# No Menstruating Mystics: The Intensification of Niddah Laws After the Destruction of the Second Temple and their Application in the Hekhalot Literature

JENNIFER BROWN
*2nd Year, MA Religious Studies*
*University of British Columbia*
*Vancouver, British Columbia*

The collection of texts that have been labelled the Hekhalot literature is of a varied nature. Though there are some common themes throughout, overall it can be accurately stated that the Hekhalot literature is "not a unity and therefore cannot be explained uniformly."[1] One aspect that does seem constant throughout the various texts is the almost complete absence of women. The only prominent section of the text that refers to a woman, the recall of Rabbi Nehunya from the heavenly realms, suggests that women, whose bodies are considered highly susceptible to ritual impurity, are antithetical to mystical experience. Inherent in this story are certain notions of ritual purity that have their roots in biblical law but which seem to have been intensified by the Tannaitic rabbis (and the Amoraic rabbis after them) as well as by the authors of the Hekhalot literature.

Mary Douglas, in her seminal work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, has suggested that purity regulations,

[1] Peter Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Albany: SUNY, 1992), 152. This in response to David J.Halperin (*Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1988)]) and Gershom Scholem (*Jewish Mysticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1965]) who both argue that the Hekhalot literature is exclusively the product of one social class; Halperin suggests that the works were written by the *am-ha-aretz*, Scholem believed they originated from within traditional rabbinic circles. Both also claimed that there was a central thematic aspect to the literature; for Scholem it was the heavenly journey, for Halperin it was the magical-theurgic adjuration.

particularly those concerning bodily orifices, become paramount when a group is culturally or politically threatened. If we locate the emergence of both the Hekhalot and Tannaitic literature as subsequent to the destruction of the second temple, the exclusion of women from the literature can be interpreted as being part of such an impulse. It is the contention of this paper that the authors of the Hekhalot literature in particular seem to have conceived of the heavens as a third temple after the destruction of the second one. In an attempt to recreate the priestly rites in the heavens, purity regulations normally operative in earthly temples were applied to the celestial realms. Prior to this the intrinsic exclusion of women from mystical experience is not found in Jewish literature. In fact, the intertestamental work *The Testament of Job*[2] describes women having visionary experiences in a manner that has points of contact with the descriptions in the Hekhalot literature, the exploration of which will be contained in the latter part of this paper.

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[2] 7. *T. Job* is "a folkloristic elaboration of the biblical story of Job." Almost certainly composed in Greek, it has a complicated relationship to the LXX. The work focuses on the virtue of patience, which is so characteristic of the biblical Job, at least in the prose prologue. The dating of the testament is disputed (Russell P. Spittler, "The Testament of Job: A History of Research and Interpretation," *Studies on the Testament of Job* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 7). This group, according to Pieter van der Horst, was a "Jewish monastic group in Egypt, the members of which, both men and women, [were] wholly devoted to ascesis, meditation and religious meetings of which central parts are the allegorical interpretation of Scripture and community singing" ("Images of Women in the Testament of Job," *Studies on the Testament of Job* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 114). Spittler agrees that the work is from this milieu but maintains that the work reflects Montanist redaction which he dates to the end of the second century CE. Both van der Horst and John J. Collins ("Structure and Meaning in the Testament of Job," *SBL Seminar Papers* [Cambridge, Mass: Society of Biblical Literature, 1978], 48), reject Spittler's reading. Collins notes that "[f]emale prophecy is… widely attested and we need not posit Montanist influence for this motif." Van der Horst insists that the work is a "completely Jewish, non-Christian composition in which we find a mélange of Jewish wisdom and mysticism" ("Images of Women," 112).

## The Sole Woman in the Hekhalot Literature

> Immediately I took a piece of very fine woollen cloth and gave it to R. Akiva and R. Akiva gave it to a servant of ours saying: "Go and lay this cloth beside a woman who immersed herself and yet had not become pure, and let her immerse herself a second time. For if that woman will come and will declare the circumstances of her menstrual flow before the company, there will be one who forbids [to her husband] and the majority will permit. Say to that woman: Touch this cloth with the end of the middle finger of your hand, and do not press the end of your finger upon it, but rather as a man who takes a hair which had fallen therein from his eyeball, pushing it very gently." They went and did so, and laid the cloth before R. Ishmael. He inserted it into a bough of myrtle, full of oil, that had been soaked in pure balsam and they placed it upon the knees of R. Nehunya ben Hakkanah. Immediately they dismissed him from before the Throne of Glory, where he had been sitting and beholding. (*Pirkei Heikahalot* 20:2-3)

As far as I can ascertain, the preceding passage is the only one in the Hekhalot literature in which a particular woman is featured. Other references speak of women in the abstract, mostly to prohibit contact with them in preparation for the adjuration/ascent. In *Hekhalot Rabbati* 16:3, Rabbi Ishmael makes passing reference to his mother,[3] but she does not actually figure in the narrative, whereas the unnamed woman in this episode is an agent in advancing the plot, albeit in an anonymous, passive way.[4] Here, as elsewhere in the

[3] "I sat on a bench of pure marble which my father, Elisha, had given me from the estate of my mother who had so stipulated in her will."

