Conclusion

Whichever solution these late ancient scholars and spiritual leaders adopted—marrying early or late, or abandoning family life altogether—Moses remains central to their notions of sexual practice and spiritual pursuit. Moses serves as a focal point for contemplating the perceived conflicts between sex, marriage, and divine calling for Philo, the Rabbis, and Aphrahat. While Philo prefers to see Moses as the embodiment of Hellenistic virtues such as self-discipline, the authors of the Sifre understand Moses’ special prophethood (but no one else’s) as necessitating his distancing himself from domestic life. Within the Jewish-Christian polemic, however, Moses’ celibacy becomes the exegetical foundation for constructing religious identities based on sexual behavior. Through his exegetical construct of holiness-as-celibacy, Aphrahat both polemizes against Jewish marriage practices and establishes a hierarchy of spirituality for his Christian readers. Celibacy is holiness and therefore remains the ultimate manifestation of true Christian living. Aphrahat wears his celibacy with pride for it marks him as holy, divinely blessed, and chosen. While the Rabbis never specifically counter Aphrahat’s conclusions, Moses’ sexual history, both procreative and celibate, allows them to construct their own sexual and religious identities. Never forgoing marriage, they struggle to create a balance between their domestic lives and their spiritual pursuits, basing their choices on Moses’ example.

Rabbi Ishmael’s Miraculous Conception

Jewish Redemption History in Anti-Christian Polemic

by

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Embedded in the early medieval Hebrew martyrological anthology The Story of the Ten Martyrs is a curious “annunciation” scene that recounts how Rabbi Ishmael’s mother, the unnamed wife of Elisha the high priest, became pregnant after encountering an angel sent to her by God. More remarkable still, Rabbi Ishmael is said to have inherited the angelic messenger’s beautiful appearance. Within the martyrological cycle, the physical embodiment of the sage’s unique kinship to the divine permits him unparalleled access to the heavenly realm from which his efficacious beauty derives. Each one of the episodes of Rabbi Ishmael’s vita recounted in The Story of the Ten Martyrs—his ascent to heaven to determine whether it is the will of God that the ten sages should be martyred, his own gruesome execution during which the skin of his...
beautiful countenance is peeled off, and the subsequent use of this “death
mask” as a relic in a ritual that portends the ultimate fall of Rome and
redemption of Israel – is intimately bound up with the special circumstances
of his birth. In fact, it is this hagiographic account of Rabbi Ishmael’s life and death that lends a semblance of narrative unity to the otherwise disjointed literary traditions of which the anthology is
composed.

The centrality of this narrative to the highly polemical collection of
martyr stories certainly seems an intentional provocation. After all, in
conferring upon this Jewish martyr semi-divine status through the agency
of an angelic messenger at his birth, the anthology elicits automatic
comparison between its protagonist and the prototypical Christian martyr
Jesus, whose birth, death, and afterlife serve as the cornerstone of a very
different history of redemption. It is certainly striking that, like the Christ
of the NT Letter to the Hebrews, Rabbi Ishmael is imagined in the dual
role of heavenly high priest and atoning sacrifice offered on the celestial
altar. At the same time that the author/redactors of the anthology were
painting a graphic portrait of the bleak experience of late antique Jews
under Roman and, later, Christian domination, they thus chose to claim
for themselves a set of highly charged literary motifs that were at odds
with the more conventional scholastic orientation of their rabbinic source
material. The recent work of Daniel Boyarin and Israel Yuval, among
others, has taught us not to be surprised at such seemingly precarious
fusions of polemical and apologetic aims: even where it is possible to
speak of Jews and Christians as two distinct communities, they shared
many common discursive categories, ritual practices, and literary forms,
de spite, or perhaps especially while, maintaining a rhetoric of difference
and, at times, overt hostility.

2 It perhaps goes without saying that this hagiographic cycle is legend and not
biography. Indeed, even the actions and statements attributed to Rabbi Ishmael the high
priest in earlier rabbinic sources (e.g., b. Hal. 4:10; b. Ber. 7a; b. Ber. 51a; b. Git. 58a;
b. Hal. 49a–b) are entirely unusable for biographical purposes, although they do
constitute a relatively coherent corpus of material concerning this figure. On a note of
caution, Rabbi Ishmael ben Elison the high priest should not be facilely identified with
the early-second-century Tauna Rabbi Ishmael, whose priestly identity remains
uncertain (Gary G. Porton, The Traditions of Rabbi Ishmael 14 vols.; Leiden: Brill,
1982), 4:122–144, esp. n. 2). Compare, however, the discussion of Rabbi Ishmael’s
distinctively priestly orientation in Menahem Hirschman, Torah for the Entire World
(Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1999), esp. 134–49.

3 For the use of Christian imagery in the Jewish martYROlogical literature produced
in the Crusades, see Israel Yuval, “Christliche Symbolik und jüdische
MartYROlogie zur Zeit der Kreuzzüge,” in Juden und Christen zur Zeit der Kreuzzüge
(ed. A. Haverkamp, Signnieren: Jan Thorbecke, 1999), 87–106. See also idem, Shene
goyim be-vinek: Yehudim ve-Netzarim – dimyyn hadadiyim (Tel Aviv: Am oved,
2000); idem, “Easter and Passover as Early Jewish–Christian Dialogue,” in Passover
and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times (ed. P. F. Bradshaw and L. A.
Hoffman; Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame, 1999), 98–124; idem, “Vengeance and
Damnation, Blood and Defamation: From Jewish Martyrdom to Blood Libel
histories of Judaism and Christianity, see Daniel Boyarin, Dying for God: Martyrdom and the
Making of Christianity and Judaism (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999); idem, “Martyrdom
21–62; also his “Semantic Differences; or, ‘Judaism’” in this volume.

4 The secondary literature on Christian annunciation, nativity, and childhood
narratives is naturally vast. See the updated commentary in Raymond E. Brown,
The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and
there. I speak here and throughout the paper of ‘conception’ and not ‘birth’, since, unlike
the accounts of Jesus’ (and Mary’s) conception, nativity, and childhood in the canonical
gospels (Matthew 1:1–2; Luke 1:1–2) and in some apocryphal texts (e.g., Odes of Solomon
19:6–10, Protevangelium of James 11, and Ascension of Isaiah 11:8–9), the tradition
of Rabbi Ishmael’s supernatural origins does not address the circumstances of his birth
or early life, instead restricting itself to the actual process of procreation. Notably, this
emphasizes conformance to the biblical prototype; see the excellent summary of this
paradigm in Athalya Brenner, “Female Social Behavior: Two Descriptive Patterns

5 God is said to intervene in the process of procreation, either directly or through
the agency of an intermediary, in the conceptions of Isaac (Gen 18:15; 21:1–3),
Samson (Judg 13:2–7), and Samuel (1 Sam 2:21). On the “annunciation” motif in biblical
literature generally, see especially Robert Alter, “How Convention Helps Us Read: The

6 For a useful discussion of many of these sources and their relationship to early
Christian literature, consult Charles H. Talbert, “Prophecies of Future Greatness: The
Contribution of Greek–Roman Biographies to an Understanding of Luke 1:5–4:15,” in
129–41. On the specific theme of supernatural conception, see Plutarch, Theseus 2.6.36;
Romulus 2.5; 4.2; Alexander 3.1–2; also Quntus Curtius, History of Alexander 1;
Pseudo-Callisthenes, Alexander Romance.
knowledge. The Jewish historian Josephus, who often employed the stock motifs of the biographical genre, likewise availed himself of the notion that the appearance of an angel to a barren woman could transmit unusual beauty to her child.

Nevertheless, the story of Rabbi Ishmael's conception is not just one more example of this near-ubiquitous impulsive. Rather, the narrative, while exhibiting discursive commonalities with the broader cultural milieu, represents a pointed rejoinder to Christian accounts of Jesus' divine nature and of his uniqueness within human history. This bold act of appropriation cannot be considered in a cultural vacuum; nor is it merely a symptom of intercommunal polemic. In his incisive work on the use of common liturgical forms in related, but distinct, religious communities, Lawrence Hoffman has developed a model for conceptualizing precisely this sort of contested cultural idiom:

Instead of viewing society as a series of already sharply defined conflicting religious groups, vying with each other, I suggest a model in which all are presumed to share equally in a generally pervasive cultural backdrop. This cultural backdrop is what everyone takes as normative, and within which everyone takes some stand or another. In their liturgy, people declare themselves to stand within the commonly accepted boundaries of the religious enterprise, sharing certain generally accepted cultural characteristics along with everyone else - that is, censoring themselves in; at the same time they preserve the boundaries of their own integrity by censoring out those cultural characteristics which they have chosen not to accept.

Hoffman cautions against an overtly general and undifferentiated notion of shared cultural space. In his view, the act of participating in a common culture automatically entails marking out where one stands on that terrain. The trick is to locate the precise strategies by which the elements of a common idiom are fashioned into an exclusionary practice - or, in this case, narrative.

