

THE MYSTERIES OF MERKABAH

BY DUDLEY WRIGHT

THE opinion prevailing among many theologians and students generally for very many years, and it is not unknown at the present day, was that Judaism and Mysticism were antithetical terms, and many modern students even would ridicule the suggestion that a society could exist in the center of the Jewish Church for the study of the Mysteries of that faith. Yet Jewish Mysticism would appear to be as old as the Jewish religion and some of the most learned Rabbis, whose names are household words today in the class-room of the seminary devoted their lives to the decipherment of the sacred treasures engraven in symbolical language on the tablets of the Law. Indeed, it may, without exaggeration, be averred that it was their love for learning, their fame for wisdom, and their reputation for sanctity, that acted as a vitalizing influence upon the whole of the Jewish race. This is demonstrated by the danger which threatened Judaism when the great Moses Maimonides, he of whom it was said: "From Moses to Moses there was none like unto Moses," sought to make reason the final arbiter of the rightness or wrongness of any Jewish dogma, weighing everything in the scales of Aristotelianism; and Maimonides, in his antagonism to Mysticism, dissolved all mysteries into mere physics, ignoring the Rabbinical warning against their disclosure. The highest form of living was to be a life of intellectuality. Love for God was to be crowded out, except as an intellectual exercise. Life was to be judged by its outward observance of a code of laws and not by the manifestations of the inward love which would strive to overcome all difficulties that might obstruct the path of the soul's way to God.

Throughout the ages there have existed among the Jews schools of Mysticism, societies for the study and elucidation of the Mysteries, into which none but the initiated could gain admission, and the knowledge which they acquired had to be kept within those

sacred enclosures: Such a school or society is believed to have existed in the highest grade of the Essenes. Another was the lesser known Society of the Merkabah, a Rabbinical school, the members of which gained divine knowledge by direct contemplation. There were grades of initiation and of sanctity, but among all of them the Mysteries were referred to in the terms of the deepest reverence and with bated breath.

The word *Merkabah* means "chariot" or "heavenly throne" and the basis of the Mysteries is to be found in chapters i. and x. of the Book of Ezekiel, in one of which the prophet saw JHVH riding in the Throne-Chariot when leaving the doomed temple at Jerusalem. Ezekiel's picture became a sacred mystery, known by the term *Merkabah*, as early as the time of Ben Sira, and reference is made to it in Ecclesiasticus xlix. 8.

The vision was held to be sacred because it was said that the rightful interpretation would be the key to admission into the presence of the Holy One of Israel. Hence, the Mishna laid down the rule (Hag. ii. 1): "The Ma'aseh Merkabah should not be taught to any one except he be wise and able to deduce knowledge through wisdom (gnosis) of his own."

Merkabah was the mystic or hidden way leading up to the final goal of the soul; enabling the individual, while still in the envelope of flesh, to ascend into the presence of the majesty of the Eternal.

Job beheld the throne of God and his daughters sang the doxology of the Ma'aseh (*Testament of Job*, vii. 39, and xi.). When his daughters put on the girdles given to their father by God they sang angelic hymns with the voices of angels and chanted angelic praises. They spake in the dialect of the cherubim and sang the praises of the cosmic powers.

The following story is related in the *Mishna*:

R. Eleazar ben 'Arak was riding on a mule behind R. Johanan ben Zakkai, when he asked for the privilege of being initiated into the secrets of the Merkabah. The great master demanded proofs of his initiation into the gnosis, and when Eleazar began to tell what he had learned thereof, R. Johanan immediately descended from the mule and sat upon the rock. "Why, O master, dost thou descend from the mule?" asked the disciple. "Can I remain mounted upon the mule when the telling of the secrets of Merkabah causes the Shekinah to dwell with us and the angels to accompany us?" was the answer. R. Eleazar continued and behold fire descended from heaven, and an angel cried out: "Truly these are the secrets of the Merkabah." Whereupon R. Johanan kissed Eleazar upon the fore-

head, saying: "Blessed be thou O father Abraham that hast a descendant like Eleazar ben 'Arak!" Subsequently, two other disciples of R. Johanan ben Zakkai walking together said to each other: "Let us also talk together about the Ma'aseh Merkabah!" and no sooner did R. Joshua begin speaking than a rainbow-like appearance (Ezekiel i. 28) was seen upon the thick clouds which covered the sky, and angels came to listen as men do to hear wedding music. On hearing the things related by R. Joshua, R. Johanan ben Zakkai blessed his disciples and said: "Blessed the eyes that beheld these things! Indeed, I saw myself in a dream together with you, seated like the select ones (comp. Exodus xxiv. 11) upon Mount Sinai, and I heard a heavenly voice saying: 'Enter the banquet hall and take your seats with your disciples and disciples' disciples, among the elect, the highest (third) class'."