[4] I am aware that the heavenly realms, as depicted in the Hekhalot literature, are not devoid of the feminine. Some of the angels in *3 Enoch* seem to be female. Also, Elliot R. Wolfson, suggests that there is a "sexual myth connected to the moment of enthronement" in *Hekhalot Rabbati* (*Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* [Princeton: Princeton University Press], 93). He notes that the throne serves as "the feminine element in relation to the masculine" and as such the moment of "enthronement is a form of *hieros gamos*" with God as the bridegroom and the throne as the bride (*Through a Speculum*, 99). For the purposes of this paper I am only interested in flesh and blood women and will not explore these issues. However, if Wolfson's theory holds any weight and the throne is the female component in a divine marriage, then it should be observed that the throne is subject to her "husband." Wolfson notes that the throne is "described as prostrating itself thrice daily before the glory and uttering 'Zohahariel, YHWH, God of Israel, glorify Yourself, and sit down upon me, magnificent King, for Your burden is dear to me and is not heavy" (*Through a Speculum*, 100). What pattern this sacred

literature, the *yored merkavah*[5] is pictured as being a legendary rabbi of the Tannaitic period. A female *yored merkavah* is never conceived of and a female rabbinical student would also have been an anomaly.

In this passage, Rabbi Nehunya is describing his heavenly journey, apparently as it is happening, to his students. Wanting to question him with respect to a particular detail ("the difference between 'those who go down to the Merkavah' and 'those who go down to the Merkavah without permission'") the students decide to "bring him back from his visions" (*Pirkei Heikahlot* 20:1). The way to achieve this is to render him impure and hence unfit to be in the presence of God. Rabbi Akiva obtains a cloth that has been infected to a slight degree with menstrual impurity.[6] After he wraps the cloth around a twig of myrtle that has been soaked in balsam (the meaning of which will be discussed subsequently), he places it on the knees of Rabbi Nehunya. This slight hint of menstrual impurity is enough to bring about the *yored merkavah's* immediate expulsion from the throne

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marriage sets for earthly marriages (with the bride as passive, burden bearing object) is worth a paper in itself but is beyond my scope here.

[5] Though the literature seems to be describing an ascent, the mystic is described as *descending* to the Merkavah. Guy G. Stroumsa suggests that in Mishnaic Hebrew the verb "to go down" was used interchangeably with the verb "to go in" ("Mystical Descents," *Death, Ecstasy and Other Worldly Journeys* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1995], 140). He further posits that the term is a parallel to the Greek καταβασις, which was used to describe a trip to the underworld. ("Mystical Descents," 144).

[6] David R.Blumenthal comments "The woman has stopped menstruating. She has bathed once but, for technical reasons, must do it again. She bathes ritually a second time and is thus ritually pure… one very, very strict rabbi might still claim she is impure because of possible irregularities in her menstrual cycle" ("The Merkavah Tradition," *Understanding Jewish Mysticism* [New York: Ktav, 1978], 69).

of glory and the implication is that a greater degree of impurity would lead to the mystic's death.[7]

## Purity Systems and Jewish Menstrual Purity

In order to make sense of the above passage, a basic understanding of the history of menstrual purity in Judaism is necessary, as are some basic ideas behind the notion of purity and how it functions within a given social system. For the latter, perhaps the most useful work is Douglas' *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Douglas notes that the notion of purity, which permeates all aspects of a given society, revolves around dirt. This is a culturally subjective concept that can be defined as "matter out of place."[8]

Within a purity system there exists a line dividing clean/unclean, pure/impure and sacred/profane into opposing categories. This line is drawn somewhat arbitrarily in any given society. As Douglas says, "dirt implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then is never an isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter."[9] That which is pure should not come into contact with that which is impure and vice versa.

Often, the human body comes to replicate the social body as a symbol of society: "the body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its

[7] "[T]o become grossly impure would cause a sudden and violent termination, thus endangering R. Nehunya's life. The rabbi-mystic must, then, design a way to render him impure, but only in the very slightest degree" ( Blumenthal, "The Merkavah Tradition," 63).
[8] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 4.
[9] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 35.

boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened and precarious."[10] When this happens, a society begins to be concerned with borders of the body in much the same way as they are concerned with geographical borders. Just as "[w]hat crosses the frontier, the city wall is of concern"[11] so are things which breach the borders of the body.