What sets the Rabbi Ishmael material apart from comparable late antique hagiography, then, is its use of the notion of ritual purity to understand and articulate its hero's special status. The narrative constructs Rabbi Ishmael as a more-than-human figure who, by virtue of his angelic paternity, is exempt from the impurity that inheres in all human existence. It is worth noting that in the Toledot Yeshu literature, the Jewish anti-Gospels that flourished in numerous versions and languages throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Jesus' mother is said to have conceived during her menses. Jesus is thus the quintessential offspring of impurity (טולדה), whose illegitimate power and destructive nature reflects his improper origin. Rabbi Ishmael is this mirror opposite, a rabbinc figure who belongs to the heavenly realm because he is truly of it. Indeed, the conception narrative attributes his mother's decisive encounter with the angelic messenger to her rigorous and even extreme practice of ritual bathing following the period of her menstrual impurity. Of course, the story of his conception does to some extent operate according to a theory of sexual reproduction that was widely accepted by late antique Jews, Christians, and "pagans" alike. Nevertheless, the narrative follows the conventions of a specific strain of Jewish purity discourse that developed in Byzantine Palestine toward the end of Late Antiquity and asssumed its clearest statement in the unusual halakhic rulings of the Berakot, Ma'ad (12). A close reading of the unit's relationship to the two separate discursive contexts in which it evolved - Jewish purity practice and Jewish martyrlogy - is thus essential to a proper understanding of Rabbi Ishmael's place within the history of salvation put forward in The Story of the Ten Martyrs.

The argument of the paper will proceed as follows: I first situate the conception narrative within the broader discourse of late antique gynecological science, both Jewish and non-Jewish. I then analyze the intimate relationship between this vignette and the distinctive understanding of Jewish purity practice current among Byzantine Jews. The conspicuous formal and ideological affinities between the "annunciation" scene and this purity discourse demonstrate that the unit assumed its present form as a narrative dramatization of its stringent

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7 Philostratus, Life of Apollonius 1.4.
8 For signs accompanying the birth of heroes in the writings of Josephus, see, for example, A.J. 2.9.6–7; 2.10.1–2. Josephus even highlights the special circumstances of his own birth in Life. For a similar impulse in Philo, see Mos. 1.5.20–24; 1.6.25–29. See also Daniel J. Harrington, "Birth Narratives in Pseudo-Philonic Biblical Antiquities and the Gospels," in To Touch the Text: Biblical and Related Studies in Honor of Joseph A. Fitzmyer (ed. M. P. Horgan and P. J. Kobelski; New York: Crossroad, 1989), 316–24.
system of purity practice. Yet, at the same time as the unit adopts the theoretical terms set out in the purity literature, it draws its narrative content from the martyrlogical tradition. I show that the central episodes of Rabbi Ishmael’s life recounted in The Story of the Ten Martyrs all directly hinge on the radical claims put forward in the “annunciation” scene concerning his angelic purity and beauty. Finally, I offer some concluding reflections on the significance of this narrative tradition for our understanding of the complex and, at times, paradoxical nature of Jewish cultural expression in the Byzantine period.

Visuality and Gynecological Science in Late Antiquity

Before considering the literary and ideological origins of the “annunciation” scene in The Story of the Ten Martyrs, I will first present the relevant text in its entirety.12

VII.11.10. (Every time Rabbi Ishmael wished to ascend to heaven (למעלה), he would ascend. 11. Why was Rabbi Ishmael worthy of this (מהלך)?) 13 His father was Eliezer the

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12 I translate and number the text following Ten Martyrs, VII.11.16–23 (Reeg, Geschichte, 19). The unit also appears at 1.15.11–30; V and VIII.11.16–23. 1.15.11–30 seems to represent a relatively independent textual form, whereas the versions in recensions V, VII, and VIII stand in close relationship to each other as well as to the variations found in other medieval sources: Lique ha-Pardes (attributed most likely to R. Solomon ben Isaac’s disciple Rabbi Shemaya), Amsterdam 1715, 4a; Munkács, 1897, 6b–7a; Sefer ha-Miqṣo’t, 13–14; Eleazar of Worms, Sefer ha-Roseah, "Hilkhot Niddah," 317; Isaac ben Moses of Vienna, 'Or Zara, Alpha Beta 29; Isaac of Dura, Shark a Dura, "Hilkhot Niddah," 2:23; Menahem Tsioni, Sefer Tsioni, 78a; Azariah de Fano, Sefer Gilgul Neshamot, 8–29; MS New York-JTSA ENA 3021, fol. 1a (entitled Zehirin ha-Tevillah); MS Paris-BN 1408, fol. 67a; MS New York-JTSA Misc. 1842, fol. 192a-b (entitled Hayye Nefesh by Isaac ben Joseph). See also the version in Moses Gaster, Ma’seh Book: Book of Jewish Tales and Legends Translated from the Judeo-German (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1934), 237–39; "Shivne R. Ishmael Kohen Gadol," in Hadashim gan yesham (ed. A. M. Haterman; Jerusalem: R. Mas, 1975), 36. These attestations have been collected from Ch. M. Horowitz, Yosef ha’Tinui (5 voix; Frankfurt am Main, 1869), 4:7–15 and 5.VIII–IX (several of the versions are transcribed at 5.45–54, 57–61); Bin Gorson, Memokor Yarzeu, 3.106 n. 5; Elliot R. Wolfson, Through a Spectrum That Shines (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), 212–14, esp. n. 96; Michael Swartz, Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 162–63, esp. n. 66; Eytan Marienberg, "Études sur la Baraita de Niddah et sur la conceptualisation de la menstruation dans le monde juif et son écho dans le monde chrétien de l’époque médiéale à nos jours" (Ph.D. diss., EHESS Paris, 2002), 485–514.

13 The material in brackets is a redactional frame that appears only in recensions V, VII–VIII.11.1 and is not integral to the pericope.

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14 In recension I alone Rabbi Ishmael’s father is R. Yose and not Eliezer the High Priest.
15 In all the versions of the story, Rabbi Ishmael’s mother is not barren, but instead has lost all of her children during childbirth. Only in recension I is it at all possible that she is barren: "We have not had success with children, since we have no heir, neither son nor daughter (ויהי בנו ובתו)" (אוני)." The other recensions read מזרחי rather than מזרחי.
16 The other recensions read מזרחי rather than מזרחי.
17 The other recensions read מזרחי rather than מזרחי.
18 This enigmatic phrase is difficult to interpret, but seems to indicate that these "righteous people" have exceeded the required practice.
19 In some versions, a dog and a camel are added to this list of impure animals, and in some she also encounters an "ignoramus" (lak ha-aretz).
20 The number of repetitions is highly variable. Recension VII agrees with recension VIII (and with Lique ha-Pardes) that she repeated the procedure forty times. Recension V doubles the number to eighty times. Sefer ha-Miqṣo’t reports that she did so ten times. Recension V restricts the number to "several times" (��ל כמות). In most versions of the narrative (including recensions VII and VIII), the angelic messenger is named Metatron. By contrast, in recension I and Lique ha-Pardes the angel is named Gabriel. In recension V, which initially casts Metatron in the role of the angel (V.11.18), Gabriel joins Metatron outside the bathhouse (V.11.18) and entirely replaces Metatron in the latter half of the narrative (V.11.20–23). Even here in recension VII, Gabriel makes an appearance at the end of the unit (VII.11.23), where he seems to have been carried over into this recension from one of the other versions. In the Or Zara, the angel is identified as the Sar Torah, which may indicate that this version was once incorporated into magical material.
contact impurity in conventional Jewish law. Strikingly, the same mechanism that exposes Rabbi Ishmael’s mother to the dangers of impurity and the associated threat to her newborn children bestows upon him his distinctive character and appearance. Although the angel does not adopt the appearance of a specific human being, the narrative’s emphasis on the angel’s capacity to assume “human form” (ידוע בן אדם) highlights the physical concreteness of the theory of visual procreation it assumes.26

The theory of visual “impressions” operative in the narrative would not have struck the late antique reader as remarkable.27 Indeed, its basic premise, that visual stimuli can influence the process of gestation, was a commonplace in certain branches of Greek and Latin gynecology.28 It is already prefigured in the patriarch Jacob’s exercise in eugenics through which he produced mottled sheep by placing striped twigs in front of the flock during breeding: “The rods that he had peeled he set up in front of the flocks ... Their mating occurred when they came to drink, and since the goats mated by the rods, the goats brought forth streaked, speckled, and spotted young.”29 In his commentary on this biblical passage, Jerome goes to great lengths to explain the narrative in terms of contemporary genetic theory.30 Augustine, too, cites this biblical precedent in his only partly-successful attempt to provide scientific grounding both for his theory of original sin and his conception of the relationship between body and soul.31 The Testaments of the Twelve

26 Recension I departs from the majority tradition when it says that the angel (Gabriel) took on the appearance of the husband, in this case Rabbi Yose (I.15.16–17): דע הל הכותupil רבי יוסי (cf. MS New York-JTSA ENA 3021, 1a/8). The idea that angels could assume the form of a particular human being is discussed in Wolfson, Speculum, 211–13, although he nowhere indicates that recension I diverges from the majority tradition precisely on this matter.


