The Ways That Never Parted
Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity
and the Early Middle Ages

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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 potemnicizes 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, allow them to construct their own sexual and religious identities. Never forgetting 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 RA’ANAN BOUSTAN

Embedded in the early medieval Hebrew martyrological anthology The Story of the Ten Martyrs is a curious “announcement” 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 cornerstones 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/editor of the anthology was 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, despite, or perhaps especially while, maintaining a rhetoric of difference and, at times, overt hostility.

2 It perhaps goes without saying that this hagiographical cycle is legend and not biography. Indeed, even the acts and statements attributed to Rabbi Ishmael the high priest in earlier rabbinic sources (e.g., b. Hai. 1:10; b. Ber. 7a; b. Ber. 51a; b. Git. 58a; b. Haz. 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 Elisha, whose identity remains uncertain (Gary G. Porton, The Traditions of Rabbi Ishmael [14 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1982]), 4.2.12–14, esp. n. 2). Compare, however, the discussion of Rabbi Ishmael’s distinguishable priestly orientation in Menahem Hirschman, Torah for the Entire World (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999), esp. 114–49.

3 For the use of Christian imagery in the Jewish martyrological literature produced in the wake of 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; Signum: Jan Thorbecke, 1999), 87–106. See also idem, She'ne goyim be-vatnekh: Yehudim ve-Notzrim—dimyam hazaddim (Tel Aviv: Am oved, 2000); idem, “Easter and Passover as Early Jewish–Christian Dialogue,” in Passover

Of course, the trope of “miraculous conception” was never the sole province of Christian authors. The Hebrew Bible itself offers clear precedent for the link between a figure’s exceptional origins and his or her extraordinary life. Greco-Roman biographers and hagiographers similarly viewed the visions and portents that accompanied the conception or birth of an exceptional figure as signs of future greatness. For instance, in his imaginative biography of Apollophanes of Tyana, the early-third-century writer Philostratus recounts how the mother of that quintessential first century theios aner (“divine man”) has a vision of the actual physical form of the god Proteus while she is pregnant. Like the angel in the Rabbi Ishmael tradition, Proteus is so strongly identified with the child he has heralded that he passes on to him his special abilities and
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 impulse. 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 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 overly 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.

7 Philostratus, Life of Apollonius I.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 1. For a similar impulse in Philo, see Mii. 1.5.20–24; 1.6.25–29. See also Daniel J. Harrington, “Birth Narratives in Pseudo-Philo’s 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.

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 menstruation.11 Jesus is thus the quintessential offspring of impurity (ἡμομήντας), whose illegitimate power and destructive nature reflects his improper origin. Rabbi Ishmael is his mirror opposite, a rabbinic 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 goes to some extent 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 assumed its clearest statement in the unusual halakhic rulings of the Berada de Niddah. A close reading of the unit’s relationship to the two separate discursive contexts in which it evolved — Jewish purity practice and Jewish martyrology — 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

system of purify 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 (әן}&ןכ תודע) he would ascend. 11. Why was Rabbi Ishmael worthy of this (טב תודע) His father was Eliahu the

12 I translate and number the text following Ten Martyrs, VII.11.16–23 (Reeg, Geschichte, 19*). The unit also appears at I.11.15–30; V and VII.11.16–23. I.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: Liquiue ha-Perdes (attributed most likely to R. Sotomon ben Isaac’s disciple Rabbi Shemaya), Amsterdam 1715, 4a; Munkdes, 1897, 6b–7a; Sefer ha-Miasso, 13–14; Eleazar of Worms, Sefer ha-Ropeah, “Hilkhot Niddah,” 317; Isaac ben Moses of Vienna, 'Or Zarua, Alpha Beta 29; Isaac of Dura, Sha'are Dura, "Hilkhot Niddah," 2.27; Menahem Tsion, Sefer Tsion, 78a; Azaraih de Fano, Sefer Giigil Neshamot, 8–29; MS New York-JTSA ENA 3021, fol. 1a (entitled Zehirat ha-Tsevillah); MS Paris-BN 1408, fol. 67a; MS New York-JTSA Mic. 1842, fol. 192a–b (entitled Havye Nefesh by Isaac ben Joseph). See also the version in Moses Gaster, Ma'aseh 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 Haftah gam shemah (ed. A. M. Hanerum; Jerusalem: R. Mas, 1975), 86. These attestations have been collected by Ch. M. Horowitz, Tosefa Ḥataa (5 vols.; Frankfurt am Main, 1889), 4.7–15 and 5.8–9 (several of the versions are transcribed at 5.43–54, 57–61); Bin Guron, Menakor Yisrael, 3.106 n. 5; Elliot R. Wolfson, Through a Speculum 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), 162–65, esp. n. 66; Elyazar Mirenberg, “Études sur la Barta of Niddah et sur la conceptualisation de la menstruation dans le monde juif et son echo dans le monde christien de l’époque médiéval a 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.11.11 and is not integral to the pericope.