Creating boundaries that distinguish between pure and impure is a way in which a cultural group differentiates itself from other groups and thus protects its unique identity.[12] Therefore, vigilance about purity regulations, especially those concerning bodily orifices, intensifies when a group is culturally or militarily threatened.[13] This observation is crucial in understanding the deep concern with menstrual purity prevalent in both official rabbinic writing and in the Hekhalot literature. Judaism was perhaps never so threatened as after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, and it is likely that this is why purity issues play such a large part in the post destruction literature.

Of course, Israel was a society that was often culturally threatened and the deep concerns about menstrual purity expressed in the Hekhalot literature have their origins in biblical precepts. Leviticus 15 deals with *tum'ah*, ritual impurity, of those with genital discharges. Here there is a parallel drawn between a man

[10] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 115.
[11] Jerome H. Neyrey, "Clean/Unclean, Pure/Polluted and Holy/Profane: The Idea and System of Purity," *Social Science and New Testament Interpretation* (Peabody: Mass: Hendrickson, 1996), 63.
[12] Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* 133.
[13] Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* 124.

who has a seminal emission and a woman who is menstruating (*niddah*).[14] Both are considered ritually impure: the man until evening and the woman for a seven-day period, regardless of the length of her menstruation. In Leviticus 15, both states are probably seen as seed impurity with menstrual blood being thought of as the female component in conception.[15] Also equated are the *zav*, a man who has ongoing seminal discharge, and the *zava*, a woman who has an ongoing vaginal discharge outside her regular period. Both are required to make an offering after the cessation of their discharge. The main function of these laws is to restrict those who are impure from coming into contact with the sacred. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes: "The only characteristic of *tum'ah* is contagion; the only misfortune associated with the condition is isolation from the people and

[14] The debate about the etymological origins of this word is reviewed by Charlotte Fonrobert. The word is linked to two possible verbal roots, either *ndd* which means *depart, flee or wander* or *ndh*, an Akkadian cognate that means to *chase away, put aside* (*Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Gender* [Standford: Stanford University Press, 2000], 16-19). The latter seems most likely. Baruch Levine suggests that "the word does not connote the impurity… itself, but, rather describes the physiological process of blood" (*Leviticus* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 97). Jacob Milgrom agrees but adds that "*niddah* came to refer not just to the menstrual discharge but to the menstruant herself for she too was discharged and excluded from her society" (*Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation* [New York: Doubleday, 1991], 745). Fonrobert disagrees noting "the practice of banning a menstruating woman, except to exclude her from the temple precincts, is not warranted by our textual sources" and points out that to substantiate his claim, Milgrom looks to the practice of menstrual exclusion in other cultures. She concludes that the original meaning of *niddah* cannot be reconstructed but that within the Mishnaic literature it means simply "a woman who menstruates" (*Menstrual Purity*, 17).

[15] Tirzah Meacham, "An Abbreviated History of the Development of the Jewish Menstrual Laws," *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 27. The notion that menstrual blood was the female component in conception was a fairly common one in the ancient world and is articulated in Greek and Roman works. Aristotle thought that in the formation of a fetus a man supplied semen and a woman "the material for the semen to work on" (*DeGen* 1:7), namely menstrual blood. A similar idea is expressed in the *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:2: "[I]n my mother's womb I was wrought into flesh… compacted in blood from the seed of her husband and the pleasure that is joined in sleep."

alienation from all things holy."[16] It is known from ancient sources that this Levitical precept was followed and menstruating women were barred from the temple complex (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 5:5:2). Another aspect of menstrual purity in Leviticus is the prohibition of intercourse during a woman's menstruation, a feature that becomes paramount in the rabbinic writings.[17]

At this stage in the development of the menstrual laws, neither the *niddah* nor the *zava* requires ritual immersion (*mikveh*) in order to become ritually pure. The ritual immersion is of course a central part of the narrative in the story of the recall of Rabbi Nehunya, but it seems to have developed much later than the biblical period. It possibly reflects the influence of Hellenistic bathing culture and is not proscribed by biblical law. Ritual immersion is, however, very important in the Mishnah, which will be discussed subsequently.