29 Gen 30.25–39. All citations from the Hebrew Bible are from the JPS translation.


31 I cite here only one example of Augustine’s argumentation: “In other animals, whose bodily bulk does not lend itself so easily to such changes, the fetus usually shows some traces of the passionate desires of their mothers, whatever it was that they gazed upon with great delight. For the more tender and, so to speak, the more formable
Patriarchs employs a similar notion to explain how the “sons of God” (יהוהים עברים) of Gen 6:1–4 were able to procreate with human women after descending to earth:

It was thus that they (human women) allured the Watchers before the flood; for, as a result of seeing them continually, the Watchers lustied after one another, and they conceived the act in their minds and changed themselves into the shape of men and appeared to the women when they were having intercourse with their husbands. And the women, lusting in their minds after their phantom forms, gave birth to giants (for the Watchers seemed to be them tall enough to touch the sky).

Although the descending angels here intrude in the course of the sexual act itself rather than during the elaborate preparations for it, there are obvious affinities between Rabbi Ishmael and the monstrous progeny of this episode of primate transgression. Yet, whereas their angelic paternity dooms them to drag humanity down into sin, Rabbi Ishmael’s represents its opposite, the legitimate and even redemptive unification of the heavenly and the earthly realms.

This same theory of visual conception, however, can be found much closer to the cultural context in which the Rabbi Ishmael legend developed. Midrashic sources explicitly employ this theory in order to elucidate these early Jewish traditions about the “sons of God.”

the original seeds were, the more effectually and the more capably do they follow the inclination of their mother’s soul, and the fantasy which arose in it through the body upon which it looked with passion. There are numerous examples of this which could be mentioned, but one from the most trustworthy books will suffice: in order that the sheep and the she-goats might give birth the speckled offspring, Jacob had rods of various colors placed before them in the watering-troughs, to look at as they drank, during that period when they had conceived” (De Trinitate, II, 5; trans. in Stephen McKenna, The Trinity [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1963], 321–22). Cf. De Trinitate, III, 15; Against Julian, V, 51–52; Against Julian, VI, 43; Retractatio II, 62, 2. On the importance of this issue in Augustine’s thought, see Elizabeth A. Clark, “Vitiated Seeds and Holy Vessels: Augustine’s Manichean Past,” in Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith: Essays on Late Antique Christianity (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellon Press, 1986), 291–349.

32 T. Ren. 5:6–7 (Translation by Marinus de Deigne in The Apocryphal Old Testament ed. H. F. D. Sparks; Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 519–20. There are numerous allusions to the story of the Watchers in early Jewish literature (e.g., I En. 6:5–16 and passim; T. Neph. 5:5; Jub. 4:15–22; 7:11, 8:3, 10:5; CD 2:18). Compare the counter-tradition concerning the miraculous birth of Noah in which Lamech’s apparently erroneous concern that his son’s angelic visage is a sign of his fallen-angelic parentage is assuaged (I En. 106–7; 1QapGn ii–v). On the place of the fallen-angel myth in late antique Judaism and Christianity, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, “What the Fallen Angels Taught: The Reception-History of the Book of the Watchers in Judaism and Christianity” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2002).

33 Gen. Rab. 26:7 (translation mine); cf. Tanh. B. Bereshit 40. I would like to thank Annette Yoshiko Reed for calling my attention to this tradition.

34 Gen. Rab. 73:10; Num. Rab. 9:34; Tov. Nazo 7. These sources are collected in Horowitz, Tosefta Antig. 5:55–56. I follow the narrative sequence and language of the Tanhuma version. In some versions, this figure is identified as the king of the Arabs, while in others simply as “an Ethiopian” ( edição של תנ"ע). Just as in Jerome’s Quaestiones hebraicae on Gen 30:33–43, the predicament of the Ethiopian king is used in each of these versions to provide validation for Jacob’s strange breeding technique. Jerome and the Rabbis may here be transmitting a common exegetical tradition, although it is also possible that this interpretative strategy developed independently in the two contexts.

past comes very close to Rabbi Ishmael’s physical kinship with Metatron. Heliodorus shared with the Jewish texts that we have been looking at a common set of literary motifs and scientific knowledge from which to build his narrative.

Rabbinic literature, however, often viewed this theory of “maternal impression” through the lens of purity regulation. In fact, the story about Rabbi Ishmael draws explicitly on Rabbi Yohanan’s unusual practice of standing outside the ritual bath so that the women who saw him after purifying themselves would have children as handsome as he.

R. Yohanan used to sit outside the ritual bath (הרחובא דרבי יוחנן הוא临 חפץ הנ🧴). He said: “When the daughters of Israel come out from the bath, let them meet me (כתיות דרבי יוחנן), so that they will have children as beautiful as I am (נידיה דרבי יוחנן).” The Rabbis said to him: “Are you not afraid of the Evil Eye (曈ון רעים)?” He answered: “I am of the seed of Joseph, our father, of whom it is said, Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring (Gen 49:22).”

Rabbi Ishmael’s story echoes the specific terminology of this description of Rabbi Yohanan’s curious form of public service: both passages use the root עבש to describe the encounter outside the bathhouse.38 It is this distinctive mixture of gynaecological science and purity practice that connects the story of Rabbi Ishmael’s conception to these earlier rabbinic traditions. At the same time, the interest in purity sets them both apart from the general cultural discourse in which they participated.

Purity, Piety, and Procreation: Beraita de Niddah

When the narrative of Rabbi Ishmael’s conception is not found in the context of the martyrological literature, it appears in a number of instructional manuals and legal texts as a freestanding narrative.

39 See the sources listed in n. 12 above, especially Ligue ha-Pardes, Sefer ha-Roqehah, Sha’are Dura, Zehrut ha-Tevillah.
41 A version of the text is available in Horowitz, Tesefat ‘Atota, 5.1–34 (all citations of the text follow Horowitz’s chapter divisions and page numbers). The sources collected and discussed by Horowitz have been thoroughly reevaluated in Marenberg, Beraita de Niddah. Marenberg is currently preparing a critical edition of the text with French translation.
early as the Geonic period, the traditions attested therein do conform to earlier Palestinian practice.

Although the "annunciation" scene does not occur in Bdn, it is this collection that offers the most sustained source for understanding this story. It presents a wide range of para-halakhic strictures that severely limit the activities of the menstruant; one could not enjoy the fruits of her labor (Bdn 1:2); she could not enter the synagogue or house of study (Bdn 3:4); one could not greet her or say a blessing in her presence lest she respond with "amen" or with the name of God, thereby desecrating it (Bdn 2:5). Her social exclusion was absolute. Even the speech of the menstruant was considered impure (Bdn 2:3). She could not comb her hair or shake her head lest a hair fall out and convey impurity to her husband (Bdn 1:4). Finally, contrary to standard Talmudic sources (b. Bek. 27a and m. Niddah 10.7), Bdn ranks the maintenance of its purity laws above a woman's other obligations, barring the menstruant from the commandments of hala'ah (separating the priestly offering from dough) and of lighting the Sabbath candles. For Bdn, menstrual impurity had become a dangerous state from which public life had to be assiduously guarded.

Amongst its idiosyncratic (though influential) rulings Bdn includes explicit discussion of the role of visual stimuli in the process of procreation. One such passage reports in the name of Rabbi Hanna that "at the time when she immerses, if she encounters (קנין) a dog, if she is wise and has fear of heaven, she will not allow her husband to have intercourse with her that night. Why? Lest her sons be ugly and their faces resemble a dog's, she returns and immerses again." The passage continues by listing similar cases concerning a donkey and an ignoramus (דני ביב). The tendency to enumerate such encounters in a series of parallel cases is a distinctive feature of this literature, one employed in the "annunciation" scene to great effect. Like the sources of impurity encountered by Rabbi Ishmael's mother, these dangerous types of people and animals pose a threat to a woman's capacity to conceive a healthy child.

Oddly enough, however, the notion of visually transmitted danger described in these texts does not coincide fully with the categories of ritual impurity that have their roots in biblical, or perhaps better, levitical, purity concerns. In fact, in the same passage, Bdn instructs that, if a woman sees a horse, she and her husband should have sex that night: "Happy is one whose mother came upon a horse; her sons are beautiful in carriage and speech, hearing, understanding and learning Torah and Mishnah ..." This detail represents an important inconsistency in the text's discursive logic since, after all, a horse is no more or less pure than a dog. At least in this case, Bdn is concerned wholly with the animal's impact on the "ethical" attributes of the child and does not view the horse through the lens of ritual purity. This reasoning should apply equally to the dog and the ignoramus. Just as in non-Jewish sources, these are ethical types and not potential carriers of ritual impurity. What we find here, then, is that Bdn has wed the conventional theory of visual "impressions" to its basic framework of levitical regulations. Just as ritual immersion removes impurity in conventional Jewish law, in the context of this hybrid discourse it is said to erase, as it were, the damaging images that have become imprinted in the woman. Yet, despite the tensions between these systems, it is virtually impossible to separate them out once they have been integrated, however incompletely, within the purity literature. Indeed, as we will see, the boundary between levitical purity and other forms of purification, such as those that precede ascent and adoration in late antique Jewish and non-Jewish magical literature, is impossible to fix in this material. Bdn's kitchen sink approach to ritual purity lumps together what we might prefer to imagine as wholly separate systems of purity or simply procreative science. The creators and consumers of this "post-levitical" purity discourse seem not to have been interested in strict categorization. For Bdn, just as for the account of Rabbi Ishmael's conception, purity, piety, and procreation are inextricable.