High Priest.14 None of his children lived ( גלוד תודע כנף), save, at the moment when his wife would give birth, the child would die.15 12. His wife said to him: Why do those wholly pure people have sons who are pious like their father? (ומלך מלך חוודים חדים יש loro بنינם)16 we do not have even a single son who remains alive.14 He answered her: “They always purify themselves in the ritual bath before sexual intercourse (ומלך מלך חניך חניך משא שולח שמלא מעלה החניך)." Whether or not the law prescribes it (יכן רוחב נישך הליוי ויודע משא), both they and their wives (השכון ושכון חניך) 15. She said: “If that is so, then we too shall adopt this practice. They immediately did so.

16. One time, this pious woman went down to the bathhouse (לכון הערל) and immersed herself there (ולכון הערל). But when she emerged (ולכון הערל), she saw (ולכון הערל) a pig in front of her.19 She returned (ולכון הערל) to the bathhouse and (again) immersed herself. When she emerged, she saw a camel. She returned, immersed herself, emerged, and saw a leper (לכון הערל אפסין אפסין רוחב). She returned and immersed herself forty times.20

17. After the fortieth time, the Holy One blessed be He said to Metatron:21 "Descend and stand before that pious woman (לכון הערל), and tell her that ten years hence she will become pregnant with a son (לכון הערל)." 18. Metatron straight away descended in the form of a human being (לכון הערל). He clothed himself and adorned himself (לכון הערל) and stood at the opening of the ritual bath.
Because of the aggressive process of redactional adaptation to which the unit was subjected in the course of its transmission, it is nearly impossible, if not methodologically irresponsible, to try to deduce which of its many extant versions, if any, might represent its original formulation. Gottfried Reeg, however, has convincingly argued the unit developed and circulated independently from the martyrological anthology and was incorporated into it only at a relatively late point in its transmission. He bases this insight on the unit’s relative infrequency within the manuscripts of *The Story of the Ten Martyrs*—it appears in only four of the ten recensions of the text (i.e., I, V, VII, VIII)—as well as on its shifting redactional context. The unit appears in two different locations within the anthology’s narrative progression. In each case, it serves a different function: recension I links the unit to a discussion of Rabbi Ishmael’s beautiful appearance, while recensions V, VII, and VIII situate the narrative immediately before Rabbi Ishmael’s heavenly ascent, thereby transforming the narrative into an anthology of his unique powers. Moreover, the peculiar ethical form of the story—its overt encouragement of proper behavior and its promise of reward—is awkward in the martyrological context and, as we will see, more naturally conforms to the ethical (Musar) literature from which it likely emerged.

Despite this considerable textual instability, all the versions of the narrative share a common understanding of Rabbi Ishmael’s miraculous conception, merging rigorous purity practice and piety with a visual theory of procreation. In this amalgamation, impurity and divine favor are both mediated through the medium of sight. The narrative puts the very act of seeing an unclean animal or an impure skin blench on par with the standard regulations concerning actual physical contact with the sources of impurity, thus going far beyond the normal strictures surrounding 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” (אֵל חֲבָרָה) highlights the physical concreteness of the theory of visual procreation it assumes.

The theory of visual “impressions” operative in the narrative would not have struck the late antique reader as remarkable. Indeed, its basic premise, that visual stimuli can influence the process of gestation, was a commonplace in certain branches of Greek and Latin gynecology. It is already prefigured in the patriarch Jacob’s exercise in eugenics through which he produced moated 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 in the troughs … 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.” In his commentary on this biblical passage, Jerome goes to great lengths to explain the narrative in terms of contemporary genetic theory. 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. The Testaments of the Twelve

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23 This hortatory statement, which treats the surrounding narrative as an elaborate example, is found in the martyrology only in recensions V and VII. It is common in the martyrological literature (e.g., MS New York-JTSA ENA 3021, fol. 149).

24 See n. 21 above.

25 Horowitz, *Tosefta ‘Aquila*, 4.14 tentatively suggests that *Lique ha-Parades, Sefer ha-Miasto or*, and *Sefer ha-Roqeh* preserve the earliest form of the narrative and that the versions in the martyrological anthology represent secondary revisions.

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); מָר שֶׁלָּם בְּרֵאשִׁיָּן נָא לְיִשַׁמָּא מִתְשׁוֹבֵל. The idea that angels could assume the form of a particular human being is discussed in Wolfson, *Speculum*, 212-13, although he nowhere indicates that recension I diverges from the majority tradition precisely on this matter.