Gershom Scholem noted the great interest of the Tannaitic rabbis in menstrual purity and believed that the *niddah* concerns in the story of the recall of Rabbi Nehunya were an indication of "the halakhic character of Hekhalot literature"[18] and thus its origins in rabbinic circles.[19] Michael Swartz agrees that it is "the passage which bears the most resemblance to rabbinic *halakah*"[20] but then, following Lawerence H. Schiffman, objects to Scholem's characterization of the

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[16] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Pollution, Purification, and Purgation in Biblical Israel," *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth* (Winona Lake: IN: Eisenbrauns, 1982), 403.
[17] Meacham, "Abbreviated History," 29.
[18] Scholem, *Jewish Mysticism*, 9.
[19] Scholem, *Jewish Mysticism*, 11.
[20] Michael Swartz, "Like the Ministering Angels: Ritual and Purity in Early Jewish Mysticism and Magic," *AJS Review* 19:2 (1994), 163.

passage as purely rabbinic. Both observe that the passage, especially its reference to the use of myrtle and balsam to minimize the impurity of the cloth,[21] reflects a magical praxis and highlights "the important relationship between Hekhalot texts and the early Jewish magical tradition."[22] The narrative thus "brings together halakhic and magical aspects."[23] However, it is perhaps erroneous to assume that the two mindsets were diametrically opposed. It is quite possible that the Jewish magical tradition at an early stage did intersect with the rabbinic movement. Peter Schäfer has suggested that magic was an "integral part of religion in antiquity"[24] and that while the official rabbinic position was against magic, within rabbinic literature "[m]agical practices and incantations are indeed a component of the canon, [though] only in the form and above all emphasis which the authors and redactors of the canon of classical rabbinic literature authorized."[25] So it is not impossible that the Hekhalot texts were simultaneously rooted in a magical and a rabbinic ethos.[26] At this early stage the two need not have been antithetical.[27]

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[21] Lawerence H. Schiffman lists several examples of the magical use of myrtle in such texts and in the *Sefer Ha Razim.* For example: "And he [the Ob or spirit] should rise immediately. If not, adjure him again up to three times. And when he comes out, lay before him the bowl and afterwards speak your piece and have in your hand a twig of myrtle. And if you want to release him, strike him three blows with the myrtle and pour out the oil and honey and break the cup and cast the myrtle from you and return to your house by another road" ("The Recall of Rabbi Nehuniah Ben Ha-Qanah from Ecstasy in the *Hekhalot Rabbati*," *AJS Review* 19:2 [1994], 276-78).

[22] Schiffman, "The Recall of Rabbi Nehuniah," 273.

[23] Schiffman, "The Recall of Rabbi Nehuniah," 289.

[24] Schäfer, "Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism," *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 26.

[25] Schäfer, "Jewish Magic Literature in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages," *JJS* 41 (1990), 75.

[26] Writing about magic in the rabbinic corpus Brigitte Kern-Ulmer notes that "the rabbis integrated popularized Greek magical theories into the rabbinic mind-set without ever directly acknowledging it" ("The Depiction of Magic in Rabbinic Texts: The Rabbinic and Greek Concepts of Magic," *JSJ* 33:3 [1996], 303).

Regardless, both the canonical rabbinic and Hekhalot literature reflect a deep concern with menstrual purity, with an entire Mishnaic tractate, *Tractate Niddah*, detailing "every contingency and the variations on those contingencies that might place one in a state of *niddah* or which might communicate impurity through contact with a *niddah*."[28] Like the Levitical laws, the laws in the Mishnah are concerned with preventing one who is in a state of impurity from coming into contact with the sacred. Of course, the Mishnah was composed and redacted in a time when the central sanctuary, the Jerusalem temple, had been destroyed. Leslie A. Cook has suggested that the menstrual laws were embellished as "part of a strategy to empower the individual Jew as priest in the context of a world without a temple and a priestly system" and that the "sages of the Mishnah were concerned with replacing the Temple sacrificial system and providing a new path to communication with God."[29] Cook further suggests that the home, rather than the synagogue, replaced the temple as ritual space. Through the observance of her

[27] It is becoming increasingly clear that the early rabbinic movement was not as monolithic as has been previously imagined and one must be cautious about making any blanket statements about its nature at this time. Michael L. Satlow notes that "[r]ecent reappraisal of the 'rabbis' has challenged the very notion that one can speak of this collection of men- living over the course of four to five centuries in both Palestine and Babylonia- as a single 'group' or 'class.' The diversity of rabbinic culture makes it probable that different rabbinic groups in fact, operated under very different sets of fundamental assumptions" (" 'Wasted Seed:' The History of a Rabbinic Idea," *HUCA* 65 [1994], 138). For early history of the rabbinic movement see Catherine Hezner (*The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1997] ) and Lee Levine (*The Rabbinic Class in Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity* [Jerusalem: Yad Itzhak Ben Zvi Press, 1989] ).

[28] Leslie A. Cook, "Body Language: Women's Rituals of Purification in the Bible and Mishah," *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England , 1999), 55. An example: "If three women were sleeping in one bed, and blood was found underneath the middle one, they are all accounted unclean; [if the blood were] under the inner one [next to the wall], the two on the inner side are considered unclean and the other one is clean" (*m. Nid*. 9:5).