In fact, even in sections of Bdn that do not explicitly relate to conception and procreation, vision serves as the principal medium through which impurity is conveyed. The text recounts that a certain Rabbi Hanna ben ha-Qanah, likely the same Rabbi responsible for the list of dangers discussed above, "was once walking on the road and came across a woman. He covered his eyes and distanced himself from her three paces." The Rabbi seems to have an almost preternatural sensitivity to impurity; he senses her impurity even before she has approached him. More importantly, he carefully covers his face so that her impurity will not enter him through his eyes. Scholars have long noticed the strong similarities between this figure in Bdn and the almost identically named Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Qanah of the Hechalot.

43 Prof. Shaye Cohen has suggested to me the possibility that, as with so much late antique Jewish literature, the existence of this work as a redactionally unified composition may be no more than a scribal fiction of the inter Middle Ages (oral communication).

44 Perhaps to be identified with Rabbi Hanna ben ha-Qanah (=Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Qanah). On this identification see below.

45 Bdn 1:1 (Horowitz, Tosefta 'Avot, 5.2).

46 Bdn 1:1 (Horowitz, Tosefta 'Avot, 5.3).

47 Bdn 1:7 (Horowitz, Tosefta 'Avot, 5.9).
in the mouth of the fetus so that it enters its body, and it is immediate struck (קטעה) [with a defect].

Here we find the text’s familiar tendency to conflate ethical and cultic categories at its most extravagant. The deleterious effects of immoral thoughts are put on par with failure to attend to one’s condition of ritual impurity. Whereas Rabbi Ishmael’s parents demonstrate their piety by embracing the strictures of purity law and are duly rewarded, the parents in this passage bring harm to their child through decadent attitudes towards sexual intercourse. Not surprisingly, the medium of punishment is menstrual blood.

Other portions of the text betray a similar interest in the notion of divine intervention in the process of procreation. Basing itself on biblical precedent, the text asserts that the miraculous fruitfulness of each of the patriarchs, Sarah, Rachel, and Leah, should be attributed to her careful maintenance of purity regulations. More interesting still, its account of Samson’s conception in Judges 13 emphasizes the added element of angelic intervention. The text reports that, despite her female neighbors’ (אשה) [advice to employ a magical remedy involving the hide of a fox (לוח) as a cure for her barrenness, Manoah’s wife chooses instead simply to continue being vigilant about her state of ritual purity: “Although they led her astray (לעבש乳腺 הריב), the Holy One blessed be He, the Holy One blessed be He heard her voice. Immediately, an angel appeared to her and said to her: ‘Take care not to eat any impure thing (לשת לאו חבירך) [כי אם יפה מこともある]’ And, because she maintained her purity (לשה דקק כמו כן), she immediately conceived (לשה דקק אלו).” In this “annunciation” scene, it is not her piety in general that is rewarded, but her steadfast dedication to the purity laws in particular, coupled with her refusal to engage in magical practice. Whatever the tangible similarities between this form of rigidly purity practice and late antique Jewish magic, BnN vigilantly insists on a firm boundary between them.

Although the purity discourse, of which BnN is the most developed example, accounts for the formal logic and vocabulary of Rabbi Ishmael’s conception, the larger context of this narrative unit still demands elucidation. In other words, where does the literary fabric of this brief exemplum – its characters and its dramatic setting – come from? As we have seen, the presence of the “annunciation” scene in The Story of the Ten Martyrs presents us with a paradox. On the one hand, in strictly formal terms this narrative unit achieved its present literary form outside of the martyrological tradition – the story reflects the practical, ethical, and ritual concerns of the purity literature in which it developed. On the

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48 This identification was first pointed out in Saul Lieberman, “The Knowledge of Halakha by the Author (or Authors) of the Heikaloth,” Appendix 2 of Ilanam Gruenwald, Apocalyptic and Merkava Mysticism (AGJU 14; Leiden: Brill, 1980), 241-44.


other, its narrative content is so integrally connected to the later events of Rabbi Ishmael’s life that it is difficult to imagine how these motifs could have been generated and orchestrated in so coherent a manner without presupposing a tradition concerning his miraculous origins. Nevertheless, the complex process of redaction through which the martyrological anthology was assembled belies any overly elegant solution to this tension. In what follows, I argue that, while this narrative tradition was incorporated into the anthology only after it had already become crystallized in another literary context, its thematic content is essential to understanding the figure of Rabbi Ishmael within The Story of the Ten Martyrs.

Rabbi Ishmael’s Angelic Purity and Beauty in The Story of the Ten Martyrs

Despite being set during the “Hadrianic persecutions” of the second century CE, the martyrological anthology as a fully formed literary composition dates to the Geonic period (seventh to tenth centuries). Jewish historians have long endeavored to isolate the historical kernet concealed in the multiple and shifting versions of this legend. More recent scholarship, however, has come to reject the positivist assumptions of these earlier attempts, preferring instead to emphasize the literary nature of the cycle. According to these scholars, the text is only of


historical value for understanding the experience of the Jews under East-Roman (Byzantine) rule in the period of its actual literary formation, not the earlier community from which its characters are drawn. The story weaves together a unified tale from pre-existing martyrological material found scattered throughout the Babylonian and Paestimian Talmuds as well as the vast midrashic corpus, together with a number of units that seem to have been generated specifically for the anthology itself. The result is a new form of martyrology. Classical rabbinic literature, for instance, nowhere recounts the contemporaneous deaths of ten rabbinic martyrs, but instead restricts itself to brief narrative complexes that typically narrate the death of one martyr, and at most two or three. By contrast, the anthology situates the executions of all ten sages within a single literary framework that offers a common explanation for their deaths, namely, the sin committed by Joseph’s brothers when they sold him into slavery (Genesis 38). Basing itself on the


56 This insight was first suggested in Philip Block, “Rom und die Mystiker der Mekpheres,” in Festschrift zum siebzigsten Geburtstage J. Guttman’s (Leipzig, 1915), 113–24.

57 On the use of earlier rabbinic sources in The Story of the Ten Martyrs, see Reeg, Geschichte, 49–51. Otherwise unattested material is used in the martyrological accounts of Rabbi Judah ben Bava (I.43), Yeshayahu the Scribe (I.50; III–VII.44), Rabbi Judah ben Dama (I.46); Rabbi Hanina ben Hakhina (I.3–V.49); and Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua (I–II, IV–VII.51).

58 E.g., for the death of Rabbi Akiva: y. Ber. 9.7 (14b); Mek. Y. Shiva’ on Exod 15.2; b. Ber. 61b; b. Eruv. 21b; b. Ber. 66a; b. Pesah. 50b; b. B. Bat. 10b; of Rabbi Hamanya ben Teradyon: b. Abod. Zarah 17b–18a; of Rabbi Yehudah ben Bava: b. Sanh. 14a and b. Abod. Zarah 11b; of Judah the Baker: y. Hag. 2.1 (770); of Rabbi Hutzpah the Interpreter: b. Hul. 142a; b. Qidd. 39b; of Lullanus and Pappus, “the Two Martyrs of Lod”: b. Ta. 16b; b. Ketub. 77a; b. Pesah. 50b; b. B. Bat. 10b.

59 This motif appears in earlier Jewish literature (e.g., b. Rash. 34.10–20; Gen. Rab. 84.17; Song Rab. on Song 1:3; PRE 38; Midrash Mishle 9.2; cf. Test. Gad 2.2; Test. Zeb. 1:5). Lists of the ten martyrs are found in Lam. Rab. 2.4; Ekkaboth Rab. 2.2; Mid. Ps on Ps 9:13. Versions of this list are also found in the body of the Story of the Ten Martyrs (I.21.12; II–III.4.3; IV–V, IX.10.32; VIII.22.27) and in some manuscripts of Hekhalot Rabban at §109 (MS N8128 and in a gloss in V228). These lists vary greatly from text to text and even within the different recensions of the anthology. It is important to note that several recensions of The Story of the Ten Martyrs suggest one of two alternative explanations of the sages’ deaths: either Israel’s sin of teaching Torah to
scriptural authority of Ex 21:16 ("He who kidnaps a man — whether he has sold him or is still holding him — shall be put to death"), the text argues that their actions constituted a capital crime. The deaths of the ten sages are intended as atonement of the "original sin" committed by the progenitors of the tribes of Israel.

