



Ethiopian ("The Black") Moses  
Courtesy of Father Antonious Henein, Holy Virgin Mary Coptic Orthodox Church of Los Angeles



STUDIES IN ANTIQUITY & CHRISTIANITY

**ASCETIC  
BEHAVIOR IN  
GRECO-ROMAN  
ANTIQUITY  
A SOURCEBOOK**

Vincent L. Wimbush, editor

FORTRESS PRESS

MINNEAPOLIS

- 5 . . . Since you inquire about these mysteries: they also correspond to the teachings of the sects which have those fifty days in which they fast, calling them 'Pentecost.'  
 Since the apostles themselves fasted for these fifty days, they revealed them to their disciples.
- 10 Christ himself revealed these fifty days to them on the day when he [was] fasting on the mountain, at the time when the devil tempted him.<sup>15</sup> He spent seven more days going down to the house of Simon the Leper. He spent another three days in the sepulchre among the dead. But . . .
- 15 in these fifty days. I bestowed them on the whole church in these fifty days in which the Catechumens fast corresponding to the mystery of the First Man. The other fifty ones [corresponding to] the symbol of the Second Man are the ones which were revealed in the church."

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15. Cf. Gospel accounts of Jesus' temptation by the devil: Matt 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13.

## The Nazirite in Ancient Judaism (Selected Texts)

### INTRODUCTION

Rather than debating whether or to what extent varieties of ancient Judaism and their systems of interdicts may be said to be "ascetic" or "antiascetic," it is useful to consider what I term the "ascetic tensions" that run through each.<sup>1</sup> Of particular interest are those points at which supererogatory self-denial or self-imposed suffering (in Hebrew, *pərišūt*) are debated by voices within ancient Jewish texts, whether those voices are portrayed as being in explicit debate with one another, are juxtaposed against one another already by ancient redactors of those texts, or are only found to be in some tension with one another as we gather those texts and set them alongside one another for purposes of critical examination. Such practices are viewed positively as voluntary extensions of what is already required or recommended by collective Jewish practice as proper means to spiritual advancement in accord with divine will, even as they are viewed suspiciously in terms of both their motivations and their consequences: their motivations may be vainly self-centered, and their consequences may be socially detrimental. When individuals or subgroups undertake higher levels of abstinent behavior, precisely with regard to those areas in which that larger society commonly practices, or at least values, abstinence of more moderate degrees (e.g., diet and sex), they distinguish themselves from that larger Jewish society by virtue of such practice and are inevitably in some tension with

1. For a more developed argument of this point, with reference to previous scholarship and with exemplification from a broad range of ancient Jewish sources, see my essay, "Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism."

it as a result, whether or not that was their intent. This tension is especially noticeable in the texts of ancient rabbinic Judaism, as the rabbinic sages of late antiquity saw themselves on the one hand as a spiritual, intellectual, and leadership elite and on the other hand as deriving from Israelite society as a whole, for which they sought to provide realizable models for collective Jewish practice.<sup>2</sup> However, this tension is as much intrarabbinic, for that is how it expresses itself within the corpus of extant rabbinic texts.

The texts that follow focus on only one aspect of the ascetic tension in ancient Judaism, especially within that variety that finds its expression in rabbinic texts of the third through sixth centuries C.E.: the figure of the Nazirite. According to biblical legislation (Num 6:1–21), an Israelite man or woman might achieve a high, priestly (even High Priestly) level of holiness through abstaining for a given period (later defined as a minimum of thirty days) from wine, grape products, contact with the dead, even of one's immediate family, and cutting of one's hair. At the end of the vowed period, or should contact with the dead cancel the vow, the Nazirite's hair is shorn and offered with other sacrifices on the altar. Later sources suggest that a person might become a Nazirite, especially for a finite period of time, for a variety of legitimate reasons: penitence, seeking divine favor at a time of distress or danger, and self-discipline. Even though Nazirite practice per se probably became extinct with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E.,<sup>3</sup> it remained representa-

2. Although we might conceive of the rabbinic program for Israel as a whole as one of religious *askēsis* (as classically understood), the rabbis resisted the internal pull to become themselves a separate ascetic (or monastic) elite within Israel. For a more general discussion of the class of rabbinic sage and their self-understanding in relation to larger Israelite society, see chap. 3 of my forthcoming book, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

3. That Nazirite vows were practiced before the destruction of the Temple is well evidenced. Note in particular the following: 1 Macc 3:47–51; Josephus A.J. 19.16.1 § 294; B.J. 2.15.1 §313; Acts 18:18; 21:23–24; *m. Nazir* 3:6; 5:4, 11; *p. Ber.* 7.2 (11b). Interestingly, most of these examples, if historically true, fall in the mid-first century C.E., that is, in the years shortly before the Temple's destruction. A burial inscription from the same period refers to a *family* of Nazirites. See Nahman Avigad, "The Burial-Vault of a Nazirite Family on Mount Scopus," *IEJ* 21 (1971):185–200. The speculation of some scholars (for references, see my "Ascetical Aspects," p. 283, n. 56) that the Nazirites in Second Temple times constituted a group (on the model of the Rechabites of Jer 35), however, is without basis. Because the Nazirite was required to bring a sacrificial offering to the Temple upon the completion of his vows or upon their violation through contact with a corpse, it is generally assumed that such vows, at least of a temporary nature, could not have been undertaken once sacrificial worship ceased. See Josephus B.J. 2.15.1 §313 and *m. Nazir* 5:4, cited below. However, it is possible that people would have continued to assume the obligations of a Nazirite without a formal vow or even would have undertaken lifelong Nazirite vows, but there is no firm evidence for this in the rabbinic period. For later evidence for the taking of "Samsonite Nazirite vows," see

tive of other forms of supererogatory abstinence, including other types of vows, whose merits and limits continued to be debated among the rabbis.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the Nazirite becomes emblematic both of the ideal of supererogatory abstinence (*pērišūt*) and of its dangers.<sup>5</sup>