Eleazar ben 'Arak lived in the first century of the Christian era and was first among the disciples of R. Johanan ben Zakkai, who was said to be acquainted with every conceivable branch of exoteric and esoteric lore. He delighted his master with his wisdom and penetration and the most extravagant encomiums were passed upon him. It was said: "Were all the sages of Israel placed in one scale and Eleazar ben 'Arak in the other he would outweigh them all." His great master styled him the "Rising Well" or the "Gushing Stream."

It was regarded as perilous to penetrate into the Mysteries of Merkabah. No one was allowed to read and expound publicly the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, because it dealt with the secrets of God's throne and, although it is now included in the Jewish Calendar of Lessons to be read on the second day of the Festival of Pentecost, it was at one time excluded altogether from the Jewish Lectionary, being regarded as too sacred even to be read aloud in the Synagogue. Jerome says that it was forbidden even to be read in secret by any Jew under the age of thirty years. Rabbi Ze'era, who lived in the third century A.D., said that not even the first word of the first chapter of Ezekiel might be divulged "unless it be to a chief of the Beth Din or to one whose heart is tempered by age or respectability." According to R. Ammi, the secret doctrine might be entrusted only to one who possessed the five qualities enumerated in Isaiah iii. 3, by which the Rabbis understood distinction in the knowledge and practice of the Torah. Yet Schiller desired to learn Hebrew solely that he might read the Book of Ezekiel in the original.

The study of the Merkabah was theosophy. To the initiated the beings around the heavenly throne, the *Hayot* and the *Ofannim*,

became animated and moved before their eyes. It is said that a youth who studied the *Hashmal* (Ezekiel i. 27) was consumed by the fire which sprang from it. On one occasion, Ben 'Azzai was seated and meditating on the Torah when the people beheld a flame encircling him. They went and told R. Akiba who approached Ben Azzai saying: "Art thou studying the Mysteries of Merkabah?"

There is a mystical work attributed to Ishmael ben Elisha, entitled *Hekalot Rabbati*. It opens with praises of those found worthy to see the Chariot-Throne. Nothing that happens or is about to happen in the world is concealed from them. The Merkabah-riders can distinguish between the riders and the wicked. The book contains a description of the Chariot-Throne and the terrors which the sight of it inspires so that myriads of angels who have it before their eyes continually are sometimes seized with an ecstatic trembling. It contains also an enumeration of the angels and gives the formulae by which they may be invoked. There is a description of the seven heavenly halls, each of which is guarded by eight angels. The door of the seventh hall is guarded by terrible warriors with drawn swords, whose eyes send forth stars of fires, and from whose mouths issue burning coal. The seeker of the mysterious Chariot-Throne gains these Halls by the use of formulae or passwords which have the virtue of compelling the angels to grant him admission. To undertake the perilous Merkabah ride one must possess all the religious knowledge, observe all the commandments and precepts, and fast frequently. To enter the state of ecstasy in which the Merkabah ride is taken one must remain motionless with the head between his knees, absorbed in contemplation, and murmuring prayers and hymns. The closing chapters of the book contain hymns of praise (each closing with the refrain "Thrice Holy"), a conversation between God, Israel, and the angels concerning the Mysteries, initiation into which confers instant wisdom and an explanation of the Mysteries themselves, certain prayers and charms.

It seems undoubted from certain remarks scattered in Rabbinical writings that there existed a sect or society in which the members devoted themselves entirely to the study of the Mysteries of the Merkabah, but a remarkable feature is that the "Mysteries" rest on the belief in the reality of the things seen in vision or, as it is generally described, "in an ecstatic state," a condition brought about by continued ablutions, fasts, fervent invocations, incantations, and other means. Those who enter upon the "Vision of the Merkabah" are called *Yorede Merkabah*.