While there are many versions of The Story of the Ten Martyrs, they all share a common literary structure provided by a highly elaborate account of the twin executions of Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel and Rabbi Ishmael, into which the motifs of ten rabbinic martyrs has been incorporated.60 This frame narrative (Rahmenerzählung) served as a relatively flexible literary structure within which future redactors of the anthology could organize and reorganize shifting configurations of thematically related martyrological material. Moreover, the individual versions of this collection differ wildly in their application of the frame narrative. The number and content of the martyrological units included in each recension is highly unstable; in fact, recensions II and VIII do not even bother to attach any additional martyrological material to the frame narrative.61 Therefore, the subsequent martyrological material, whether drawn from earlier rabbinic sources or attested first within this collection, often seems no more than the obligatory realization of the literary structure established in the frame narrative. Rabbi Ishmael’s vita, then, not only dominates late Jewish martyrology in a thematic sense, but also functions as its literary anchor.

Rabbi Ishmael’s Heavenly Ascent

As we have seen above, several recensions of The Story of the Ten Martyrs offer the story of Rabbi Ishmael’s miraculous origins as an explanation for his ability to ascend to heaven. He makes this celestial visit to learn if the executions of the ten sages are in accordance with the will of God and, more importantly, whether the decree can be repealed.62 Immediately following the account of his conception, these versions of the text continue:

At that time Rabbi Ishmael recited the name of God and a storm wind lifted him up and brought him to heaven (גבירתי קרא שלמה הרוחו, Metatron, the Prince of the Countenance, met him (לברך) and asked him: “Who are you?” He answered him: “I am Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisah the High Priest.” He said to him: “You are the one in whom your Creator takes pride each day (אֶלֶף בְּעַד הָאֱלֹהִים) - I have a servant on earth, a priest like you [Metatron]; his radiance is like your radiance and his appearance is like your appearance (רֹאשׁוֹ)”. Rabbi Ishmael answered: “I am he.” He asked him: “What is your business in this place of pure ones (דָּם שָׁלוֹם בְּכֶם).”63 A decree has been issued that ten noble ones of Israel will be executed.64 Now one of these ten (יִפְטָר דְּיָם בְּכֶם) is yours and I have ascended to learn whether this is the will of heaven or not (תָּכֵת לְהוֹרָה בַּשָּׁלוֹם אַתְךָ).” Metatron answers Rabbi Ishmael with a detailed description of the proceedings in the heavenly court during which the angelic prosecutor successfully demands from God that he exact the punishment due Israel for the crime of their forefathers. This account satisfies Rabbi Ishmael, who returns to earth to instruct his colleagues to accept their collective fate. The coupled descriptions of Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel and Rabbi Ishmael’s gruesome deaths immediately ensue, followed by the sequential reports concerning the deaths of the other martyrs.

Of course, Rabbi Ishmael’s encounter with an angel in heaven seems familiar enough. In the Hekhotat literature, Rabbi Ishmael is portrayed numerous times as the favored disciple of the great master of secret lore, Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Qanah. He serves as the prototype of the aspiring mystical initiate who, through careful preparation and technique, gains access to the heavenly sphere above. Like his colleagues in the mystical fellowship, his powers derive from the secret teachings transmitted within the human community of scholars.64 The act of heavenly ascent is typically described in the Hekhotat literature using the technical phrase “to descend to the chariot-throne” (יתרדד במקדש).65 By contrast, The

60 Ten Martyrs, V, VII-VIII 11.11. Recension I 5.10, however, links the conception narrative to Rabbi Ishmael’s exceptional beauty.

61 Ten Martyrs, I-X 15.1-4; cf. Grünth, Midrash Shir Hashirim, 4a. The translation follows recension VII. This unit is relatively stable within the manuscript tradition.

62 The locus classicus for this instructional style of literature is the havura-account in Hekhotat Rabbi (Schäfer, Synopse, §§198-259).

63 See most recently the comprehensive study of its technical vocabulary of “descent to the chariot” (ירידת ה-מערכה) in Annelies Kuyt, The ‘Descent to the Chariot’ (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995); idem, “Once Again: Yurot in Hekhotat Literature,” FIB 18 (1990): 45–69. See also the important analyses of this phenomenon in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Yeridah la-Merkavah: Typology of Ecstasy and Enthronement in Ancient
Story of the Ten Martyrs employs the more conventional verb “to ascend” (לעָסָר) in order to characterize Rabbi Ishmael’s journey.66 This terminological discrepancy is not incidental, but signifies the differing ideological and literary contexts of the two accounts. Whereas the Hekhalot corpus portrays Rabbi Ishmael gaining his powers through a process of study, prayer, and ritual performance that can be replicated by others, the martyrological tradition presents Rabbi Ishmael’s power as radically unique, deriving from his special kinship with the angel Metatron.

In fact, rather than drawing on the Hekhalot literature, the description of Rabbi Ishmael’s journey to heaven has a striking number of verbal and conceptual affinities with the well-known midrashic tradition concerning Moses’ ascent to receive the Torah.67 Like Moses, who in almost all the


66 There are several notable exceptions where versions of the martyrlogy do employ the technical terminology of yeridah. These, however, are unquestionably later adaptations of the original formulation in the martyrlogy. The version of the story of the ten martyrs contained in Hekhalot Rabbi (Schäfer, Synopses, §§107–121) reports: “When Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Qanah saw this decree (נַעַרְאָה), he rose and led me down to the Merkavah (ניִרְאֶה) and then to the glorious (וֹנִילָה) (Schäfer, Synopses, §107). However, the causative (יָמִד) form of the verb yarad used here is found only in this one instance throughout the entire Hekhalot corpus (Knyt, Descens, 150–52). This anomalous formulation suggests strongly that this version of Rabbi Ishmael’s ascent was adapted to conform to the literary/ideological context of the Hekhalot literature. Similarly, recension III of the martyrlogical anthology, which is represented by a single Italian manuscript family, employs the same technical terminology (e.g., at 12.9 and 31.1). Reeg, Geschichte, 43–44, however, rightly argues that this recension represents a relatively late and highly modified version of the anthology into which a great many passages from the Hekhalot corpus have been interpolated. Pace Dan (“The Story of the Ten Martyrs,” 15–22; idem, “Pirke Hekhalot Rabbi,” 63–80), recension III is not the earliest extant version of the anthology from which the Hekhalot literature derived its version of the martyrlogy.


versions of this tradition is conveyed to heaven within a cloud (learned),68 Rabbi Ishmael is said to ascend within a storm-wind (לעָשָרָה) (Rabbi ben ha-Qanah). Indeed, precisely the same phrase — “he encountered him” (גָּלַע) — is used in both literary traditions to describe their audience with the angel who meets them immediately upon their ascent.69 Moreover, the image of heaven in both of these traditions is horizontal, not vertical as in the Hekhalot literature.70 This horizontal orientation is given expression through the description of Rabbi Ishmael walking about in heaven (והני מעלה ונלך),71 which uses almost identical language to the characterization of Moses’ own movement — “he was walking in heaven like a human being walking on earth” (רָאִית הַגְּלִית בַּהֲלוֹם).72 Yet the affinities between these two accounts go beyond these verbal echoes. Upon ascending, both figures are interrogated by the angelic host concerning their presence in heaven. Just as Metatron asks Rabbi Ishmael, “What is your business in this place of pure ones (הָאֵל מְשַׁלְמְשָׂא הָאִיר)? the angels who confront Moses demand to know, “what business does one born of woman have in this place of purity, in this place of holiness (לָא בְּמִסְבָּר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים וּלְמִסְבָּר הוּא)?”73 An even more dramatic formulation of this protest is found in the brief textual unit known as “The Seventy Names of Metatron.”74 Here the angels oppose God’s decision to reveal the secrets of the universe to Moses, who, as the representative of mankind, is


68 E.g., Pesiq. Rab. 20, §§11 (Ulmer, Pesiqta Rabbati, 422–23).
69 E.g., Pesiq. Rab. 20, §§11 (Ulmer, Pesiqta Rabbati, 422–23).
70 On the layered vertical cosmology of the Hekhalot literature, see most recently Peter Schäfer, “In Heaven as it is in Hell: The Cosmology of Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit,” in Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antiquity Religious (ed. R. Abusch and A. Y. Reed; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, forthcoming), 1.1, 201.
71 Ma’ayan Hohmah (Jellinek, Beit ha-Midrash, 1.57), Cf. Pesiq. Rab. 20:11–12; MS Oxford Or. 135, 357a (§11,2).
72 Ma’ayan Hohmah (Jellinek, Beit ha-Midrash, 1.57), Cf. Pesiq. Rab. 20:11–12; MS Oxford Or. 135, 357a (§11,2).
73 T-S K 21.95.A, 1b13–14 (Schäfer, Geniza-Fragmente, 174). Most versions of the narrative use the shorter phrase 17 יְהוָה (e.g., b. Shabb. 88b; Pesiq. Rab. 20, §§11), instead of the more explicit phrase יְהוָה בְּמִסְבָּר. However, since all of these versions include the phrase “one born of woman” (יִשְׂרָאֵל), it is reasonable to assume that both formulations are similarly intended to address the impropriety of human entry into heaven. In most versions, this question is asked by Kemaat, the first angel encountered by Moses, rather than by a group of angels.
described as "born of woman, blemished, unclean, defiled by blood and impure flux," and who like all men "excretes putrid drops (of semen)." Unlike Rabbi Ishmael, who is immediately granted a detailed answer to his request, Moses is met with the unbridled hostility of the angelic host, which is evidently displeased that God plans to entrust to flesh and blood what he has withheld from His beloved angels. The angels view Moses' arrival in heaven as an unacceptable invasion of their domain and wage a near-fatal battle against his perceived aggression. Their challenge does not primarily address the content of his mission, but rather his right to be present in heaven at all.