These texts are all drawn from rabbinic literature, beginning with the earliest digest of rabbinic law, the Mishna (ca. early third century C.E.), and its accompanying Tosepta (sometime thereafter), which each devote a tractate both to the laws of the Nazirite and to vows more generally. Around the same time we have early midrashic commentaries (third century C.E.), which interpret the biblical warrant for the Nazirite. Finally, there is extensive commentary in the Palestinian (ca. 500) and Babylonian Talmuds (ca. 600) to the earlier mishnaic rules regarding Nazirite vows and practices.

Because each of these texts draws upon and relates to earlier traditions, the above dates are only meant as approximate signposts. What we have before us is an evolving, intertextual, and hence intergenerational reflection upon the Nazirite and the larger complex of issues relating to Jewish ascetic practice, for which the Nazirite is understood to stand.

## TRANSLATION

### MISHNA: NED. 1:1; 2:3

[1:1] Any substitute for [the form of words used to utter] a vow is as binding as the vow, for a ban as a ban, for an oath as an oath, for a Nazirite vow as a Nazirite vow. . . . [If he said,] "As the vows of the

Samuel Morrell, "The Samsonite Vow in the Sixteenth Century," *AJS Review* 14 (1989):223–62.

4. That vows of abstinence were commonly and, to the rabbis' chagrin, rashly and without proper intention undertaken in rabbinic times is well evidenced. It may be in relation to this practice that rabbinic discussions of the biblically prescribed Nazirite vows come, at least in part, as a response. For a positive rabbinic view of vows in general, see *m. 'abot* 3:13: "Vows are a fence [protective guard] around abstinence." From a rabbinic legal perspective, a vow was a sacred obligation that once formally uttered could result in a sacrilege if violated, hence the need for rabbinic methods of legally abrogating vows if, once rashly undertaken, they could not be maintained. See Z'ev W. Falk, "Binding and Loosing," in Bernard Jackson, ed., *Studies in Jewish Legal History: Essays in Honour of David Daube* (London: Jewish Chronicle Publications, 1974) 92–100.

5. Note that the verb *nzr*, meaning to "dedicate," is rabbinically identified with the verb *prš*, meaning to "separate," with the latter having the dual sense of separation from pleasurable practices as well as separation from the larger society: *Sifre Zutta* to Num 9:6; *Sipra 'Emor* 4:1; *Tg. Onq.* to Lev 15:31. On the ambivalent rabbinic attitude to *pērišūt* and *pērūšim* ("ascetics" and Pharisees), see my "Ascetical Aspects," 271–72.

wicked . . .", he is culpable for a Nazirite vow, an offering, and an oath. [If he said,] "As the vows of the pious . . .", he has said naught; [but if he said,] "As their freewill offerings . . .", he is culpable for a Nazirite vow and an offering.

[2:3] There is such a thing as a vow within a vow. . . . If a man said, "May I be a Nazirite if I eat, may I be a Nazirite if I eat," and he ate, he must fulfill each of the two vows.

MISHNA: NAZIR 2:3; 3:6; 5:4; 7:1

[2:3] If they filled a man's cup [with wine] and he said, "I will be a Nazirite with respect to it," he becomes a Nazirite. It once happened that a woman was drunk and when they filled her cup [with wine] she said, "I will be a Nazirite with respect to it." The sages said: She only intended to say, "May it be to me as Korban."

[3:6] If a person [in the Diaspora] vowed to be a Nazirite for a long period,<sup>6</sup> and fulfilled his Nazirite vow, and afterwards came to the Land of Israel, the School of Shammai say: He must fulfill a Nazirite vow of thirty days more [in the Land of Israel]. The School of Hillel say: He must again fulfill his original Nazirite vow [in the Land of Israel]. It once happened that when the son of Queen Helena<sup>7</sup> went to war, she said, "If my son returns in safety from the war I will be a Nazirite for seven years. When her son returned from the war she was a Nazirite for seven years, at the end of which she went up to the Land of Israel. The School of Hillel ruled that she must be a Nazirite for another seven years. At the end of the seven years she contracted ritual impurity. Thus, she ended up being a Nazirite for twenty-one years. Rabbi Judah said: She only needed to be a Nazirite for fourteen years.<sup>8</sup>

[5:4] If a man vowed to be a Nazirite and he went to bring his cattle and found that they had been stolen, and he had made his Nazirite vow before they were stolen, his vow is binding; but if he had made his Nazirite vow after they were stolen, his vow is not binding.<sup>9</sup> Nahum the

6. More than thirty days, the period considered by the rabbis to be the minimum period for a Nazirite vow. Compare Josephus *B.J.* 2.15.1 §313.

7. She was Queen of Adiabene and a convert to Judaism. The incident, if historical, would have occurred in the early 40s c.e.

8. This is traditionally explained as follows: She served for one term of seven years before coming to the Land of Israel, for another term of seven years in the Land of Israel, because she could not be presumed to have been ritually pure outside it, and for another thirty days (the minimum period) after she was in the Land of Israel.

9. The man had intended to bring one of his cattle as an offering upon completing his vow. If circumstances change after the vow is taken, it cannot be abrogated. See *m. Ned.* 9:2.