[29] Cook, "Body Language," 43.

body's cycles, the Jewish woman became "the structural equivalent of the priest."[30] It is in *Tractate Niddah* that ritual bathing becomes required. It is also in the Mishnah that we see the process of internal vaginal investigation using cloth after the menstruation has ceased.[31] If blood is found on the cloth after the *mikveh*, the ritual immersion is rendered invalid.[32]

References to menstrual purity can also be found in other Mishnaic tractates. In one passage it is stated that a woman's neglect of the observance of *niddah* is grounds for divorce (*m. Ket.* 7:6). Failing to observe menstrual purity laws can also result in death (not unlike how menstrual pollution is potentially fatal in the recall of Rabbi Nehunya): "for three transgressions women die in childbirth- if they are not punctilious with respect to *niddah,* to *hallah* [the preparation of the Sabbath bread], or to the lighting of lamps (*m. Shab.* 2:6). These seem to go beyond the biblical precepts and suggest that the *niddah* laws in the Mishnah were not merely filling in the gaps of the biblical laws, but actually embellishing them.

The concern with menstrual impurity is also reflected elsewhere in the Hekhalot literature. Most notably it can be seen in the ascetic instructions for the

[30] Cook, "Body Language," 43. Cook's interpretation is interesting and not without validity but *Tractate Niddah* at times seems to be voyeuristic and having a group of men define the parameters of female experience seems disconcerting, to say the least. Witness for instance m. Nid. 8 and the discussion of what physical characteristics constitute womanhood: "What are the distinguishing features in her [that she has attained to womanhood]? R. Jose the Galilean says, When the wrinkles are formed under the breasts. R. Akiba says, When the breasts hang down. Ben Azzi says, [When the breasts are so developed that] if the hand be placed upon the tips of the nipples], they sink in and [when the pressure is released] return slowly."

[31] Cook, "Body Language," 42. There are fifty references to vaginal self-examination in the tractate.

[32] Meacham, "An Abbreviated History," 40.

mystic as he prepares for his ascent. He is told to "eat bread of his own hands,"[33] or, alternately, to avoid "the bread of a woman," ostensibly to avoid menstrual pollution.[34] Though Michael Swartz and Schiffman have suggested that concern with menstrual purity in the Hekhalot literature goes beyond rabbinic proscriptions,[35] the belief that bread baked by a woman who is menstruating becomes contagious is paralleled in rabbinic literature, being expressed in the Midrashic works *Genesis Rabbah*[36] and *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer.*[37]

Swartz notes that in the Hekhalot literature, the very sight of a woman causes the ascetic to be rendered impure and claims that this reflects folk belief rather than rabbinic law.[38] However, the notion that even the sight of women is dirty can be found in rabbinic literature. For instance, in the Babylonian Talmud it is written, "if one gazes at the little finger of a woman it is as if he gazed at a place of filth" (*b. Ber. 24a*). Though this passage does not say that women are

[33] Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1981) 299, 684, 489*;* Swartz, "Like the Ministering Angels," 151.
[34] Swartz, "Like the Ministering Angels," 154. Quoting a Geniza fragment: "He goes and sits in a house by himself, and he should be fasting all day and does not eat bread of a woman."
[35] Swartz and Schiffman are right in suggesting that the story does not prove, as Scholem suggested, that the authors of the Hekhalot literature were the same rabbis who were responsible for the classical Talmuds and Midrashim. Neither, however, can it prove the opposite.
[36] *Genesis Rabbah* 48:14.
[37] *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* ch. 36. "He said to Sarah, 'make a meal for them.' At that time when Sarah was kneading, she saw the blood of *niddah;* therefore he did not present the cakes to them."

impure it certainly seems to imply that they are in some way inherently unclean.[39] The idea of women as contaminating is not unique to the Hekhalot literature, though it is certainly in effect here, and precludes the possible of a female mystic.[40]

**Female Mystics in Second Temple Literature: The Testament of Job**

In light of the above, it is interesting to note that the idea of women being excluded from mystical experience because of their high susceptibility to impurity was not always in place. The idea of a female mystic is not alien to the literature of ancient Judaism. Indeed, in the literature of the second temple period there are accounts of women having mystical/visionary experiences. The most notable of these, as Rebecca Lesses has noted, is found in *The Testament of Job*.[41] This intertestamental work is of the genre of Jewish literature known as the testaments, in which a famous biblical character gives a speech to his descendants on his

[39] Elsewhere in rabbinic literature, the origins of *niddah* are traced to Eve and the incident in Genesis 3. In the Palestinian Talmud it is written that "[t]he first Adam was the blood of world… and Eve caused his death; therefore she was given the commandment of menstrual separation" (y. Shab. 2:6 8b). It must be noted, however, that rabbinic literature by its very nature represents a plurality of voices and that misogyny in the Talmud is by no means uniform. Daniel Boyarin, in speaking about images of Eve in rabbinical literature, notes that "although several rabbinic texts… put the blame for the sin and its punishment on the woman, equally as many say the exact opposite" (*Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993], 84).