27 An impressive number of ancient, medieval, and even modern sources that attest to the endurance of this theory in the medical tradition are collected and discussed in M. D. Reeve, “Conceptions,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 215 (1989): 113-43. See also the interesting observations concerning the place of this theory in Western notions of human imagination in Silvio Curieito, “L’immaginazione e il concepimento: Forina di una teoria embriogenetica e di un mito letterario,” *Rivista* 52 (2000): 533-64.


29 Gen 30:25-29. 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 formidable
Patriarchs employs a similar notion to explain how the "sons of God" (וילא יהוה) 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 lasted after one another, and they conceived 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, tasting in their minds after their phantom forms, gave birth to giants (for the Watchers seemed to be them tall enough to touch the sky).32

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 primeval 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; Retrasctio 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. Reu. 5:6–7 (Translation by Marinus de Jonge 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., 1 En. 6–16 and passim; T. Napht. 3:5; Jub. 4:15–22; 7:21; 8:3; 10:3; 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 (1 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).

In a similarly veiled, a narrative unit contained in a number of midrashic works recounts that the “cushite” King of the Arabs came to Rabbi Akiva for advice after accusing his wife of adultery because she had given birth to a white child.34 Without further prompting, the rabbi immediately asks whether the figures painted on the wall of the couple’s house are black or white (כושיパイなのאך לא לבנה). When he learns that they are white, he reassures the anxious father that his wife must have been looking at them when she conceived. Interestingly, this brief rabbinic tradition offers an almost perfect précis of Heliodorus’s vast novel, The Aethiopica, which similarly turns on the problem of skin color. Through myriad narrative twists and turns, the novel’s protagonist, Charikleia, learns that, despite her white skin, she is in fact the daughter of the King and Queen of Ethiopia.35 Apparently, the royal couple has given birth to this remarkable child because the Queen gazed at the beautiful image of Andromeda painted on the wall of their bedroom during sexual intercourse, an event that has stamped their child with the exact appearance of the Greek heroine. Fearing that she will be accused of adultery, Charikleia’s mother arranges for her to be cared for by others and tells her husband that the newborn has died during childbirth. While the midrash and Heliodorus may simply reflect a common folk motif, Rabbi Akiva’s question regarding the existence of the painted figures—a detail that is not otherwise accounted for in the midrashic sources—suggests that The Aethiopica itself or, more likely, its underlying narrative kernel somehow exerted an influence on the rabbinic authors. Whatever the channels of influence, it proves significant that Charikleia’s inheritance of the specific appearance of a heroic figure from the mythic

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; Tanh. Naso 7. These sources are collected in Horowitz, Tosefta Arta 4, 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” (מן עברים). Just as in Jerome’s Quaestiones Hebraicae on Gen 30:35–43, 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.

Rabbinc 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 go sit outside the ritual bath (מבתי). He said: "When the daughters of Israel come out from the bath, let them meet me (ומראות את מתנה לי) so that they will have children as beautiful as I am (”? רברפיי ילבתי). The Rabbis said to him: "Are you not afraid of the Evil Eye (מעט傳送 competitיבא)" 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 הֶעְצָה to describe the encounter outside the bathhouse.38 It is this distinctive mixture of gynecological 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 of Jewish law reflected in these texts was particular to the Franco-German cultural sphere in the later Middle Ages, but seems to have spread along with so much else in medieval Ashkenazi culture to these nascent centers of Jewish life from the Land of Israel; hence, this branch of Jewish purity law is best viewed not as a deviation from a firmly established norm but rather as a later refraction of what was originally a legitimate local practice.40 This mode of purity practice is most fully described in the enigmatic text Beraita de Niddah (BdN).41 The text, consisting of a collection of legal statements and narrative exempla, seems to have its origins in the Jewish community of Byzantine Palestine in the sixth and seventh centuries and, according to Shaye Cohen, reflects that community’s new tendency to equate the synagogue with the Jerusalem Temple.42 Whether or not BdN actually existed as a literary whole as

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36 The parallel version at b. Ber. 20a reads “they look at me” (˘איהון ייבי).
37 b. B. Metzsa 84a (I have slightly modified the translation in Daniel Boyarin, "Talmudic Texts and Jewish Social Life," in Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice [ed. R. Valanassis; Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000], 136). Compare the parallel text at b. Ber. 20a. Rabbi Yohanan also discusses the importance of ritual bathing for procreation at b. 'Eruv. 53b. On Rabbi Yohanan’s eponymous relationship with Resh Lakish (b. B. Metzsa 84a-b) and the importance of this narrative for the formation of rabbinic scholastic culture, see Daniel Boyarin, “Rabbi's and their Pals: Rabbinic Homosociality and the Lives of Women,” in Umheoroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1997), 127–50.
38 The term עוּשָׁה is also found in a similar context at b. Pes. 111a, where the dangers of encountering a woman immediately after she has completed her ablutions are described.
39 See the sources listed in n. 12 above, especially Lique ha-Pardes, Sefer ha-Roqehah, Sha’are Dura, Zehirut ha-Tevillah.
41 A version of the text is available in Horowitz, Tosafot 'Ataqa, 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 Hannnah that “at the time when she immerses, if she encounters 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 (1:7). 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 leviitical 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 indistinguishable.