Mede made a similar error when Nazirites came up from the Diaspora [to Jerusalem] and found the Temple destroyed. Nahum the Mede said to them: Would you have vowed to be Nazirites had you known that the Temple was destroyed? They answered: No. And Nahum the Mede released them from their vows. But when the matter came before the sages they said to him: If any man vowed to be a Nazirite before the Temple was destroyed, his Nazirite vow is binding; but if he vowed after the Temple was destroyed, his Nazirite vow is not binding.

[7:1] Neither a High Priest nor a Nazirite may contract ritual impurity because of their [dead] kindred, but they may contract ritual impurity because of a neglected corpse.<sup>10</sup> If they were on a journey and found a neglected corpse, R. Eliezer says: The High Priest may contract ritual impurity but the Nazirite may not contract ritual impurity. But the sages say: The Nazirite may contract ritual impurity, but the High Priest may not contract ritual impurity. R. Eliezer said to them: Rather, let the priest contract ritual impurity for he does not need to bring an offering because of his ritual impurity, and let not the Nazirite contract ritual impurity for he must bring an offering because of his ritual impurity. They answered: Rather let the Nazirite contract ritual impurity, for his sanctity is not a lifelong sanctity, and let not the priest contract ritual impurity, for his sanctity is a lifelong sanctity.

TOSEPTA: NED. 1:1

[If he said,]<sup>11</sup> "As the freewill offering of the wicked . . .", he has said naught, for the wicked do not make freewill offerings. [If he said,] "As the freewill offerings of the pious . . .", R. Judah says: It is as if he had vowed a Nazirite vow. For the early pious would make freewill offerings [and not formal vows] of Nazirite obligations, since God did not grant them otherwise an opportunity to bring [sin offerings] for their inadvertent sins, therefore they made freewill offerings of Nazirite obligations so as to bring an offering. Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel says: [If he said,]

10. Literally, "a corpse of a religious obligation," that is, one that is found and there is no one else to bury it. In such a case even a High Priest or a Nazirite not only may but must incur impurity so as to attend to the corpse. See *m. Nazir* 6:5. In being forbidden from having contact with the corpse even of a next of kin, the Nazirite is like the High Priest and of a higher order than the regular priest who was permitted to attend to the corpse of a next of kin. See Lev 21:1-2, 11; and *b. Ta'an.* 26b-27a. On the similarity of the holiness of the Nazirite to that of the High Priest, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* s.v. "Nazirite." On the priestly quality of the Nazirites' abstinence from wine, see Philo *Spec. Leg.* 1.249.

11. See *m. Ned.* 1:1, cited above.

"As the freewill offering of the pious . . .", it is not as though he had vowed a Nazirite vow. For the early pious would not make freewill offerings of Nazirite obligations, for if one wished to bring a burnt offering he brought it; offerings of well-being, he brought them; a thanksgiving offering and the four kinds of bread, he brought them. But they would not make freewill offerings of Nazirite obligations because they would then have had to make atonement, as it is said, "And he shall make atonement on his behalf for the sin that he committed through (against) the corpse (soul) ('*al hannepes*)" (Num 6:11).<sup>12</sup>

#### TOSEPTA: NAZIR 4:7

Simeon the Righteous<sup>13</sup> said: In all my life I ate the trespass offering of a Nazirite only once. It happened that a man came to me from the south, and I saw that he had beautiful eyes, a handsome face, and curly locks. I said to him: "My son, why did you want to destroy such lovely hair?" He said to me: "I was a shepherd in my village and I came to fill water from the river. When I looked at my reflection my impulse to do evil overcame me and sought to drive me from the world. I said to him: 'Evil one, you should not pride yourself in something which is not yours, in something which is destined to become dust and worms. Behold I vow to shave you off for the sake of heaven.'" I patted his head and kissed him, saying: "My son, may there be many like you who do God's will in Israel. In you is fulfilled what Scripture says: 'If anyone, man or woman, who distinctly utters a Nazirite vow, to set himself apart for the Lord . . .'" (Num 6:2).<sup>14</sup>

#### TANNAITIC MIDRASH: SIPRE NUM 30

"And [the priest] shall make expiation on his behalf [for the sin that he committed through (against) the corpse (soul) ('*al hannepes*)]" (Num

12. For the rabbinic understanding of this verse, that the Nazirite incurs guilt because of the self-denial he caused to his soul, see below.

13. Presumably the High Priest mentioned in *m. 'abot* 1:2, ca. 190 B.C.E. For the possibility that the reference is to another High Priest named Simeon, ca. 41 C.E., or to Simeon son of Shetaḥ, ca. 90 B.C.E., see David Goodblatt, "Agrippa I and Palestinian Judaism in the First Century," *Jewish History* 2 (1987) 30-31, n. 64.

14. For a close parallel, see *Sipre Num* 22, where the story is provided as commentary to the words, "to set himself apart for the Lord." For later parallels, see *p. Ned.* 1:1, 6; *b. Ned.* 9b-10a. For discussion, see David Halivni, "On the Supposed Anti-Asceticism or Anti-Naziritism of Simon the Just," *JQR* 58 (1968) 243-52, with references to the earlier literature. Compare Philo *Spec. Leg.* 1.247-54, where it also stressed that the Nazirite undertakes his vow as a way of dedicating himself to God.