[40] To be clear, I am not suggesting that women in the post temple period did not have mystic experiences, merely that no such notion is present in the extant literature.

[41] Rebecca Lesses, "Amulets and Angels: Visionary Experience in the Testament of Job and the Hekhalot Literature," Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Toronto, November, 2002. http://www.iwu.edu/~religion/ejcm/Lesses02paper.PDF, 4.

deathbed.[42] During his speech, Job seemingly snubs his three daughters when he bequeaths his worldly estate to his sons. His consolation is that he has "designated for [his daughters] an inheritance better than that of [their] seven brothers" (*T. Job* 46:3-4). The inheritance comes in the material form of three multicoloured cords "shimmering with fiery sparks like the rays of the sun" which in actuality are not material at all, originating "not from earth but from heaven"( *T. Job* 46:7-8).

As well as having protective and healing powers, these cords allow Job's daughters to partake in visionary, ecstatic experiences. While physically remaining on earth they are able to speak in angelic dialects and participate in the heavenly liturgy. Upon binding the cord on her arm we are told that Job's daughter Hemera "took on another heart- no longer minded toward earthly things- but she spoke in the angelic speech, sending up a hymn to God in accord with the hymnic style of the angels. And as she spoke she allowed 'the spirit' to be inscribed on her garment" (*T. Job* 48:2-3).[43]

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[42] Probably the most famous example of the genre is *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*. According to Carol A. Newsom *T.Job* differs from most works in the genre in that it contains "little moral admonition and no prediction of the future" ("The Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Jewish Literature," *The Oxford Study Bible: Revised English Bible With Apocrypha* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992], 107) Though most of the narrators of the testaments tend to be male, John R. Levison maintains that chapters 15-30 of the *Apocalypse of Moses* were originally a separate document in which Eve narrates a testament. He notes that within these chapters, Eve exonerates herself from full responsibility for the expulsion from Eden, whereas in the rest of the document she is repeatedly blamed. Reading 15-30 separately from the rest of the document thus constitutes "a fresh hearing of a voice sympathetic to the first woman which was long obscured by its negative context" ("The Exoneration of Eve in the Apocalypse of Moses 15-30," *JSJ* 20:2 [1989], 150).

[43] Job's other daughters similarly participate in heavenly praise. Job's second daughter speaks in "the dialect of the archons and she praise[s] God for the creation of the heights " (*T. Job* 49:2). His third daughter also speaks "in the dialect of the cherubim, glorifying the Master of virtues by exhibiting their splendour" (*T. Job* 50:1-2).

These descriptions of mystical experience are in some ways similar in character to those in the Hekhalot literature.[44] Just as the *yored merkavah* ascends through the heavenly realms while his body is present in front of his students, Job's daughters remain physically on earth while their visionary experience takes place. In order to question him the students need to "bring [Rabbi Nehunya] back from his visions" (*Pirkei Heikhalot* 20:1) yet the fact that the contaminated cloth is placed on his knee indicates that he is still physically present. It is when he is rendered impure that he is immediately dismissed from "before the Throne of Glory where he had been sitting and beholding " (*Pirkei Heikhalot* 20:1). Both Rabbi Nehunya and Job's daughters seem to be in a trance state that allows them to be simultaneously in two worlds at once.

Another interesting point of contact concerns participation in the heavenly liturgy. Though the singing takes place on earth, the voices of the daughters of Job synchronize with those of the angels as they partake in the heavenly praise. Schäfer has noted that in *3 Enoch* "[t]he main task of the angels is the praise of God" but notes that in this work the praise "takes place without reference to man. The divine liturgy is at best… the model for the earthly liturgy."[45] In comparison, Job's daughters go a step beyond the *yored merkavah* in that they are allowed, in their trance-vision, to join in the angelic praise. Elsewhere, Schäfer argues that the

[44] Howard C.Kee notes the similarities between the *Hekhalot* literature and *T. Job:* "[T]he milieu to which *The Testament of Job* seems most clearly akin is Merkabah mysticism, and its kinship is probably at the early state of that movement's development." That is before ideas of purity were crystallized ("Satan, Magic and Salvation in the Testament of Job" *SBL 1974 Seminar Papers* [Cambridge, Mass: Society of Biblical Literature, 1974], 53).
[45] Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest,* 141.

purpose of the heavenly journey within the Hekhalot literature is "participation in the heavenly praise."[46] This is the central content of the vision of Job's daughters as well.[47]

