

THE WORK OF THE CHARIOT



In the *Talmud*, there are two branches of early Jewish mysticism that are mentioned – the *Work of the Chariot* and the *Work of Creation*. In this slideshow, we'll examine the *Work of the Chariot*.

“The work of the chariot may not be discussed even in the presence of one unless he is a sage and already understands through his own knowledge.”
(B. Chagigah 11b)

Every tradition has its methods for going on spiritual journeys. In ancient *Judaism*, the method that was followed was known as the *Work of the Chariot*. What is known in ancient Jewish mysticism as the *Work of the Chariot* stems from the phantasmagoric vision of *Ezekiel* in which he has a vision of *God* upon a *throne*.

*“And it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Kevar river, that the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. ... And I looked, and, behold, a stormy wind came from the north, a great cloud, and a fire flaring up, and a brightness was around it, out of its midst, as the color of **amber/electrum/brilliance**, out of the midst of the fire. Also out of its midst came the likeness of four living creatures. ... And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like lapis lazuli; and **upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness like the appearance of a man upon it.**”*

(Ezekiel 1:1-26)

This vision is often seen as a more elaborate version of one had earlier by the prophet *Isaiah*.

“In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphim; each one had six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he did fly. And one cried to another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”
(Isaiah 6:1-3)

The *throne* above the four living creatures in the vision of *Ezekiel* is interpreted as “*God’s chariot*,” and hence the phrase the *Work of the Chariot*. In Hebrew, the word for *chariot* is *merkabah*, and this topic is often referred to as *merkabah mysticism*. Also, *Ezekiel’s* vision has come to be taken as a model for mystical attainment with the *Work of the Chariot* intended, to some degree, to replicate this experience. However, exactly what the methods and techniques were that were utilized in these ancient times, we cannot say with certainty. What remains in the literature is fragmentary.

What we do know of the ancient *Work of the Chariot* is confined, for the most part, to the *hekalot* literature. The word *hekalot* in Hebrew means *palaces*, and this was a reference to seven palaces in seven heavens that are traversed during this journey. Also, as is typical, the notion of seven heavens is derived from the variety of words found in the *Bible* that describe God's dwelling place.

“R. Judah said: There are two firmaments, for it is said: Behold, unto the Lord your God belongs heaven, and the heaven of heavens. Resh Lakish said: There are seven, namely, Wilon (curtain), Rakia (firmament), Shehakim (clouds), Zebul (lofty habitation), Ma'on (dwelling), Makon (fixed place), 'Araboth (darkness).”
(B. Chagigah 12b)

The *Work of the Chariot* was a quest fraught with both complexity and danger, not unlike the Arthurian legends of the quest for the Grail or other examples of the “hero’s journey.” Along the way, combinations of the correct passwords and seals were required to gain entrance to the next level, and if all was not right, then the results would be disastrous.

*“And whenever a man wished to descend to the Merkabha he would call to Surya the Prince of the Presence and conjure him one hundred and twelve times by Totrosi’ai the Lord who is called Totrosi’ai Zurtak Totrakhiel Tophgar ’Ashrawwili’ai Zebhodiell Zoharariel Tandiel, and Shekhadhozi’ai Dehibhiron, and ’Andiriron the Lord God of Israel. And **let him beware that he do not exceed a hundred and twelve times and do not diminish from them. And if he exceed or diminish his blood is upon his own head.**”*

(Hekalot Rabbatai, Chapter XIV)

*“Said Rabbi Ishmael: Rabban Simon ben Gamliel was angry with me. He said to me, “Almost had Zahaphtariai rebuked us and shucked u} as husks of corn. Why didst thou, by criminal carelessness, sin against us? Dost thou, perhaps, think that Jonathan be Uzziel is a man of small account in Israel? **If he simply descended and came and stood at the entrance of the seventh palace without a seal, what would happen to him? He could not blink an eye before the door-keepers of the seventh palace had utterly exterminated him.** And yet you have said nothing about the necessary seals nor the names of the angels to whom they must be shown.”*

(Hekalot Rabbatai, Chapter XXI)

*“When thou comest and standest at the entrance of the sixth palace, display three seals of the door-keepers of the sixth palace. **Display two seals to Kazpiel the Prince, whose sword is drawn in his hand, and there issue forth from it lightnings, and he shaketh it against everyone who is not fit to behold the King and his throne, and there is no creature who may stay his hand. And his sword crieth and saith: ‘Pain!’”***

(Hekalot Rabbatai, Chapter XVIII)

What qualifies one to pursue the *merkabah*? According to the *Hekalot Rabbatai* it is righteousness brought about by both practice and study of the *Torah* and other instructive writings.