6:11): For he sinned against his soul. R. Eleazar Hakappar (ca. 200 C.E.) says: Against which soul did he sin that he needs expiation? For he denied his soul wine.<sup>15</sup> And we can argue a fortiori: if one who denies his soul wine needs expiation, how much more so one who denies himself everything. R. Ishmael says: Scripture [in speaking of expiation] refers only to the impure Nazirite, as it says, "And shall make expiation on his behalf for the guilt that he incurred through the corpse," for he became impure from contact with the dead.<sup>16</sup>

#### TANNAITIC MIDRASH: SIPRE ZUṬṬA' TO NUM 6:8

"All the days of his term as Nazirite he is holy (consecrated) to the Lord": Because he decided to follow the way of abstinence and purity he is called "holy," and furthermore Scripture equals him to the prophet, as it is said, "And I raised up prophets from among your sons and Nazirites from among your young men" (Amos 2:11).<sup>17</sup>

#### PALESTINIAN TALMUD: BER. 7:2 (11b)

It is taught: In the days of Simeon the son of Shetaḥ [ca. 90 B.C.E.] three hundred Nazirites went up [to Jerusalem]. For one hundred and fifty he found grounds for annulment [of their vows], but for [the other] one hundred and fifty he did not find grounds for annulment. He went to King Yannai and said to him: "There are three hundred Nazirites here who require nine hundred sacrifices. If you provide half I shall provide the other half." He [Yannai] sent him four hundred and fifty. An informer went and told him: "He [Simeon] did not give anything of his."

15. The sense that the word *nepes* refers not to the dead corpse but to the Nazirite's own self may derive from Num 30:3: "If a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath imposing a prohibition on himself ('*al naps*) . . ."

16. R. Eleazar Hakappar's interpretation is also cited, and becomes itself the subject of interpretation, in the following: *b. Ta'an* 11a-b; *b. Ned.* 9b-10a; *b. Nazir* 2b-3a; 19a; *b. B. Qam.* 91b. Note how the Nazirite serves as the basis for discouraging all forms of supererogatory abstinence. Thus, in *B. Qam.* 91b, R. Eleazar Hakappar's dictum is cited with regard to those who afflict themselves excessively in mourning, and in *b. Ta'an* 11a-b, it is cited with regard to supererogatory fasting. The later Babylonian sources disagree whether R. Eleazar Hakappar meant to brand all Nazirites as sinners or only those who, because they vow rashly, are not diligent and become defiled. In this regard, see also Tosaphot to *b. Ned.* 9b-10a. A similar interpretation of the Nazirite as sinner is given in the name of R. Simeon in *p. Ned.* 1:1 (36d), to be cited below; *p. Nazir* 1:6 (51c); *b. Nazir* 9b-10a.

17. Compare the targumic rendering of *Tg. Neb.* Amos 2:11-12, which substitutes "teachers" for "Nazirites."

When King Yannai heard this he became angry. Being afraid, Simeon the son of Shetaḥ fled. Some time later distinguished men of the Kingdom of Persia came to King Yannai. While they were sitting and eating, they said to him: "We know that there used to be here a certain old man here who would say before us words of wisdom." He told them what had happened. They said: "Send and bring him." He sent and gave him his word [that he would not harm him]. When he came he sat between the king and the queen. He [Yannai] said to him: "Why did you deceive me?" He said to him: "I did not deceive you. You gave of your wealth and I gave of my teaching, as it is written, 'For the shelter of wisdom is like the shelter of money'" (Eccl 7:12).<sup>18</sup>

PALESTINIAN TALMUD: NED. 1:1 (36d)

The mishnah<sup>19</sup> is in accord with the view of R. Judan, as it is taught in the name of R. Judan: "It is better not to vow than to vow and not fulfill" (Eccl 5:4): Best of all is not to vow at all. R. Meir said: "It is better not to vow than to vow and not fulfill." Best of all is to vow and to fulfill one's vows. And thus it says, "Make vows and pay them to your God" (Prov 76:12). . . .

[If he said] "As the vows of the pious . . .", he has said naught.<sup>20</sup> This would seem to suggest that the pious make vows. However, when such a one vows he is no longer pious. The mishnah is in accord with the view of R. Judah, as it is taught in the name of R. Judah: The early pious desired to bring a sin offering, but God did not grant them an opportunity to sin, so they made freewill offerings of Nazirite obligations so as to bring a sin offering.<sup>21</sup> R. Simeon says: They were sinners for vowing Nazirite vows, as it is said, "And [the Priest] shall make expiation on his behalf for having sinned with respect to the corpse [(soul) ('al hannepesš)]" (Num 6:11): This sin is with respect to his own soul, for having abstained from wine.<sup>22</sup> And this is in accord with Simeon the Righteous,

18. The remainder of the story need not concern us here. For parallels, see the following: *p. Nazir* 5:5 (54b); *Gen Rab.* 91 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 115-17); *Eccl Rab.* 7:11. For historical discussion, see Goodblatt, "Agrippa I," 16-23; with which contrast Daniel R. Schwartz, *Agrippa I: The Last King of Judaea* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1987) 79, n. 5; both of which cite earlier treatments. Compare Acts 21:23-24, 26 and a similar story told by Josephus (*A.J.* 19.6.7 § 294) about King Agrippa I.

19. *m. Ned.* 1:1, cited above, to the effect that the righteous do not vow, but make freewill offerings.

20. *m. Ned.* 1:1.