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 Hannah 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 Hekhalot
its characters and come from? As we charlot-throne using a piece of cotton tanned with a minuscule trace of menstrual impurity. Indeed, this rigorist brand of purity practice in which "magical" practice and halakhah are interwoven seems to be at the heart of the many ideological affinities between BnD and the Hekhalot literature. Within the context of the Jewish mystical and magical literature of Late Antiquity, practices to achieve a heightened state of ritual purity are most commonly intended as preparation for revelatory adjuration (and not primarily for heavenly ascent). This notional background may very well have informed the conception narrative's description of Metatron's appearance to the mother of Rabbi Ishmael. As in so many adjurational texts, the power to draw down an angel for specific practical aims is here predicated on the attainment of proper levels of ritual purity.

Interestingly enough, angels do not play only constructive roles in BnD's understanding of conception. In its description of the causes of birth defects, the text attributes a malevolent aspect to angelic adjuration, see Peter Schafer's "Engel...". While the concept of divine intercession 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' advice (sheva'at ); the Holy One blessed be He do to the fetus? Before the fetus has left the mother's womb, He summons (lit. hints to: 'yi'ld') an angel, who takes blood of menstrual impurity (hemidin 'ri), places it in the mouth of the fetus so that it enters its body, and it is immediately struck (ne'ifen) (with a defect.51

Here we find the text's familiar tendency to conflate ethical and cutic 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' advice (sheva'at ); 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 (hadarim 'alai '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 rigorist purity practice and late antique Jewish magic, BnD vigilantly insists on a firm boundary between them.

Although the purity discourse, of which BnD 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 mythological tradition — the story reflects the practical, ethical, and ritual concerns of the purity literature in which it developed. On the
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 kernel concealed in the multiple and shifting versions of this legend.54 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.55 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.56

The story weaves together a unified tale from pre-existing martyrological material found scattered throughout the Babylonian and Palestinian 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.57 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.58 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).59 Basing itself on the transformation of these traditions in later rabbinic sources is an important corrective to the more positivist interpretation of the evidence in Saul Lieberman, “The Martyrs of Caesarea,” Annaire de l’Institut de Philologie et d’Histoire Orientales et Slaves 7 (1939–1944): 395–446; idem, “Religious Persecution of the Jews,” in Saio Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday (Jerusalem: The American Academy of Jewish Research, 1974), 213–45 (repr. in Bar-Kokhba Revolt ed. A. Oppenheimer; Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 1980), 205–37 [Hebrew]; Moshe David Heer, “Persecutions and Martyrdom in Hadrian’s Days,” Sceptra Hierosolymitana 23 (1972): 85–125.


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 motif of ten rabbinic martyrs has been incorporated. This frame narrative (Rahmenzählung) served as a relatively flexible literary structure within which future redactors of the anthology could organize and reorganize shifting configurations of thematically related martyrrological material. Moreover, the individual versions of this collection differ wildly in their application of the frame narrative. The number and content of the martyrrological units included in each recension is highly unstable; in fact, recensions II and VIII do not even bother to attach any additional martyrrological material to the frame narrative. Therefore, the subsequent martyrrological 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. 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. Metatron, the Prince of the Countenance, met him (V, 1) and asked him: “Who are you?” He answered him: “I am Rabbi Ishmael ben Eliashiv the High Priest.” He said to him: “You are the one in whom your Creator takes pride each day (הָאֵלֶּה הַמִּלָּוְתָּה) 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).” Rabbi Ishmael answered: “I am he.” He asked him: “What is your business in this place of pure ones (A decree has been passed that ten noble ones of Israel will be executed) (and I have ascended to learn whether this is the will of heaven or not) (ﾗｂ,</p>

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 Hekhalot 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. The act of heavenly ascent is typically described in the Hekhalot literature using the technical phrase “to descend to the charriot-throne” (ﾋﾞﾗﾞﾞ ﾜﾒｶﾜ). By contrast, The
Story of the Ten Martyrs employs the more conventional verb “to ascend” (‘as) 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, piety, 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 martyrology do employ the technical terminology of yeridah. These, however, are unquestionably later adaptations of the original formulation in the martyrology. The version of the story of the ten martyrs contained in Hekhalot Rabbati (Schafer, Synopse, §§107–121) reports: “When Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Qanna saw this decree (7 חכין), he rose and led me down to the Menovah (המונית), …” (Schafer, Synopse, §107). However, the causative (hif’il) form of the verb narrat used here is found only in this one instance throughout the entire Hekhalot corpus (Kuyt, Desceni, 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 martyrological 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 Rabbati,” 63–80), recension III is not the earliest extant version of the anthology from which the Hekhalot literature derived its version of the martyrology.