*“And Dumiel would say to him: ‘I bear witness and warn thee concerning two things: That **none of those who descend to the Merkabha succeed to descend except only he who hath these two qualifications: He who hath read the Bible and studieth mishna, midrash, halakhoth and agadoth, and the explanation of halakhoth as to what is forbidden and permitted; and he who hath fulfilled all that which is written in the law and keepeth all warnings of statutes and of judgments and of laws which were declared to Moses on Sinai.**”*

(Hekalot Rabbatai, Chapter XX)

Recall now the story we discussed previously of the four rabbis who went on a mystical journey. Within that story we also found a warning from *Rabbi Akiba* to not mistake the marble stones for water.

“Rabbi Akiba said to them, ‘When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, do not say, water, water! For it is said: “He who speaks falsehood shall not be established before my eyes.””
(B. Chagigah 14b)

It is apparent from this passage that one of the great dangers of mystical journeys is the fantasy or delusion that one may fall prey to where the real reality (whatever that is) is mistaken, in this case, for the more familiar water. Notice, too, that the image of water also appears in the vision of *Ezekiel*.

“I heard the noise of their wings, like the noise of great waters, like the voice of the Almighty.”
(Ezekiel 1:24)

In *Hekalot Rabbatai*, we also find a reference to water, and about this reference one must say two things. First, *Hekalot Rabbatai* is clearly referencing the story of the journey of the four rabbis that is found in the *Talmud*. However, that does not necessarily mean that the journey the rabbis went on in the *Talmudic* story is the same as the one outlined in *Hekalot Rabbatai*. As the scholar *Joseph Dan* points out, the journeys described in the *hekalot* literature may be later additions and layers added onto this famous story, and it might, indeed, have little to do with the practices of our original four rabbis.

*“And I beheld something like unto the appearance of lightning which was fixed and stationary and was divided, among those who descend to the Merkabha, between those who were fit to descend to the Merkabha and those who were not fit to descend to the Merkabha. If a man were fit to descend to the Merkabha, when they say to him “Enter” and he doth not enter, they repeat themselves and say to him “Enter,” and he at once entereth. They would then praise him, saying, “Surely this is one of those who descend to the Merkabha.” But **if a man be not fit to descend to the Merkabha, when they say to him “Enter” and he entereth, they at once place upon him a thousand pieces of iron, because the door-keepers of the sixth palace place upon him a thousand thousands of waves of water, and there is not in that place even a single drop.***

And if he said, “What is the nature of this water?”
they at once run after him, stoning him, and saying
to him, “Wretch, are thou not or the seed of them
that kissed the golden calf, and art unfit to see the
King and His throne in his beauty.” And if he be
such, a voice goeth forth from the seventh heaven
saying, “well have ye said that he is from the seed of
them that kissed the golden calf and is not fit to see the
King and His throne.” **He does not move from the**
spot before they place on him a Thousand
thousands of pieces of iron.”

(Hekalot Rabbatai, Chapter XXV)

Today, we generally do not expect religious and mystical endeavors to be as fraught with peril as those we find in the writings of the *Work of the Chariot* from earlier times. Instead, probably the most likely danger is that of self-delusion or “*following the multitude to do evil (Exodus 23:2).*” If problems are to occur today, they are more likely to result from being swept up in the mythology of a particular group or cult rather than from seals and secret passwords being required by menacing angels.

Furthermore, there are *Kabbalists* that are of the opinion that the *Work of the Chariot* is a reference to meditative journeys that one might take, and later during our line-by-line discussion of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, we will talk at length about the form of meditation described in that text.

And finally, a prooftext that the story of the four rabbis who entered the *garden* is really about a meditative journey is that *pardes/garden* (*peh-resh-dalet-samech* = 344) has the same numerical value as *l'suach/to meditate* (*lamed-shin-vav-chet* = 344) that is found in *Genesis 24:63*.

“And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the evening time.”
(Genesis 24:63)