21. See *t. Ned.* 1:1, cited above.

22. A similar interpretation is given in the name of R. Eleazar Hakappar, in *Sipre* Num 30.

who held the same view as that of R. Simeon [that Nazirites are sinners].<sup>23</sup>

R. Mana asked: Why should I care about Simeon the Righteous, even if he follows the view of R. Simeon? Did Simeon the Righteous never eat sin offerings for other types of offenses all his days?<sup>24</sup> Rather, because people vow in rashness, in the end they regret their vows, and because they regret their vows, when they bring their offerings they are like one who slaughters unconsecrated animals in the Temple Court. But this one vowed with integrity, his mouth and his heart acting in unison.<sup>25</sup>

BABYLONIAN TALMUD: BER. 63A

It has been taught: Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch] says: Why does the section of the Nazirite (Num 6:1-21) follow immediately after that of the unfaithful wife (Num 5:11-31)? To teach that whoever sees an unfaithful wife in her degradation should vow to abstain from wine.<sup>26</sup>

BABYLONIAN TALMUD: TA 'ANIT 11A-B

Said Samuel: Whoever undertakes [supererogatory] fasting is called a sinner. His reasoning was like that of the following tanna, as it is taught: R. Eleazar Hakappar B'Rabbi said: "And [the Priest] shall make expiation on his behalf for the sin that he committed through (against) the corpse (soul) ('al hannepesš)" (Num 6:11): Against which soul did he sin? Rather,

23. The story is next told about Simeon the Righteous's encounter with the Nazirite shepherd from the south. See *t. Nazir* 4:7, cited above. Thus, the reason that Simeon the Righteous never ate the trespass offering of a Nazirite except this once was because he, like R. Simeon of the Talmud, thought that Nazirites were sinners.

24. As a priest, he surely must have eaten many sacrifices brought because of sinful behavior. Parallels have R. Mana asking rhetorically, What is so different about the trespass offering of the defiled Nazirite that Simeon the Righteous should not eat it if he eats other trespass offerings for sinful behavior? See *b. Ned.* 9b-10a; *Num Rab.* 10:7.

25. In other words, unlike sin offerings that are brought in atonement for a sin, the offerings of Nazirites are often themselves sinful because they are offered resentfully at the conclusion of a vow that never should have been undertaken to begin with. However, R. Mana appears to reject the suggestion that Simeon the Righteous acted as he did out of agreement with R. Simeon (and R. Eleazar Hakappar), that Nazirites are by definition (according to Num 6:11) sinners. For this view, see Tosaphot to *b. Ned.* 9b-10a, as well as Halivni, "On the Supposed Anti-Asceticism," 243-52. The same combination of traditions is found, with only slight variation, in *p. Nazir* 1:6 (51c). R. Mana (ca. 350 C.E.) appears as R. Mani in *b. Ned.* 9b-10a, where part of his statement is attributed to R. Jonah, and as R. Muna in *Num Rab.* 10:7.

26. The obvious implication is that wine led to her unfaithfulness. A similar tradition seeks to explain why the mishnaic and talmudic tractate *Nazir* precedes that of *Soṭa* in the Order Women. See *b. Nazir* 2a; *Soṭa* 2a; *Num Rab.* 10:4.



[he sinned against his own soul] by denying himself wine.<sup>27</sup> And we can argue a fortiori: if this one who denies himself only wine is called a sinner, how much more so one who denies himself everything. R. Eleazar says: One who undertakes [supererogatory] fasting is called holy, as it is said [with regard to the Nazirite], "Holy shall be the uncut hair of his head" (Num 6:5). And if this one who only denied himself one thing is called holy, how much more so one who denies himself everything. How would Samuel explain the fact that [the Nazirite] is called [by Scripture] holy? This refers to the growth of the hair [and not to the Nazirite himself]. And how would R. Eleazar explain the fact that [the Nazirite] is called [by Scripture] a sinner? This refers to [a Nazirite] who defiled himself [through contact with a dead corpse]. Did R. Eleazar really say this? For has R. Eleazar not said: A person should always conduct himself as if holiness dwells in his stomach [and he should not harm that holiness by fasting], as it is said, "[I am] the holy one in your midst [innards]" (Hos 11:9). There is no contradiction [between the two teachings of R. Eleazar]. The first [that the Nazirite is holy] refers to one who is able to bear self-affliction; the second [that one who afflicts himself afflicts God's holiness] refers to one who is unable to bear self-affliction.<sup>28</sup> Resh Laqish said: [One who does not afflict himself] is called pious, as it is said, "A pious man treats his own self well, whereas the wicked causes harm to his flesh" (Prov 11:17). Rab Sheshet said: A disciple of the sages who undertakes supererogatory fasting, let a dog eat his meal. . . . Said R. Jeremiah bar Abba in the name of Resh Laqish: A disciple of the sages is not allowed to undertake [supererogatory] fasting, for he thereby diminishes [his ability to perform] his work for the sake of heaven.<sup>29</sup>

#### BABYLONIAN TALMUD: NED. 9B-10A

R. Jonah said to [R. Mani]:<sup>30</sup> The reason [that Simeon the Righteous did not eat the sacrifices of Nazirites] is as follows: When people regret [their sinful deeds] they become Nazirites, but when they are defiled [through contact with a corpse] and have to extend their Nazirite vows

27. See n. 15.

28. Compare John Chrysostom, *De Sacerdotio* 13.3 (PG 48:644), who distinguishes between lifetime Nazirites (ascetics) who have become accustomed to abstaining from "food, drink, and bed" and priests who have not.

29. Rashi explains that by such fasting he becomes weak and is unable to sustain his studies.

30. For the view of R. Mani (= Mana), see *p. Ned.* 1:1 (36d) cited above and n. 25.

[for a second term], they regret them and end up bringing [their concluding sacrifices] like unconsecrated offerings to the Temple Court.<sup>31</sup> If so, might not an undefiled Nazirite also [regret his vows and be like one who brings unconsecrated offerings to the Temple Court]? An undefiled Nazirite is not so, for he estimates his willpower [before deciding] how much he can vow.<sup>32</sup> . . . Said Abaye: Simeon the Righteous, R. Simeon, and R. Eleazar Hakappar all agree that the Nazirite is a sinner.<sup>33</sup>

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

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31. See *p. Ned.* 1:1 (36d), cited above, where this is the view of R. Mana.