Another interesting feature in the vision of Job's first daughter, Hemera, is the reference to her garments. In the Hekhalot literature there is a great interest in "the garment in which God is wrapped in the moment of his enthronement."[48] It also seems similar to the clothing of Enoch in his transformation into Metatron: "Out of love which he had for me, more than for all the denizens of the heights, the Holy One, blessed be he, fashioned a majestic robe in which all kinds of luminaries were set, and he clothed me in it" (*3 Enoch* 12:1). The image of "the spirit [being] inscribed on [Job's daughter's] garments" seems to reflect a similar interest in "the creative role of letters"[49] that is expressed in the Hekhalot corpus.[50] The angelic speech engaged in by Job's three daughters is possibly reminiscent of "the 'language of purity'" used by the angels in the Hekhalot literature that is "not like our ordinary human language, since it is composed solely of the four letters of the divine name."[51]

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[46] Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest,* 164.
[47] Wolfson agrees with Schäfer that "the prime reason for the ascent is the participation in the heavenly liturgy" (*Through a Speculum*, 92).
[48] Wolfson, *Through a Speculum,* 92.
[49] Elior, "The Concept of God in Hekhalot Mysticism," *Binah, Studies in Jewish Thought 2 (*New York: Praeger, 1989), 103.
[50] This is also seen in *3 Enoch* 13:1-2 when Enoch's crown is inscribed.
[51] Lesses, "Amulets and Angels," 4. The full extent of the similarity can't be seen because the text does not reproduce the language that was spoken by Job's daughters. Instead the reader is referred to the "Hymns of Kasia" and the "Prayers of Amaltheia's Horn." Though Lesses asserts that these works probably never existed, I'm not certain that they can be dismissed entirely. Newsom notes that "much of the literature of ancient Israel has been lost. Texts written on leather or papyrus are

## The Heavens as a Surrogate Temple

One major difference between the Hekhalot literature and *The Testament of Job* is that in the latter "purity concerns do not enter in."[52] By the time of the composition of the Hekhalot literature, however, it has become "impossible to imagine that women as well as men could have [visionary] experiences."[53] It is very likely that this re-conceiving of who could and could not have access to the heavenly realms emerged in response to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE.

As noted above, Douglas postulated that purity concerns heighten when a cultural group is threatened. Perhaps the greatest threat to early Judaism was the destruction of the temple. The opening line of *Hekhalot Rabbati* seems to suggest that it was the outcome of the Jewish war with Rome that justified the revelation of the techniques necessary to access the heavenly realms.[54] Following Douglas, it is only logical that both the rabbis and the authors of the Hekhalot literature would intensify purity laws at this time.

It is also possible that purity laws were being applied to the heavenly realms because they were at this time seen as a surrogate temple. Ira Chernus and

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highly perishable… the process of recopying them by hand is expensive and extremely time consuming. As the needs and interests of Jewish communities changed over time, and as new texts continued to be written, many of the older writings ceased to be recopied and were ultimately lost" ("Dead Sea Scrolls," 101). I can see no reason to favour the possibility that these hymnals are fictional rather than the possibility that they may have just been among the literature lost to time.

[52] Lesses, "Amulets and Angels," 19.

[53] Lesses, "Amulets and Angels," 19.

[54] "Rabbi Ishmael said, "When R. Nehunya ben Hakkanah saw Rome was planning to destroy the might of Israel, he at once revealed the secret of the world as it appears to one who is worthy to gaze on the King and His Throne in His majesty and His Beauty" (15:1).

Rachel Elior have both suggested that the Hekhalot literature conceived of the heavenly realms as a third temple after the destruction of the second one.

Elior has suggested that only a catastrophic event such as the destruction of the temple could have impelled the authors to develop "a new approach to hitherto forbidden realms"[55] in a way that so radically violated the conventions of biblical tradition with "speculations concerning the secrets of the Godhead and the study of Divine Names."[56]

The authors of the Hekhalot literature have created "a foil to the finality of destruction" of the temple and effectively "perpetuate[d] the destroyed Temple and its rites in the heavenly shrines."[57]

In support of her argument, Elior notes that liturgical and ritual interests are paramount within the literature and that it is "replete with direct and indirect references to the world of the priests and Levites in the temple."[58] Within the Bible the word *hekhal* is used primarily to denote the temple[59] and God's throne in the Hekhalot literature is likely representative of the Holy of Holies within the innermost chamber of the temple. It is probably no accident that Rabbi Ishmael, who is often involved in the narrative of the Hekhalot literature, is also described within the Babylonian Talmud as being the high priest who enters the Holy of

[55] Elior, "From Earthly Temples to Heavenly Shrines: Prayer and Sacred Song in the Hekhalot Literature and its Relation to Temple Traditions," *JSQ* 4.3 (1997), 222.
[56] Elior, "Earthly Temples," 222.
[57] Elior, "Earthly Temples," 222.
[58] Elior, "Earthly Temples," 224.
[59] Elior, "Earthly Temples," 227.