67 For detailed discussion of this material, see especially David Halperin, The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Response to Ezekiel’s Vision (TSAI 16; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 289–322; Karl-Heinz Grözing, Ich bin der Herr, dein Gott: Eine rabbinische Homilie zum Ersten Gebot (PesR 20) (Berl: Herbert Lang, 1976). Different versions of this narrative tradition are contained in the following sources: b. Shabb. 88a–89a; Pes. Rab. 20, §§11–20 (ed. Rivka Ulmer, Pesqata Rabbati: A Synoptic Edition of Pesqata Rabbati Based Upon All Extant Manuscripts and the Edition of Princess [vol. 1; SFSHR 155; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997]; 422–35); MS Oxford Or. 135, 357a–358a (printed in Grözing, Ich bin der Herr, dein Gott: Eine rabbinische Homilie zum Ersten Gebot (PesR 20) (Berl: Herbert Lang, 1976)); MS Oxford Or. 135, 357a–358a (printed in Grözing, Ich bin der Herr, dein Gott: Eine rabbinische Homilie zum Ersten Gebot (PesR 20) (Berl: Herbert Lang, 1976)); Ma’ayan Hakhmah (Adolf Jellinek, Beit ha-Midrash [3rd ed.; 6 vois.; Jerusalem: Wahrmm Books, 1967], I.58–65; Hagagadat Shema’ Yisra’el (Jellenik, Beit ha-Midrash, 5.165–66); T-S K 21.95.A, ia–2a (fragment 21 in Peter Schäfer, Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur [TSAI 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984], 171–81); PRE 46; Midrash ha-Gadol to Ex 19:20. The narrative also appears in p'iyut form as ’El ir gibborim by versions of this tradition is conveyed to heaven within a cloud (רומא, b. Shabb. 88b),68 Rabbi Ishmael is said to ascend within a storm-wind (قبضנ בר),69 and Ḥav. (חכין) – is used in both literary traditions to describe their audience with the angel who meets them immediately upon their ascent.70 Moreover, the image of heaven in both of these traditions is horizontal, not vertical as in the Hekhalot literature.71 This horizontal orientation is given expression through the description of Rabbi Ishmael walking about in heaven (רוהי המלך קעורית),72 which uses almost identical language to the characterization of Moses’ own movement – “he was walking in heaven like a human being walking on earth” (רוהי המלך קעורית).73

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 (הלו נבון מקנעם השורדים)”? 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 (.bn תמר שלdemand את אנש BUILD נבון)?”74 An even more dramatic formulation of this protest is found in the brief textual unit known as “The Seventy Names of Metatron.”75 Here the angels oppose God’s decision to reveal the secrets of the universe to Moses, who, as the representative of mankind, is

Amitta ben Shephatiah (Yonah David, The Poems of Amitta (Jerusalem: Akhsnav, 1975), 100–2).


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 Rabbiho DiBerisha,” in Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions (ed. R. Abusch and A. Y. Reed; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, forthcoming).

71.1.20.1.


73 T-S K. 21.95.A, b13–14 (Schafer, Geniza-Fragmente, 174). Most versions of the narrative use the shorter phrase 77 תמר (e.g., b. Shabb. 88b; Pesq. Rab. 20, §11), instead of the more explicit יֵשׁ אלהים (ם). However, since all of these versions include the phrase “one born of woman” (נַעְר אֱלֹהִים), 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 Kemaal, the first angel encountered by Moses, rather than by a group of angels.

described as “born of woman, blighted, unclean, defiled by blood and impure flux,” and who like all men “excretes putrid drops (of semen).”75 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.76 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 יכל烟囱 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?”77 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 יכל烟囱 as its standard formula for expressing alarm at the potential mixing of these two apparently antithetical domains, the angelic and the human.78 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.79 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 Azael, who vocally oppose Enoch’s arrival in heaven and subsequent elevation to angelic status:

Then three of the ministering angels, Uzzah, Azzah, and Azael, 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 heavens (במימר השמים) or be descended from those who perished in the waters of the Flood? What right has he to be in heaven (במימר השמים)?” (§6 = 4:6–7)80

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 (במימר השמים) or be descended from those who perished in the waters of the Flood? What right has he to be in heaven (במימר השמים)?” (§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 (במימר השמים)? Why does a white drop (of semen) ascend on high (במימר השמים) 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 ophabim, and the cherubim of devouring fire asked Metatron, ‘Youth, why have you allowed one born of women to come in and behold the chariot (במימר השמים) of the Holy one and the cherubim of devouring fire? From what nation is he? From what tribe is he? What is his character (במימר השמים)?’” (§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 יכל烟囱 is used to assert that everything must have its proper place – God, the angels, and human beings – reaffirming


76 On the motif of conflict between angels and human beings and its bearing on the Moses ascent traditions, see especially Peter Schäfer, Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen: Umschreibung zur rabinischen Engelvorstellung (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973), 207–16.