32. This passage is preceded by the story of Simeon the Righteous and the Nazirite shepherd and is followed by the tradition of R. Judah about the early pious having vowed Nazirite vows in order to bring offerings and R. Simeon's denial of this. See *t. Nazir* 4:7, *t. Ned.* 1:1, and parallels, cited above.

33. The text continues by citing the tradition attributed to R. Eleazar Hakappar, that Num 6:11 refers to the Nazirite and by extension to all who afflict themselves with supererogatory abstinence. For this tradition, see *Sipre* Num 30 and *b. Ta'an.* 11a-b, cited above, and parallels. However, the Tosaphot to our passage differentiate between Simeon the Righteous and the others, arguing that Simeon the Righteous considered only a defiled Nazirite to be a sinner, for having vowed rashly, whereas the others consider all Nazirites to be sinners for having afflicted themselves, even if they did not defile themselves. See n. 25.

**PART THREE**

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**RITUAL AND  
REVELATION**



## *Hêkālôt Rabbātî* §§ 297–306: A Ritual for the Cultivation of the Prince of the Torah

### INTRODUCTION

In the visionary literature of ancient Jewish mysticism known as Merkavah mysticism, texts appear that concern the theurgic cultivation of an angel or "Prince" appointed over Torah (*šar-tôrâ*). This angel is said to impart the ability to learn and retain Torah at a prodigious rate. This literature can be seen as a kind of magic in the service of scholasticism. Nonetheless, these texts prescribe rituals similar to ascetic practices. The texts thus raise significant questions about the relationship between ascetic practice, magic, and theurgy.

The *šar-tôrâ* passage translated here is appended to *Hêkālôt Rabbātî*, a text that concerns the ascent to the Merkavah, the chariot-throne of God.<sup>1</sup> Whereas *Hêkālôt Rabbātî* and similar texts describe the practitioner's ascent to heaven, the *šar-tôrâ* tradition provides instructions for bringing an angel to earth.<sup>2</sup> Although pseudepigraphically attributed to rabbis of first- and second-century Palestine, our text was probably composed in Jewish Babylonia between the sixth and ninth centuries. Differences between the ritual practices, systems of purity, and liturgical

1. The texts of Merkavah mysticism, including *Hêkālôt Rabbātî*, are published in Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1981). All citations from Hekhalot literature in this essay and translation will follow the numbering of paragraphs in the *Synopse*. This translation is based primarily on MS Vatican 228. Other manuscripts are used where a clearer reading is available.

2. Cf. the ritual for the conjuration of the Angel of the Presence (*šar happānim*); see P. Schäfer, "Die Beschwörung des sar ha-panim. Kritische Edition und Übersetzung," *Frankfurter Jüdaistische Beiträge* 6 (1978) 107–45.

compositions in these texts and those of the Talmudic Rabbis suggest that they were not composed by the central shapers of Rabbinic Judaism.<sup>3</sup>

The narrative (I, §297–98) tells how, when the Second Temple was being built, the Jewish leaders compelled God to reveal to them the secret of the praxis for success in learning.<sup>4</sup> The Temple, habitation of the Divine Presence (*šekinâ*), is an appropriate setting for the revelation of this secret.<sup>5</sup>

The praxis (II) consists of two stages: (1) a preparatory ritual (§299) and (2) the recitation of the names of angels (§300–302) in daily prayer.<sup>6</sup> A numinous hymn (III) is appended in §306;<sup>7</sup> §304–5 (IV) testifies to the benefits and efficacy of the praxis. The preparatory ritual requires a supererogatory level of ritual purity. After cleansing himself from impurity, the practitioner is to refrain from vegetables<sup>8</sup> and eat bread “of his own hands.”<sup>9</sup> The efficacy of the praxis, however, resides in the incantatory recitation of the names of the angels.

This phenomenon differs from what is commonly seen as asceticism

3. The constant emphasis in the text that the study of Torah is burdensome also suggests that its authors were not accustomed to the life of the academy.

4. In a section preceding this narrative (§281–94), Israel complains of the double burden of building the Temple and engaging in study. God, looking upon from heaven, declares that he recognizes their plight and will reveal them the secret of acquiring Torah rapidly; he does so over the objection of the angels.

5. In *Hekalôt Rabbati*, Rabbi Nehunia ben ha-Qanah discloses the secrets of ascent in the Temple. On that passage and the role of purity in ascent to the Merkavah, see L. H. Schiffman, “The Recall of Rabbi Nehunia ben ha-Qanah from Ecstasy in the ‘Hekhalot Rabbati,’” *AJS Review* 1 (1976) 269–81; and S. Lieberman, “The Knowledge of Halakha by the author (or authors) of the *Heikhaloth*,” in I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1980) 241–44. On the function of the Temple cult in attracting the Divine Presence, see B. A. Levine, *In The Presence of the Lord* (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1974). In our text, the secrets are revealed through Zerubbabel, who was the subject of numerous apocalyptic legends in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. “Zerubbabel” and “Zerubbabel Apocalypse”; L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946–47) 4:351–52, 6:437–39.

6. These divine names are referred to as the Awesome Crown and the Great Seal. On these terms, see G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 2d ed. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1965) 69.

7. Cf. the role of liturgical prayer in Merkavah mysticism, see M. D. Swartz, “*Alay le-shabbah*: A Liturgical Prayer in *Ma’aseh Merkavah*,” *JQR* 77 (1986–87) 179–80.