In this connection, Dr. J. Abelson, in his work on *Jewish Mysticism*, says:

A further development is seen in the theory that certain pious men may temporarily ascend into the unseen, and, having seen and learnt the deepest mysteries, may return to earth again. These were the mystics who, by training themselves to a life of untarnished holiness, were able to fit themselves for entering a state of ecstasy, to behold visions and hear voices which brought them into direct contact with the Divine Life. They were the students of the Merkabah who, as a result of their peculiar physical and mental make-up, were capable of reaching the goal of their quest. "There were four men," says the Talmud (*Haggigah*, xiv., b) "who entered Paradise." They were R. Akiba (50-130 A.D.), Ben 'Azzai (2nd century A.D.), Ben Zoma (2nd century A.D.), and Elisha b. Abuyah (end of first century and beginning of 2nd century A.D.).

They were believed to ascend to heaven in the chariot and there in the dazzling light surrounding the Eternal penetrate the innermost secrets of all persons and things, which otherwise would remain impenetrable and invisible to them.

But dangers, even to the initiated, attend the journey and, in order to guard himself against the terrible beings which will encompass him, the Merkabah-rider must provide himself with amulets or seals containing mysterious names and recite incessantly certain prescribed prayers. These malevolent spirits are held to be symbolical of the temptations which beset the student of divine mysteries, but which can be overcome by prayer and incantations. Dr. Louis Ginzberg says in his article on "Ascension" in the *Jewish Encyclopaedia*:

These mystics were able, by various manipulations, to enter into a state of autohypnosis, in which they declared they saw heaven open before them, and beheld its mysteries. It was believed that he only could undertake this Merkabah-ride, who was in possession of all religious knowledge and was almost superhuman in the purity of his life. This, however, was regarded usually as a matter of theory; and less perfect men also attempted by fasting and prayer, to free their senses from the impressions of the outer world and succeeded in entering into a state of ecstasy in which they recounted their heavenly visions.

Writers are divided in opinion upon the question of the origin of the Merkabah. Jellinek thinks that the conception sprang from Persian suffism, while Bloch endeavored to trace it back to Arabic mysticism, but Dr. Kaufmann Koller thinks that recent researches concerning Mithra worship and the Mithra liturgy have thrown altogether more light upon the subject. Mithra, the heavenly chari-

oteer, with his Quadriga, a chariot drawn by four horses, was worshipped in ancient Persia as the god of Light and regarded in early Roman times as the prime mover of the world, which was said to be formed of our elements. Philo took the idea of the Merkabah and applied it to the Logos.

According to the Zohar, Mysteries were guarded secretly in the hearts of those who possessed them and communicated secretly to others, but what was known by one adept was not always familiar to another. The written passages of Scripture had sometimes many meanings, but invariably three, viz., (1) historical, corresponding to the outer court of the temple; (2), moral, answering to the Holy Place, and (3) Mystical, corresponding to the Most Holy Place.

Ezekiel is held by the Rabbis to have been less faithful than Moses, for he divulged all the treasures of the King. Both the external Law and the secret doctrine were revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. Moses transmitted the one to the nation at large, but communicated the other only to certain elders, by whom it was handed on to other initiates. It is said that at the death of Moses the sun was eclipsed, for then the written law lost its splendor. At the time of King David's death the light of the moon diminished and the radiance of the oral law was tarnished. As a result discussions and controversies began among the sages of the Mishna, so that joy in the study of the Law ceased for all future generations. Then came the wrangling of the various schools, the members of which saw only as in a glass, darkly.

Jonathan ben Uzziel, the most distinguished pupil of Hillel, is said to have written a Targum to the Prophets to remove all impediments to the understanding of Scripture, and this production is said to have filled the whole land of Judaea with trembling and awe, so that when he wanted to translate the Ketubim (the third part of the Old Testament canon) a heavenly voice cried "Enough! Thou hast reached the limit beyond which thou shouldest not go!" "He disclosed the Mysteries of God to the children of Israel" is the explanation given by the Rabbis for this refusal. Another tradition says that as he sat interpreting the Torah, the fire that emanated from his soul consumed every bird flying above his head, and this is regarded as further testimony that the ancient Targum contained Mysteries too holy for the uninitiated to know, or even to read. The Rabbis held that all who inquired into the Mysteries of the Merkabah without being divinely authorized would die a sudden death.