The phrase -כ-וֹכ הַלַּוֹן constitutes far more than the pragmatic (and relatively neutral) question: "What is your business here in this place?" Instead, this interrogative formula signals a pointed challenge to the interlocutor: "What business do you have being here at all?" - or, perhaps even better, "Should not the very nature of this human being bar his entry into our realm?" The question insists on the radical disparity between human existence and the wholly pure status of the heavenly realm. The angels' complaint against Moses is based on their unshakable conviction that for a human being to enter the angelic realm constitutes a grave transgression of the cosmic order.

What, then, accounts for the contrasting receptions that these two figures are given upon arriving in heaven? In order to answer this question, we should first turn to the Hekhalot literature, which similarly employs the phrase -כ-וֹכ הַלַּוֹן as its standard formula for expressing alarm at the potential mingling of these two apparently antithetical domains, the angelic and the human. The formula is used most frequently in 3 Enoch, which directly addresses the problems associated with the transformation of the human Enoch into the angelic figure Metatron. In a passage that is highly reminiscent of the Moses material, the text puts the phrase in the mouths of the distraught angelic trio, Uzzah, Azzah, and Azazel, who vocally oppose Enoch's arrival in heaven and subsequent elevation to angelic status:

Then three of the minstrel angels, Uzzah, Azzah, and Azazel, came and laid charges against me in the heavenly height. They said before the Holy One blessed be He, "Lord of the Universe, did not the primordial ones give you good advice when they said, Do not create man!" The Holy one, blessed be He, replied, "I have made and will sustain him. I will carry and deliver him." When they saw me they said before him, "Lord of the Universe, what right has this one to ascend to the height of heights (chershaim הַלַּוֹן)? Is he not descended from those who perished in the waters of the Flood? What right has he to be in heaven (כ-וֹכ הַלַּוֹן)?" (§6 = 4:6-7)

In response to their charges, God turns the tables on them, rebuking the angelic rebels with a curt reminder of the strict boundaries that severely circumscribe their influence on his judgment: "What right have you to interrupt me? (כ-וֹכ הַלַּוֹן) (§6 = 4:8) As a thematically related passage later reports, it is Enoch's odor that has apparently been the cause of the angels' distress. Like Moses' opponents, these angels complain, "What is this smell of one born of woman (כ-וֹכ הַלַּוֹן)? Why does a white drop (of semen) ascend on high (כ-וֹכ הַלַּוֹן) and serve among those who cleave to the flames?" (§6 = 4:2) Finally, in a passage that belongs to the literary frame of 3 Enoch, this same complaint is lodged against Enoch/Metatron for permitting his interlocutor in the text, Rabbi Ishmael, to visit him in heaven: "Then the eagles of the chariot, the flaming ophanim, and the cherubim of devouring fire asked Metatron, 'Youth, why have you allowed one born of women to come in and behold the chariot (כ-וֹכ הַלַּוֹן)? From what nation is he? From what tribe is he? What is his character (כ-וֹכ הַלַּוֹן)?'" (§3 = 2:2). In 3 Enoch, unlike the martyrlogy, the angelic host does not recognize Rabbi Ishmael's special status.

In each case, the phrase -כ-וֹכ הַלַּוֹן is used to assert that everything must have its proper place - God, the angels, and human beings - reaffirming


76 On the conflict of motive between human beings and its bearing on the Moses ascent traditions, see especially Peter Schäfer, Rivalitäten zwischen Engeln und Menschen: Untersuchungen zur rabbinischen Engelvorstellung (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975), 207–16.

77 This last rendering of the phrase reflects the literal meaning of the word כ-וֹכ as "form, nature, character, or peculiarity" (s.v. Jastrow, 522).

78 In his recently published study A Transparent Illusion: The Dangerous Vision of Water in Hekhalot Mysticism (Leiden: Brill, 2002), esp. 118-23, C. R. A. Moray-Jones applies a similar analysis to the enigmatic question "What is the nature of this water?" (כ-וֹכ הַלַּוֹן) that appears in the well-known "Water Vision Episode" in the Hekhalot corpus (Schäfer, Synopses, §§258-259 and §§407-408; cf. b. Hag 14b). I arrived at my conclusions prior to reading Moray-Jones' discussion.


80 On the relationship of this passage to the fallen angel traditions in 1 Enoch, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, "From Azazel and Semiahzah to Uzzah, Azzah, and Azazel: 3 Enoch 5 (§§7-8) and Jewish Reception-History of 1 Enoch." JSQ 8 (2001): 105-36.
the cosmic order in the face of these repeated breaches. Indeed, it is used not only to challenge the over-reaching ambitions of lesser beings, whether human or angelic, but also to safeguard the divine from being tainted by the human sphere. In a passage again found in 3 Enoch, the angels complain that because of idolatrous sins committed by the generation of Enoch it is no longer fitting for God to remain among human beings. More germane to our purposes, however, is a striking adjudicational text that is appended in some manuscripts to Hekhalot Rabbati, in which the Prince of the Torah rebukes the young Rabbi Ishmael, here age thirteen, for having improperly called him down to earth:

I stood and afflicted myself for forty days, and I recited the Great Name, until I caused him [the Prince of the Torah] to descend. He came down in a flame of fire, and his face had the appearance of lightning. When I saw him, I trembled and was frightened and fell back. He said to me: "Human being! What is your business that you have disturbed the great household (פור יד לי) [sons of God], and to speak with the world came into being that I did not bring you down for [my glory], but to do the will of your master." Then he said to me: "Human being, son of a stinking drop, worm and vermin (�� יד תדה א’ רוב המולא)."

The text then proceeds to instruct the reader on the proper preparation for angelic adjudication: "Whoever wants it to be revealed to him must sit fasting for forty days, perform twenty-four immersions every day, and not eat anything defiling; he must not look at a woman, and must sit in a totally dark house." As we have noted above, the rigorous practices prescribed here are typical of the Hekhalot literature: the state of ritual purity that is a prerequisite for interacting with the divine is an achieved state. Like Moses and Enoch, the Rabbi Ishmael of the Hekhalot literature is neither exempt from the contamination inherent in normal human existence nor from the dangers this impurity poses for the person attempting to gain access to divine knowledge.

Thus, despite the many literary and conceptual connections between The Story of the Ten Martyrs and the Hekhalot corpus, they offer radically different solutions to the predicament created by their common notion of a selectively permeable cosmos. The Hekhalot corpus' Rabbi Ishmael must labor to achieve the proper state of purity and to learn the necessary practices for encountering the divine, but the martyrlogical posits a very different type of liminal figure. Rabbi Ishmael's angelic status and purity seem to derive directly from Metatron himself. In Metatron's words, Rabbi Ishmael is the one in whom God "takes pride each day saying, 'I have a servant on earth, a priest like you (Metatron); his radiance is like your radiance and his appearance is like your appearance' (אֱלֹהִים אִים אֲליִשֶׁר; אֱלֹהִים אִים אֲליִשֶׁר)."

Quite simply, he is a hybrid of the divine and the human, his nature structurally analogous to the porous cosmos he traverses. His encounter with Metatron is more a recognition scene of kin than a confrontation between two dissimilar beings.

It is hardly surprising that Rabbi Ishmael's kinship with his angelic progenitor is embodied in his luminous face, since Metatron's own bond with the divine is regularly expressed in similar terms. One particularly evocative passage from the Hekhalot corpus, which takes the form of a midrashic exegesis of two verses that mention God's face, Ex 33:15 (וַתְּגַוַּהוּ מְאֹד אֵל אֶלֶּהָ יִשְׂרָאֵל) and 23:21 (וַתְּגַוַּהוּ מְאֹד אֵל אֶלֶּהָ יִשְׂרָאֵל), relates how God warned Moses to beware of the dangerous force exerted by His countenance (רוּחֲנִי וְשָׁמַע אֶל הַקָּצֶר גָּזִירָא וְרָאָתִי). The unit then explicitly identifies God's face with the angelic name Yofi'el (lit. "beauty of God") and with Metatron himself. Nathan A. Deutsch has rightly pointed to this passage to support his conclusion that "some sources understood Metatron to be the hypostatic embodiment of a particular part of the divine form, most notably the face of God .... It is likely that this tradition underlies the title sar ha-pnanim, which is associated with Metatron. Rather than 'prince of the face [of God],' this title is better understood as 'prince who is the face [of God]."