8. Other *šar-tôrâ* rituals require the petitioner to avoid garlic or onions, foods that may cause bodily odors; see §489 in the *Synopse*. Greco-Roman magical and dream incubation texts prescribe avoidance of fresh foods that are hard to digest. See R. Arbesmann, “Fasting and Prophecy in Pagan and Christian Antiquity,” *Traditio* 7 (1949) 1–71, esp. 9–27.

9. This requirement may be to ensure that the bread is not kneaded by a woman and thus contract menstrual impurity; cf. §572 in Schäfer, *Synopse*, from an Aramaic *šar-tôrâ* text.

in Judaism and in the Greco-Roman world in that the praxis is not an exemplary way of life, but preparation for an extraordinary experience.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, we should not dismiss the *šar-tôrâ* phenomenon as unrelated to that historical context. In the Mediterranean world, fasting and self-denial were common forms of preparation for mantic and theurgic activity.<sup>11</sup> In ancient Judaism, ritual purity functioned to ward off demonic forces and allow the practitioner to be in the presence of divine beings.<sup>12</sup>

It has been argued that in many societies in late antiquity, the ascetic functioned as a bulwark of defense against the demons and as a spiritual athlete imbued with wondrous powers.<sup>13</sup> In Babylonian Jewish society the rabbi, with the power of his Torah, was similarly seen as a numinous figure.<sup>14</sup> The theurgists of the *šar-tôrâ* sought to appropriate some of that power through the direct agency of the angel of the Torah.

## TRANSLATION

### I. THE SECRET OF THE TORAH IS REVEALED

(§297) Rabbi Ishmael said: Thus said Rabbi Akiba to me in the name of Rabbi Eliezer the Great: Our fathers had not taken it upon themselves to put one stone on top of another in the Temple of YHWH until they compelled and obliged the King of the universe and all his servants to reveal to them the secret of the Torah: how it is performed, how it is expounded, how it is used.

At once the Holy Spirit appeared from the third entrance in the House of YHWH—for the *Šekinâ* did not descend and dwell in the Holy of Holies because of the decree. When our fathers saw the Throne of Glory,

10. Cf. S. Fraade, “Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism,” in A. Green, *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible to the Middle Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 253–88.

11. On this point, see especially Arbesmann, “Fasting and Prophecy.”

12. In *b. Yoma* 4b, Exod 24:15 is interpreted to mean that the cloud purged Moses of food “to make him like the ministering angels.” See S. Lowy, “The Motivation of Fasting in Talmudic Literature,” *JJS* 9 (1958) 20, n. 11, and the sources cited there. Other traditions state that eating and drinking were unnecessary at Sinai because Moses and the Elders were nourished by the light of the *Šekinâ*. See I. Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1982); D. Goodman, “Do Angels Eat?” *JJS* 37 (1986) 160–75.

13. P. Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *JRS* 71 (1971) 82–101.

14. J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* 5 (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1970).

which was elevated and stood between the entrance hall<sup>15</sup> and the altar—for until then they had not yet constructed a building, but [it appeared] over a place of plans,<sup>16</sup> on which the hall of the Temple and the altar, and the whole Temple were to be completed<sup>17</sup>—

(§298) When our fathers saw the Throne of Glory, which was elevated inside it, hovering between the hall and the altar, and the King of the universe upon it, they immediately fell to their faces. And at that moment he said:

“The Glory of this latter House shall be greater than that of the former one.<sup>18</sup> For in the first sanctuary I was not bound to my children, except by this voice. O, my sons, if you only would! Why do you prostrate and fall to your faces? Get up and be seated before My Throne, the way you sit in council.<sup>19</sup> Take the crown, accept the seal,<sup>20</sup> and learn the secret of the Torah: how you shall perform it, how you shall expound it, how you shall use it. Raise the paths of your heart; let your hearts look into Torah.”

At once Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel stood up before him like an interpreter<sup>21</sup> and elaborated the names of the Prince of the Torah, one by one, with his name, the name of his crown, and the name of his seal.

## II. THE PRAXIS

(§299) Rabbi Ishmael said: Thus said Rabbi Akiba to me in the name of Rabbi Eliezer the Great: Whoever wishes to bind himself to the Prince of the Torah<sup>22</sup> must wash his garments and cloaks and perform a stringent immersion [rendering him free] from any doubt of nocturnal pollution. He must enter and sit twelve days in a room or attic. He may not come or go, nor may he eat or drink; but every evening he shall eat clean bread of his own hands, and drink water, and not taste any kind of vegetable.

15. Heb. *'ulam*. See Ezek 40:49.

16. Referring perhaps to the place where the plan for the temple was laid out; cf. Ezek 43:11. See P. Schäfer, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur 2* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1987), 284, nn. 34 and 35.

17. This parenthetical note seems to be a gloss explaining how the Throne could appear in a specific location in the Temple if it had not yet been built.

18. Hag 2:9.

19. Heb. *yēšivā*, a court session of sages.

20. The “crown and the seal” are the potent names listed below (§302).

21. Heb. *turgēman* (dragoman). The reference is to the interpreter of the Torah in the ancient Temple and synagogue who would both translate and interpret the scriptures and proclaim the interpretation in a loud voice. Cf. Neh 8:8.

22. That is, obligate the angel to him theurgically.

(§300) Then he shall recite the midrash<sup>23</sup> of the Prince of the Torah regularly in his prayer three times every day after the Prayer,<sup>24</sup> which he shall recite from beginning to end. And afterwards, he must sit and repeat it for the twelve days of his fast, from morning to evening; he shall not be silent<sup>25</sup> at any time. When he finishes it, he shall stand on his feet. He must adjure the servants and their King twelve times for each Prince. After that, he must adjure them by a seal for each one of them.