77 This last rendering of the phrase reflects the literal meaning of the word ב ב (form, nature, character, or peculiarity) (s.v. Jastrow, 523).


80 On the relationship of this passage to the fallen angel traditions in 1 Enoch, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, “From Asael and Semihazah to Uzzah, Azzah, and Azael: 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 Enos it is no longer fitting for God to remain among human beings. More germane to our purposes, however, is Metatron, to earth:

The text then proceeds to instruct the reader on the proper preparation for angelic adjuration: "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

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 (רנ”), I said to him: "It is revealed and known before Him who spoke and the world came into being ([כד]ו)." He said to me: "Human being, son of a stinking drop, worm and vermin (מה שקר נפש רוחות רוחה").

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I stand 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 (רנ”), I said to him: "It is revealed and known before Him who spoke and the world came into being ([כד]ו)." He said to me: "Human being, son of a stinking drop, worm and vermin (מה שקר נפש רוחות רוחה")

The text then proceeds to instruct the reader on the proper preparation for angelic adjuration: "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.

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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 beauty and purity, 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 the 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 Eliezer the high priest, that he was among the seven beauties the world had seen. 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 anthology, reports even more succinctly: “There was no beauty in the world from the days of Joseph to the sons of Jacob except Rabbi Ishmael (שלמה שניים, משה, יוחנן, אבא, אבון, ישמעאל).” These competing formulations, which both seek to link rabbinic figures with biblical prototypes of masculine beauty, effectively situates 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 (ברברברוביה).” One who wishes to see the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan should bring a brand 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 Abbahu 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 sit outside the ritual bath. He said: “When the daughters of Jacob, Joseph, Saul, Absalom, Rabbi Yohanan, Rabbi Abbahu, and Rabbi Ishmael—like the beauty of our father Jacob and the beauty of our father Jacob—situate outside the ritual bath, and let him situate outside the ritual bath, and let him place a brand 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 Abbahu 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 sit outside the ritual bath. He said: “When the daughters of Jacob, Joseph, Saul, Absalom, Rabbi Yohanan, Rabbi Abbahu, and Rabbi Ishmael—like the beauty of our father Jacob and the beauty of our father Jacob—situate outside the ritual bath, and let him place a brand 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 Abbahu 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). This statement appears in variety of formulations and locations in the different recensions of The Story of the Ten Martyrs (in some cases several times within a single recension): I.15.10; IV-V.22.6–7; IV.22.32; VI-VII.37.1–2; VII and IX-X.28.1–2.

**Ten Martyrs**, II–III.22.33. A slightly different form of this tradition occurs at V–VII.22.33: “They said (of Rabbi Ishmael) that from the days of Joseph there was no beauty like him (אין מילוי יוספ לא italiani ממלודות).”

Although Rabbi Ishmael’s beauty is explicitly mentioned on a number of occasions elsewhere in earlier rabbinic literature (e.g., t. Hor. 2:5–7; y. Hor. 3:7 [48b]; b. Git. 58a.), the inclusion of Rabbi Abbahu and Rabbi Yohanan in the list further emphasizes Rabbi Ishmael’s genealogical bond to the one biblical figure most renowned for his beauty, Joseph. Indeed, it may be possible to hear an echo of this kinship in the martyrology’s account of Rabbi Ishmael’s arrival in Rome for execution: “When they brought Rabbi Ishmael to Rome all the women who gazed upon him began to bleed because of his great beauty.”

Rabbi Ishmael’s damaging effect on the women of Rome is strikingly similar to medieval versions of the Joseph narrative in Genesis 39, which describes how Potiphar’s wife and her friends were so astounded at Joseph’s beauty when he entered the banquet room to serve them that they mistakenly cut the palms of their hands with the knives they were holding.

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92 V.22.8; VI.37.3; VII–IX.X.28.5; b. B. Metzah 84a; b. Sanh. 14a. For discussion of these sources, see B. Marmorstein, “The Status of Javan and Aram in the Babilonian Talmud,” JQR 59 (1978): 342–54; also the description of Rabbi Allah’s arrival in Rome for execution: “When they brought Rabbi Ishmael to Rome all the women who gazed upon him began to bleed because of his great beauty.”