Rabbi Ishmael's angelic appearance is thus synonymous with God's own hypostatic countenance. It is, therefore, understandable that in one of the recensions of the martyrlogical anthology, the relatively late Midrash Eleh Ezerah, Metatron explicitly comments on the resemblance between Rabbi Ishmael and God: "You are Ishmael in whom your Creator takes pride each day, since he has a servant on earth who resembles the countenance/beauty of his own face (רַבּוּד הַלְּכָּבָר מִפְּנֵי)."

Although this formulation is a

81 Schäfer, Synopse, §8 = 5:10-12: "'Lord of the Universe, what business have you with me (עִנָּני בְּלָבָן אֶלֹהִים) ... ? Why did you leave the heaven of heavens above ... and lodge with men who worship idols? Now you are on earth, and the idols are on the earth; what is your business among the idolatrous inhabitants of earth (בָּלוּ קֹדֶשׁ בַּיִּשְׂרָאֵל)'?"

82 Schäfer, Synopse, §313. (I have slightly modified the translation in Swartz, Scholastic Magic, 69.) Cf. §292.

83 Schäfer, Synopse, §314 (translated in Swartz, Scholastic Magic, 70).

84 Ten Martyrs, 1-X 15.1-4; cf. Grinworth, Midrash Shir Hashirim, 44a.

85 Schäfer, Synopse, §§396-397.


87 Ten Martyrs, 1.15.3. κατάθετος = Greek κραυγαλλός, "countenance or beauty" (s.v. Jastrow, 1379). For the dating of this recension and its relationship to the pygut Elen Ezerah, see Reeg, Geschichte, 48-52.
minority tradition, it puts a suitably fine point on the matter: Rabbi Ishmael is God’s special servant, whose more-than-human purity and beauty are tokens of the divine nature that ensures his safe reception in heaven and affords him an unparalleled place in Israel’s history.

Rabbi Ishmael’s Execution

Just as Rabbi Ishmael’s heavenly ascent hinges on the motifs of angelic purity and beauty, so too does the elaborate account of his execution that is at the heart of The Story of the Ten Martyrs. In addition to the allusions to his angelic beauty in both the conception and ascent narratives, the martyrology explicitly reports that Rabbi Ishmael belongs to a long succession of beautiful Jewish men: “They said concerning Rabbi Ishmael ben Eliash the high priest that he was among the seven beauties the world had seen (רשא הגבורה עלי ארא). And these are Adam, Jacob, Joseph, Saul, Absalom, Rabbi Yohanan, Rabbi Abbahu, and Rabbi Ishmael.”

A variation on this motif, which is also contained in the antiquity, reports even more succinctly: “There was no beauty in the world from the days of Joseph the son of Jacob except Rabbi Ishmael (רשא הגבורהrides על עלי ארא).”

These competing formulations, which both seek to link rabbinic figures with biblical prototypes of masculine beauty, effectively situate Rabbi Ishmael within a specific tradition found in rabbinic literature concerning this eugenic genealogy that wends its way through Israel’s history.

Indeed, the list of the “seven beauties” to which Rabbi Ishmael is added seems to draw much of its material from the very same passage cited above in connection with Rabbi Yohanan’s public service of transmitting his beauty to the next generation:

Said Rabbi Yohanan: “I have survived from the beautiful of Jerusalem (רשא הגבורהrides על עלי ארא).” One who wishes to see the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan should bring a new silver cup and fill it with the red seeds of a pomegranate and place around its rim a garland of red roses, and let him place it at the place where the sun meets the shade, and that vision is the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan. Is that true? But haven’t we been taught by our master that, “The beauty of Rabbi Abbahu is like the beauty of our father Jacob and the beauty of our father Jacob is like the beauty of Adam,” and that of Rabbi Ishmael is not mentioned. But (the editor objects) Rabbi Yohanan is not included here because he did not have a beard (lit. “splendor of face,” i.e. had a different sort of beauty). Rabbi Yohanan used to go sit outside the ritual bath. He said: “When the daughters of

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92 V.2.28; VI.37.3; VII.9; IX.28.3. רוחו של גבורהrides על עלי ארא.

This motif was current in late antique and medieval midrashic sources; Tann., Vayyeshev 5; Midrash ha-Gadol on Gen 39:14; Moses Gaster, The Chronicle of Jerahmeel (repr. H. Schwarzbaum; New York: KTAV, 1971), 94; Sefer ha-Yashar (ed. Lazarus Goldschmidt; Berlin: Benjamn Harz, 1923) 159–60; Mahzor Vitry (ed. Simeon Hurwitz; Nürnberg, 1923), 342. It also appears in many of the versions of the Joseph narrative found in Islamic/Arabic literature and art, most notably Qur’an, Surat 12:22–53 (of Late Meccan provenance), where the women exclaim that Joseph is “no human being, but a noble angel” (12:30–32). For discussion of these sources, see Kugel, Poutphar’s House, 28–65. See also Shalom Goldman, The Ties of Women The Ties of Men: Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife in Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish and Islamic Folklore (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 31–54; Barbara Freyer Stowasser, Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretation (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 50–56; Feowald Malti-Douglas, Women’s Body, Women’s World: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 50–51. See also the Islamic sources
Rabbi Ishmael remains impassive throughout the procedure until the executioner reaches the site where he wears his tefillin (枦 المناطق), at which point he lets out a loud and bitter scream. When the executioner asks him why he has only started to cry now, he responds that he is not mourning his own life (לتباعמ התמיד) but rather the loss of his capacity to fulfill the commandment of putting on tefillin. This curious detail may be an allusion to the anthropomorphic notion that God himself dons tefillin, which is attested in both the Babylonian Talmud and the Hekhalot literature. If, as it seems, Rabbi Ishmael possesses a replica of the divine visage, then it is no wonder that the amputation of the holiest portion of his face threatens the divine order itself. Indeed, the text reports that the cries that Rabbi Ishmael utters at precisely this point in the procedure reach up to heaven, threatening to return the world to primordial chaos and even to overthrow the throne of God. In the face of this unleashed power, however, God insists that the angelic host not intervene to stop his death, since it will seal a contract between Him and His people on earth: “Let him alone so that his merit may endure for generations and generations of generations and generations” (ואילים וראוי). In a similar statement elsewhere in the martyrlogy, God makes this promise even more explicit: “The Holy One blessed be He said: ‘Because of the merit of the martyrs I will redeem Israel and exact revenge from the enemies of God.’”

The Ritual of Rabbi Ishmael’s Mask

Furthermore, the very flesh that embodies Rabbi Ishmael’s unique relationship to the divine will serve as a physical guarantee of God’s enduring promise to Israel. According to the narrative, after Rabbi Ishmael’s execution, the mask of his face is preserved in the treasury at Rome in defiance of the forces of decay and is brought out of safekeeping every seventy years for use in a truly bizarre ritual.


98 Ten Martyrs, V.22.9; VI.37.4; VII.16.28.4. I here translate recension V.
99 Ten Martyrs, I-VII.25.5; IX-X 28.5. Compare Jos. Asen. 5:1–7, where Asenath catches sight of Joseph from a high window in the tower her father has built to help her escape her virginity and is immediately captivated by his beauty. Later in the text, Asenath mistakes an angel who has appeared before her for her beloved Joseph, whose beauty was apparently angelic like Rabbi Ishmael’s (Joseph and Asenath, 14.1–17.6).


90 Ten Martyrs, I-VII.25.35–40; IX-X 28.7–11. I here translate recension V. The version of this passage in Grimnir, Midrash Shir Hashirim, 4b, differs considerably from the ones found in The Story of the Ten Martyrs. Here, the female figure is identified as a Roman matron (תפּוֹר) rather than as the Emperor’s daughter. In addition, the figure of the Emperor is entirely absent from the scene, leaving the Roman matron to engage in an explicitly sexual dialogue with the martyr—a scene that evokes him into looking directly at her in exchange for saving his life. He rebuffs her, explaining that he is far more concerned with his ultimate reward than with his earthly existence. I believe that this version is the earlier of the two found in the martyrology, where the Emperor preemptively refuses his daughter’s request to save Rabbi Ishmael even before she has articulated it.
They take a healthy man and have him ride on [the back of] a cripple [אֲנָשׁ שָׁפָט] creating a spectacle (קָפִּיָּרִיל שָׁפָט אֵלָה). They summon a herald who proclaims before them: "Let him who sees, see; and anyone who does not see, will never see again (אֲנָשׁ שָׁפָט)". They place the head of Rabbi Ishmael in the hand of the healthy man (אֲנָשׁ שָׁפָט עַד רַבִּי אֵלָה). They call the healthy man Esau and the cripple Jacob because of his limp (יְבֵן שָׁפָט עַד רַבִּי אֵלָה). And they proclaim: "Woe to him when this one rises up for the sin of the other. Woe to Esau, when Jacob rises up for the sin of Rabbi Ishmael’s head (אֲנָשׁ שָׁפָט עַד רַבִּי אֵלָה)". As it is written: I will wreak my vengeance on Edom through My people Israel (Ez 25:14).

