) וההר בוער באש. אי"ר לוי מצינו בתורה בנביאים ובכתובים שאין הקב"ה חפץ בקילוסו של אדם רשע מן התורה (ויקרא יג) ועל שפם יעטה וטמא טמא יקרא. מן הנביאים (מ"ב ח) ויהי הוא מספר למלך את אשר החיה את המת וגו'

### פסיקתא רבתי פרק כ פסקה ג

שעבר ועל אותה שעה אמר ויעבור ה' על פניו וגו' (שמות ל"ד ו') אמרו עליו על סנדלפון שהוא גבוה מחביריו מהלך חמש מאות שנה ומשתמש אחר המרכבה וקושר כתרים לקונו וכי תעלה על דעתך שיודעים מלאכי השרת היכן הוא והלא כבר נאמר ברוך כבוד

### פסיקתא רבתי פרק כ פסקה ג

שמגיע כתר לראשו מחזיק עצמו לקבל כתר מעבדיו וכל חיות ושרפים ואופנים וגלגלי המרכבה כסא הכבוד בפה אחד אומרים ימלוך ה' לעולם אלהיך ציון לדור ודור הללויה (תהלים קמ"ו י') כיון שעבר פגע בו ריגיון נהר של אש (שגחלים שורפות)

### פסיקתא רבתי פרק כא פסקה ו

מיעטתה אלא בשעה שירד הקדוש ברוך הוא על הר סיני ירדו עמו עשרים ושנים אלף מרכבות וכל מרכבה כמרכבה שראה יחזקאל דבר אחר רכב אלהים רבותים וגו' אמר ר' יוחנן יום (שעלה) שנגלה הקדוש ברוך הוא על הר סיני ליתן תורה לישראל ירדו עמו



### פסיקתא דרב כהנא פרק יב פסקה כג

עשרים ושנים אלף כמחנה לוויה רכב אלהים ריביותם אלפי שנאן (שם) ד"א רכב אלהים ריביותם אלפי שנאן (שם) ירד עם הקב"ה עשרים אלף מרכבות ועל כל מרכבה ומרכבה שו"א יחזקאל רכב אלהים מכת שעלת מבבל אמרו שירד עם הקב"ה לסיני עשרים

### מדרש רבה שמות פרשה טו פסקה כו

ז...לכך נאמר וישב שלמה על כסא יהוה למלך. הקב"ה לבושו הוד והדר ונתן לשלמה הוד מלכות שנאמר (שם א כט כט) ויתן עליו הוד מלכות. בכסאו של הקב"ה כתיב (מלכים א ז) ועל המסגרות אשר בין השלבים אריות בקר וכתוב א' אומר (שם) כמעשה אופן המרכבה בכסאו של הקב"ה אין דבר רע נוגע שנאמר (תהלים ה) לא יגורך רע ובשלמה כתיב (מלכים א' ה') אין שטן ואין פגע רע הקב"ה עשה ששה רקיעים ובשביעי יושב ובכסאו של שלמה כתיב (שם י) שש מעלות לכסא ויושב במעלה השביעית..

### מדרש רבה שמות פרשה כג פסקה יג

א"ר אבין ד"י מיני גאים נבראו בעולם. גאה שבבריות אדם. גאה בעופות נשר. גאה שבבהמות שור. גאה שבחיות ארי. וכולן נטלו מלכות ונתנה להם גדולה והם קבועים תחת המרכבה של הקב"ה שנאמר (יחזקאל א) ודמות פניהם פני אדם. ופני אריה ופני שור ופני נשר. וכל כך למה כדי שלא יתגאו בעולם וידעו שיש מלכות שמים עליהם. וע"ז נאמר (קהלת ה) כי גבוה מעל גבוה שומר וגבוהים עליהם. הוי כי גאה גאה.

### מדרש רבה שמות פרשה כג פסקה יד

יד ד"א כי גאה גאה הה"ד (שיר א) לסוסתי ברכבי פרעה. דרש ר"י פפוס לססתי כתיב (כמו שכתוב בשיר השירים רבה) עד יש לך רוח יש לך כנפים. מיד הסיטן הקב"ה והביאן מבין גלגלי המרכבה והסיטן על הים. מהו דמיתין רעיתי שנדמו גלי הים לסוסיות נקבות ומצרים הרשעים לסוסים זכרים מזוהמין והיו רצים אחריהם עד שנשתקעו בים שנאמר סוס ורוכבו רמה בים. והיה המצרי אומר לסוסו אתמול הייתי מושכך להשקותך מים ולא היית בא אחרי עכשיו אתה בא לשקעני בים. והיה הסוס אומר לו רמה בים ראה מה בים רומו של עולם אני רואה בים:

### מדרש רבה שמות פרשה לג פסקה ד

למעלן כרובים שנאמר (שם לו) יושב הכרובים. למטן ויהיו הכרובים (שמות כה: כ). למעלן (יחזקאל א) והאופנים ינשאו לעומתם. למטן ומעשה האופנים כמעשה אופן המרכבה. וכן (שם) והנה אופן אחד בארץ. למעלן (תהלים יא) ה' בהיכל קדשו. למטן היכל ה'.