93 This motif was current in late antique and medieval midrashic sources: Tanh., Vayeshev 5; Midrash ha-Gadol on Gen 39:14; Moses Gaster, The Chronology of Jerahmeel (repr. H. Schwabzaum; New York: KTAV, 1971), 94; Sefer ha-Yashar (ed. Lazarus Goldschmidt; Berlin: Benjamin Haar, 1923) 159–60; Mahzor Vitry (ed. Simeon Hurwitz; Nürnberg, 1923), 342. It also appears in the many of the versions of the Joseph narrative found in Islamic/Arabic literature and art, most notably Qur’an, Sura 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, Potiphar’s House, 28–65. See also Shalom Goldman, The Wiles of Women/The Wiles 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; Feuww Malti-Douglas, Woman’s Body, Woman’s World: Gender and Discourse in Arabic-Islamic Writing (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 50–51. See also the Islamic sources.
Whatever the cultural and literary background of these traditions, each is carefully situated within the martyrology’s account of Rabbi Ishmael’s gruesome death. Some recensions even report that the Roman Emperor decides to execute Rabbi Ishmael precisely in response to the violent reaction the martyr’s beauty provokes in him: “When they brought him before the king, he asked him: ‘Is there anyone in your nation more beautiful than you?’ He answered: ‘No.’ He immediately decreed that he should be executed.”94 Later in the same scene, however, his beauty has precisely the opposite effect on the Emperor’s daughter, who spies him through the window of the imperial palace95 after hearing the baleful cries of the martyr for his decapitated colleague Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel.

The text continues:

She went to her father and said: “Father, I have one request from you.” He said to her: “My daughter. I will grant whatever you ask, except for sparing Ishmael and his colleagues.” She responded: “But that was my request!” He responded: “You can’t have your way on this matter.” She said: “If that’s the case, then at least give me permission to remove the skin of his face.” He immediately ordered that the skin of Ishmael’s face be removed while he was still alive.96

Rabbi Ishmael’s death is cruelly enacted precisely through the removal of the very token of his special status, his beautiful face.

Rabbi Ishmael remains impassive throughout the procedure until the executioner reaches the site where he wears his teffillin, 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 but rather the loss of his capacity to fulfill the commandment of putting on teffillin. This curious detail may be an allusion to the anthropomorphic notion that God himself dons teffillin, which is attested in both the Babylonian Talmud and the Hekhalot literature.97 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.98 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 (שמחה יהוה לדור ודורו).”99 In a similar statement elsewhere in the martyrology, 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.”100

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 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:101


93 Ten Martyrs, V.22.9; VI.37.4; VII, IX–X.28.4. I here translate recension V.

94 Ten Martyrs, I–VII.22.31; 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 see him from a high window in the tower her father has built to help her see him.

95 She went to her father and said: “Father, I have one request from you.” He said to her: “My daughter. I will grant whatever you ask, except for sparing Ishmael and his colleagues.” She responded: “But that was my request!” He responded: “You can’t have your way on this matter.” She said: “If that’s the case, then at least give me permission to remove the skin of his face.” He immediately ordered that the skin of Ishmael’s face be removed while he was still alive.

96 Ten Martyrs, I–VII.22.35–40; IX–X.28.7–11. I here translate recension V. The version of this penelope in Grünthau, Midrash Shir Hashehirah, 4b, differs considerably from the ones found in The Story of the Ten Martyrs. Here, the female figure is identified as a Roman matron (เคשמינית) 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 – she tries to seduce 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 earlier than the one found in the martyrology, where the Emperor preemptively refuses his daughter’s request to save Rabbi Ishmael even before he has articulated it.