The ritual is deeply obscure, although it seems to reflect Jewish perceptions of Roman barbarism. Another passage in the Babylonian Talmud reports that "every Roman legion carries it several scalps and do not be afraid of this, since they place the scalp of Rabbi Ishmael on the heads of their kings (יְבֵן שָׁפָט אֵלָה). More than a century ago, Samuel Rapaport read the version of this passage in Avodah Zarah as an allusion to a carnivalesque spectacle introduced into the Ludi Saeculares by the Roman emperor, Philip the Arab (244–49 CE), around 274 CE in which a normal man rode upon a limping dancer wearing a mask. According to this explanation, the ritual’s symbolism reflected the internal political struggles between Philip and his rival, Decius. Indeed, the customary formula used by the herald to proclaim the start of the Ludi Saeculares, at least according to the Roman historian Suetonius, is strikingly close to the orator’s phraseology in the mask ritual: “The herald invited the people in the usual formula to the games which ‘no one had ever seen or would ever see again (quaes nesc spectasset quisquam nec spectaturus esset).’” Yet, whatever the

Hebraize what must be the Aramaic original of certain portions of the text. I note only those textual variations that are significant for my argument.

102 IV–V.22.67 reads: “They dress him in the clothes of the first man; they bring out the face of Rabbi Ishmael and place his head (יְבֵן אֲנָשׁ שָׁפָט אֵלָה) on his head (יְבֵן שָׁפָט אֵלָה).” In this formulation, Rabbi Ishmael’s face is spoken of precisely in the manner of God’s countenance (יְבֵן אֲנָשׁ שָׁפָט אֵלָה). In b. Abod. Zarah 11b and IX.54.3, the word used for the mask is נֵס, נֵס שָׁפָט אֵלָה (יְבֵן שָׁפָט אֵלָה).


105 Samuel Rapaport, Erekh Millin (Warsaw, 1852; repr. Jerusalem: Makor, 1970), 57–63 (s.v. דיר). However, the medieval commentator Rashi, clearly familiar with The Story of the Ten Martyrs, interpreted the passage in light of the martyrology’s narrative of redemption (b. Abod. Zarah 11b, יְבֵן שָׁפָט אֵלָה).

106 Suetonius, Claud. 21.1 (J. C. Rolfe, trans., Suetonius ivol. 2; LCL: Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997), 39). Cf. Herodian 3.8.10: “So heralds traveled throughout Rome and Italy summoning all the people to come and attend the games the likes of which they had never seen before and would not see again” (C. R. Whittaker, trans., Herodian ivol. 1; LCL: Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1969, 313). These sources as well as several

historical origins of this material, The Story of the Ten Martyrs clearly presents this macabre pageant as a Roman celebration of the Jews’ bad fortune, and not as a struggle within the imperial family. Moreover, by redeploying this material within this narrative context, the martyrology seems to be making the case that the Romans’ hubristic display of Rabbi Ishmael’s face is bound to backfire. They mistake the meaning of their own actions: rather than signifying their power, the ritual in fact enacts the long-held wish that Jacob avenge the crimes of Esau, the legendary ancestor of Edom, which is systematically identified with Rome throughout late antique and medieval Jewish literature. 107

Earlier in The Story of the Ten Martyrs, Rabbi Ishmael had foreseen that it will be his fate to serve as an instrument of God’s redemption of Israel. As he is moving about in heaven, led by his angelic guide Metatron, he comes across an altar. Puzzled, he asks the angel: “What do you sacrifice on this altar? Do you have cows, rams, and sheep in heaven?” When the angel responds that they “sacrifice the souls of the righteous on it (יְבֵן שָׁפָט אֵלָה),” Rabbi Ishmael says: “I have now learned something I have never heard before.”108 In fact, it is this final piece of revealed knowledge that seizes Rabbi Ishmael’s decision to return to earth to report to his colleagues what he has learned, apparently now satisfied that his death at the hands of the Roman authorities will not be in vain. He immediately descends and bears witness to what he has just seen in heaven. 109 A passage in the medieval midrashic compilation Numbers Rabhah expresses this sacrificial theology in strikingly similar language:

Another explanation of the text, Setting up the Tabernacle (רָכַב בָּשָׂרוֹת; Num 7:1) – Rabbi Simon expounded: When the Holy One, blessed be He, told Israel to set up the Tabernacle, He intimated to the ministering angels that they also should make a Tabernacle, and when the one below was erected the other was erected on high. The latter was the Tabernacle of the "youth" (רָכַב בָּשָׂרוֹת), whose name is Metatron, and therein he offers up the souls of the righteous to atone for Israel in the days of their exile (לְכָל כַּל מִשְׁפְּרָה הָיוֹת). The reason scripture says “who” (וְהוֹ) the Tabernacle is because another tabernacle was erected simultaneously with it. In the same way it is

others are cited in Saul Lieberman, Greek in Jewish Palestine (New York: JTS, 1942), 145 n. 7.


written, *The place, O Lord, which you have made for yourself to Dwell in, the Sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established* (Ex 15:17).110

The phrase נבשיותט השם ידיק וסמל (or in some variants ידיק והשמית) runs like a red thread through the numerous passages in contemporary Jewish sources that describe this heavenly cult of the martyrs.111 Yet, unlike these loose units, *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* integrates this notion into a coherent narrative framework. As the human manifestation of the purity and beauty of heavenly high priest Metatron, Rabbi Ishmael is both the elected high priest and atoning sacrifice of the people of Israel.

Preliminary Conclusions

Although it is impossible to fix with any confidence the precise social and historical context within which late Jewish martyrlogy developed, its direct literary and ideological relationship to the pidduric literature of the Jewish communities of late antique Palestine – coupled with its unequivocal anti-Roman imagery – strongly suggests that it is the product of Byzantine Jewish culture. Certainly, its vivid portrayal of Rabbi Ishmael as a redeemer figure who is fated to be an instrumental role in the liberation of Israel from the yoke of Roman rule resonates with the apocalyptic writing that flourished among Jews in this period.112


111 E.g., *Midrash qzet ha-nidraot* (Jellinik, *Bet ha-Midrash*, 1:64); *Seder gan eden* (Jellinik, *Bet ha-Midrash*, 3:137); *Midrash Adamot be-hokmah yasad ha-aretz* (Jellinik, *Bet ha-Midrash*, 5:63). Compare b. Menah. 110a; b. Hag. 12b; Yalk. Sh. 189 (376b); *Yada Sh. Sh. 339 (417c)*, where the heavenly altar is discussed although the notion of human sacrifice is absent. See also the fascinating Tosafist gloss that cautiously weighs the burning question of whether it is the "souls of the righteous" or "fiery sheep" (אפרים נשמות שלוש) that are sacrificed on the heavenly altar (b. Menah. 110a, (טבריד ומכות של חיות והן האל declaraciónי של עמים רבים ו الحمل)). On the atoning blood of the martyrs in Jewish tradition, see Yovel, *Shenei gynim*, 116–15 and 159–69.


Moreover, the martyrlogy’s use of the "annunciation" scene in *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* betrays an interest in the origins of the messiah akin to the portrait of Messiah son of Ammei and his mother Heptizibah in the seventh-century Hebrew apocrypha *Sefer Zerubbabel.*113 Read within this cultural context, the martyrlogy offers a similar incisive critique of Byzantine Christian society in this period, as well as of the place of the Jewish community within it. It is tempting to see its virulent anti-imperial polemic as the Jewish counterpart of Christian–Jewish debates of the Late Roman and Byzantine periods.114


Ironically, however, the narrative’s repudiation of Byzantine political power reflects the same fascination with the nature of visuality that was at the stormy center of the iconoclastic debates of seventh- to ninth-century Byzantium. Indeed, the martyrology – and in particular its view of the capacity of Metatron’s human form to bridge the gap between the upper and lower worlds – seems to engage fully the central questions of the acrimonious debates that shook the Byzantine Christian world concerning the role of physical representation of angels and saints in enabling human beings to come into contact with the divine. Peter Brown has recently noted how “Jewish criticisms of Christian imagery-worship as a form of idolatry play a significant role in the literature of the 630s and 640s.” However, it is also possible that, far from giving voice to any ideological predilection for aniconic modes of representation that this literature so often attributes to the Jews, the redactor(s) of The Story of the Ten Martyrs framed the ritual of Rabbi Ishmael’s mask precisely in terms of the theoretical assumptions that underly the widespread use of iconic relics in Christian worship? Certainty its vivid account of how the Romans preserved the skin of Rabbi Ishmael’s face for ritual purposes bears an uncanny resemblance to the haunting images – and the stories that surrounded them – of Christ’s face that circulated throughout the East in this period, in particular the Mandylion and other similar representations on fabric and wood. Like the meticulous portraits of various NT figures that filled the Christian apocrypha, the image of Rabbi


117. See the photographs of these images that appear on cloth and wood and the essays discussing them in The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation (ed. H. L. Kessler and G. Wolf; Villa Speina Colloquio 6; ed. Bologna: Nuovo Alfa, 1998).