### מדרש רבה במדבר פרשה יב פסקה ד

הארץ מהן ירוקין ומהן אדומין מרכבו ארגמן זה השמש שהוא נתון למעלה והוא רוכב במרכבה ומאיר לעולם כמה דתימא והוא כחתן יוצא מחופתו וגוי ומכח השמש הגשמים יורדים. מכח השמש הארץ מעלה פירות

### מדרש רבה במדבר פרשה כג פסקה יג

א"ר יהודה כל הקללות שקלל דוד את יואב נתקיימו בזרעו של דוד זב מרחבעם בן שלמה שנאמר (מלכים א יב) והמלך רחבעם התאמץ לעלות המרכבה וכתוב בזב (ויקרא טו) וכל המרכב אשר ירכב עליו הזב יטמא מצורע מעזיהו שנא' (ד"ה ב כו)

### מדרש רבה דברים פרשה יא פסקה י

מהו ברוך כבוד ה' ממקומו בשעה שראו גלגלי מרכבה ושרפי להבה שאמר הקב"ה לא תקבלו תפלתו של משה ולא נשא לו פנים ולא נתן לו חיים ולא הכניסו לא"י אמרו ברוך כבוד ה' ממקומו שאין לפניו משוא פנים לא לקטן ולא לגדול.











#### אוצר מדרשים פרק שנו פסקה כ

לפני בן עמרם אין בי יכולת לעמוד לפניו אמר לו הקב"ה מפני מה אמר סמאל מפני שהוא דומה לשרי המרכבה הגדולה שלך וזיקים וברקים ואש יוצאין מפיו בדברו עמי כמו שיוצאין מפי שרפים העומדים להודות לשבח ולפאר ולרומם ולנצח ולגדל את שם

#### אוצר מדרשים פרק פסקה ג

שסתם הכתוב מכאן אמרו אין דורשין בעריות לשלשה ולא במעשה בראשית לשנים ולא במרכבה ליחיד אלא אם היה חכם ומבין מדעתו (חגיגה פ"ב א') כל המסתכל בארבעה דברים ראיתי לו (ראוי לו) כאילו נהפכה שליתו על פניו ולא יצא ולא ראה את

#### בתי מדרשות ב' פרק א פסקה יב

אחר כך נכנס כ"ף ובאותה שעה רעש גדול היה לפני הקב"ה כשירד כ"ף מעל כתר נורא של הקדוש ברוך הוא נכנס ועמד לפני כסא הכבוד ונתרעש הכסא וגלגלי מרכבה אחזו רעדה אמר להם הקדוש ברוך הוא כסא הכבוד וגלגלי המרכבה מפני מה אתם מרעישין

#### בתי מדרשות מדרש שני כתובים פרק א פסקה א

אפשר אלא שסתם הכתוב מכאן אמרו אין דורשין בעריות לשלשה ולא במעשה בראשית לשנים ולא במרכבה ליחיד אלא אם היה חכם ומבין מדעתו כל המסתכל בארבעה דברים ראיתי לו כאלו נהפכה שליתו על פניו ולא יצא ולא ראה את העולם לידע מה למעלה וכוחו ככח המלאכים ולשונו לשלהבת והעלה את משה

#### ילקות שמעוני יתרו כ

אנכי יי"י אלהיך. זשי"ה רכב אלהים רבותים אלפי שנאן (תהלים סח, יח). א"ר אבדימי דמן חיפא שנית במשנתי שירד הק" לסיני בכ"ב אלף של מלאכי השרת. א"ר ברכי" הכהן כמחנה לוי, שתפה הק" שהן עומדין במומיהן, לכך ירד בכ"ב אלף כמחנה לוי. ד"א רכב אלהים, מלמד שירד עם הק" כ"ב אלף מרכב", וכל מרכבה ומרכבה כמרכבה שראה יחזקאל. אלפי שנאן, א"ר תנחום בר חנילאי עד מקום שהסופיטוס יכול לחשב, קילי כלירין, מילי מיליארין.



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