97 For mention of how the women of Egypt look at Joseph from walls or windows, see Tg. Neo! 158–220.

98 Ten Martyrs, I–V.22.9; VI.37.4; VII. IX–X.28.4. I here translate recension V. The Ritual of Rabbi Ishmael’s Mask

99 Ten Martyrs, I, III–V.22.50; VI–VII.37.10; IX–X.28.14

100 Ten Martyrs, VI.36.4: אלמלא הקדוש יнесен אין מתחלש למדבר אתייר זכתהו שלום ושלום

101 Ten Martyrs, II, IV–V. VII.22.65–73; IX.54.1–6. I translate here recension VII. A longer version of this passage also appears at b. ‘Abod. Zar. 11b, where this alleged description of a Roman festival is attributed to Rav Judah in the name of Samuel. The variations between these versions are considerable. Recension IX is closest to the Bavli text, although somewhat more condensed. IV and V, which are almost identical, similarly have the same sequence of phrases as the Bavli, although their phraseology is different on a number of occasions. II and VII are closely related, since both similarly
They take a healthy man and have him ride on the back of a cripple (קֵלָּה דְּמַה שָׁמְתָה קַלָּה וַעֲלֵיהּ יִבְנָה). They summon a herald who proclaims before them: "Let him who sees, see; and anyone who does not see, will never see it." They place the head of Rabbi Ishmael in the hand of the healthy man (ץָאָר רוּפֵא שָׁמָּה יִשְׁמִיאֵל), who bears witness to what he has just seen ( TMProּשָׁכְתָה אלֵיהּ). They call the healthy man Esau and the cripple Jacob because of his limp (יִשְׂמִיאֵל יִשְׂמִיאֵל), for they summon a herald who proclaims: "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 (ירא לַעֲשֹׂנִים, רִבְּעָה שָׁמָּה יֵשְׁמִיאֵל)." And they proclaim: "Let him who sees, see; and anyone who does not see, will never see it." 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 with it several scalps and do not be surprised at this, since they place the scalp of Rabbi Ishmael on the heads of their kings (רַבָּא יִשְׁמִיאֵל יִשְׁמִיאֵל)," 104 More than a century ago, Samuel Rapaport read the version of this passage in Avodah Zarah as an allusion to a carnivalesque practice introduced into the Ludi Saeculares by the Roman emperor, Philip the Arab (244-49 CE), around 247 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. 105 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 crier's phrasology 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 (quam nec spectatissimum spectaculum esse)." 106 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.

104 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 it on his head (ומְכַלָּא יַחֲדָא סְמָתָה רַבָּא יִשְׁמִיאֵל) in this formulation, Rabbi Ishmael's face is spoken of as precisely in the manner of God's countenance (i.e. their crier)." In b. 'Abod. Zar. 11b and IX, 54.3, the word used for the mask is שֵׁרֶנָּה (טָהוֹן)." Yet, whatever the


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. Zar. 11b). Suetonius, Claud. 21.1 (J. C. Rolfe, trans., Suetonius [vol. 2; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997], 39). Cf. Herodian 3.8.10: "So heraids traveled through Europe and Rome and they summoned all the people to come and attend the games of which they had never seen before and would not see again" (C. R. Whittaker, trans., Herodian [vol. 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 redepenting 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 has 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 (אַרְבָּא כָּלֵי תְשֵׁלְמֵי הַשָּׁם דְּרִיקֵם)," 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 seals 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 Rabbah expresses this sacrificial theology in strikingly similar language:

Another explanation of the text, Setting up the Tabernacle (מצה בֶּית הָעָד, 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" (יהב), whose name is Metatron, and therem he offers up the souls of the righteous to atone for Israel in the days of their exile (על ימי עזרא בֶּית חֲלוֹם). The reason scripture says "(ם) the Tabernacle" is because another tabernacle was erected simultaneously with it. In the same way it is

106 Ten Martyrs, 1-IX, 20.1-5.

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).\(^\text{110}\)

The phrase "C’i...~ gegenze~...~...~mtegrates this notion into a coherent narrative framework. As the human

Although it is impossible to fix with any confidence the precise social and historical context within which late Jewish martyrology developed, its direct literary and ideological relationship to the purity 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 play 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.\(^\text{112}\)

Preliminary Conclusions

Moreover, the martyrology’s use of the “annunciation” scene in The Story of the Ten Martyrs betrays an interest in the origins of the messianic akin to the portrait of Menahem son of Amiel and his mother Hephzibah in the seventh-century Hebrew apocalyptic Sefer Zerubbabel.\(^\text{113}\) Read within this cultural context, the martyrology offers a similarly 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.\(^\text{114}\)


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 martyrlogy – 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 image-worship as a form of idolatry play a significant role in the literature of the 630s and 640s." However, is it also possible that, far from giving voice to any ideological predilection for aniconic modes of representation, 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 underlay the widespread use of iconic relics in Christian worship? Certainly 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 Ishmael painted by the martyrlogy can be characterized, in Gilbert Dagron's words, as "an icon in words in response to an immense desire to visualize." It is fair to say, then, that at least some Jews and at least some Christians could agree that the possibility of redemption is bound up in the ritualized manipulation of these repositories of "otherworldly" presence. It would, of course, be wrong to view the martyrlogy's narrative of collective redemption through atoning human sacrifice as a mere derivative of the regnant Christian paradigm. Instead, what we have seen is a pointed attempt to appropriate salient elements of Christian sacred history, while still formulating innovative and even idiosyncratic claims about Rabbi Ishmael's (semi)-divine nature in distinctive literary and cultural terms.


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 Spelmi Colloquia 6; ed. Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1998).