Holies on the Day of Atonement to burn incense.[60] Rabbi Ishmael now carries out his priestly duties in the heavenly realms. Moreover, it also seems highly significant that the entire body of literature is inspired by the vision of the *merkavah*, that is, the heavenly chariot, by Ezekiel, an exiled Priest who was dealing with the destruction of the first temple.[61] It is also significant that the earthly location for the narrative of *Hekhalot Rabbati* is on the temple mount,[62] for it is only appropriate that the visions of the new temple should occur where the previous one had been located.

The heavenly realms, like the temple, now have clearly marked boundaries, with ascending levels of sanctity and danger, the transgression of which can lead to death: "Now, the guards of the sixth palace make a practice of killing those who 'go and do not go down to the Merkabah without permission.' They hover over them, strike them, and burn them" (*Pirkei Heikhalot* 19:6). Similarly, Chernus notes that "in the Jerusalem Temple precincts signs were posted warning *gerim* (proselytes) and women not to proceed past certain limits set for them."[63]

If the heavenly realms acted as a de facto temple after 70 CE, then it follows that notions of ritual impurity were applied to the heavenly realms in a

[60] Elior, "Earthly Temples," 227.
[61] Elior, "Earthly Temples," 242.
[62] *Pirkei Heikhalot* 16:2 "I immediately went out and gathered together every great and small Sanhedrin to the third entrance of the House of God." Blumenthal interprets: "The 'House of God' is the temple and since it had been destroyed, R. Ishmael means that he gathered everyone to the spot where the 3rd gate had stood" ("The Merkavah Tradition," 59).
[63] Ira Chernus, "The Pilgrimage to the Merkavah: An Interpretation of Early Jewish Mysticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought 6* (1987), 4.

way that they had not previously been. Chernus, who sees the ascent through the heavenly realms as being analogous to the pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple,[64] sees the purity concerns in the Hekhalot literature as mirroring the purification processes of the pilgrim approaching the Jerusalem temple. He notes that "[t]he pilgrim ascending to Jerusalem had to meet certain qualifications, most of which revolved around considerations of purity."[65] Included in this preparation was a seven-day purification ritual for pilgrims coming from outside Israel just as "purificatory rites including baths, special diets or fasting, and sexual abstinence played an importance role in the preparation for the journey to the Merkavah."[66] Furthermore, "as the pilgrims approached the Temple, they were examined by Levites who checked their ritual fitness to enter the sacred precincts, just as the Merkavah mystic had to face inspection by the heavenly being guarding the thresholds of the various Heikhalot."[67] With such strict purity laws now in effect in the heavenly realms, it thus becomes impossible to imagine a woman ascending into the heavens, just as it would have been unacceptable for a woman to enter into the inner courts of the second temple.[68]

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[64] Chernus, "Pilgrimage," 2. The innermost *Hekhal* represents the temple itself.
[65] Chernus, "Pilgrimage," 4.
[66] Chernus, "Pilgrimage," 4.
[67] Chernus, "Pilgrimage," 4.
[68] Josephus mentions that there is a separate court for women (*Against Women* 2:8, *Jewish War* 5: 5:2, *Antiquities* 15:11; 5). It is also mentioned in the Mishnah (m. Mid. 2:5:5). It seems that women were not excluded from the inner court of the temple in order to segregate the sexes as there is indication that men could be in the women's court (i.e. healed lepers, priest with blemishes- males excluded from the innermost court) but is rather because, as Susan Grossman says, women, because of menses "would somehow be considered to have an inherently stronger potential for defilement than would Israelite men" ("Women and the Jerusalem Temple," *Daughters of the King* [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992], 25)

## Conclusion

After the destruction of the temple purity laws were intensified. The writers of the Hekhalot literature began to think about the heavenly realms in a new way. Purity realms were rigorously applied to them, more so perhaps than they had been to the temple. Menstruation, according to Douglas' system, becomes "dirt" or "matter out of place" in the heavenly realms. The *yored merkavah* is pointedly asked: "Do the ministering angels have abnormal discharges and the impurity of menstruation… for which they need immersion?"[69] These angels do not, and because women regularly do, the heavenly realms are off limits to them.

Both the early rabbinic writing and the Hekhalot literature place a great deal of importance on menstrual purity. They have both augmented and embellished the biblical precepts outlined in Leviticus. This intensified interest in menstrual purity is likely a response to the destruction of the temple and, following Douglas, an answer to the threat of cultural obliteration. Specifically, the Hekhalot literature envisioned the heavenly realms as a third temple and applied these intensified purity regulations to them. In this climate of cultural turmoil, it became inconceivable that women could participate in mystical experience, though this notion was more than present in previous literature.

[69] Schäfer, *Synopse*, 181; Swartz, "Ministering Angels," 161.

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