(§301) And these are their names. He shall say: ŠQDHWZY'Y YWY, the Prince; ZHPNWRY'Y YWY, the Prince; ZHWBDY'L YWY, the Prince; ABYRGHWDRY'W YWY, the Prince; NYHPDRYW'YLYY YWY, the Prince; HDRYWN YWY, the Prince; 'ZBWDH'Y YWY, the Prince; TTRWSY'Y YWY, the Prince; 'ŠRWLY'Y YWY, the Prince; SGNSG' YWY, the Prince; PLYTRYHW YWY, the Prince; DHYBYRWN YWY, the Prince; and 'DYRYRWN YWY, the Prince.<sup>26</sup>

(§302) He must adjure them, these twelve,

In the name of Yofiel, glory of the world by the authority of his King, and in the name of Sarviel, who is one of the princes of the Merkavah; and in the name of Shahadriel, beloved Prince; and in the name of Ḥasdiel, who is called to the Divine Power six times every day.

Then he shall go back and adjure those last four by the Great Seal and by the Great Oath and by the name 'Azbogah,<sup>27</sup> which is the Great Seal, and in the name of ŠWRṬQ, holy name and awesome crown.

(§303) At the end of twelve days, he may proceed to any aspect of Torah he requests: whether to Scriptures or Mishnah, or gazing at the Merkavah. For he goes forth in a pure state, and from great abstinence and affliction. For we have in hand a teaching, a decree of the forebears and a tradition of the ancients, who wrote it down and left it for the generations, so that the humble could make use of it. Whoever is worthy is answered by them.

23. This term, which commonly means rabbinic exegesis of the Bible, is used here to refer either to this pericope, including the narrative, or to the list of names of angels to be recited. The *Shi'ur Qômā* instructs the reader to “repeat this Mishnah (teaching).” See M. S. Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983).

24. That is, the petitionary prayers of the statutory rabbinic liturgy, known as *hattēpillā*, “The Prayer,” or the *Amidā*, “the prayer recited while standing.”

25. That is, he should not pause in repeating the prayer.

26. Note that there are actually thirteen names in this list. The names vary from one manuscript to another.

27. On this name see Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 66–67.

### III. TESTIMONY TO THE SUCCESS OF THE PRAXIS<sup>28</sup>

(§304) Rabbi Ishmael said: Thus said Rabbi Akiba to me in the name of Rabbi Eliezer the Great: Happy is he, the merit of whose fathers is his aid and the just deeds of whose children stand on his behalf. He may make use of the majesty of the crown, and of this seal; they are obliged to him, and he is exalted by the majesty of the Torah.

(§305) Rabbi Ishmael said: This spell<sup>29</sup> was performed by Rabbi Eliezer and he was answered, but he did not believe it. He returned and it was performed by me, and I did not believe it, until I brought a certain fool and he became equal to me [in learning]. It was done again by the shepherds, and they became equal to me.

They sent Rabbi Akiba out of the land [of Israel], by authority of a court, and he was detained until it was done by the populace, who could not read or recite, and they were made equal to wise scholars. [Rabbi Akiba] came and supported and agreed to the testimony of the court, saying: "This thing was even done outside of the land, and it was successful." Thus Rabbi Eliezer the Great and the sages said, "perhaps we have the merit of the land of Israel in our favor."<sup>30</sup> They did not believe it until they sent Rabbi Akiba to Babylonia and it was performed and it succeeded. He gave witness, and afterward we heard and rejoiced.

#### IV. Prayer

(§306) Rabbi Ishmael said: How shall a man begin before he prays this [ritual of] the Prince of the Torah? When he stands to pray, he should say:

May you be glorified, uplifted and exalted, glorious King,<sup>31</sup>  
for you dwell over a throne high and exalted, awesome and fearsome,  
in the lofty chambers of the magnificent palace.  
The servants of your Throne are awestruck  
and the heavens at your footstool tremble,

28. Paragraphs §304 and 305 are additions to the text that appear in three of the principal manuscripts.

29. Heb. *dāvār*, "utterance."

30. That is, perhaps the merit of the Land of Israel is responsible for the success of the praxis.

31. Most manuscripts elide several lines of this hymn; MS Oxford 1531 notes that a portion of the prayer is contained in chap. 7 of *Hekhalot Rabbati* (= §153 in the *Synopse*). The translation of this passage is taken from MS Budapest 238, augmented by the parallel text in Schäfer §153.

every day, with the sound of hymn,  
and in a melodious roar and a tumultuous song,  
as it is written, "Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of Hosts,  
The whole earth is full of His glory."<sup>32</sup>

And they say:

Who does not exalt you, O King, awesome and feared by all your servants?  
In shaking and trembling they serve you;  
in agitation and quaking, they are awestruck before you  
with corresponding expression,<sup>33</sup> in unison  
they exclaim your awesome name in dread and fear.  
None is earlier and none is later—anyone who delays his voice past  
another's even a hair's breadth  
is immediately cast aside,  
and a flame of fire thrusts him away.  
As it is written, "Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of Hosts,  
The whole earth is full of His glory."<sup>34</sup>

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

(Note: A German translation of this passage can be found in Schäfer, *Übersetzung*. The *šar-tôrâ* materials have not been the subject of a separate study apart from the Merkavah traditions. A discussion of this passage is found in Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic*, 169–73. Halperin, *Faces of the Chariot*, which was unavailable at the time of this writing, includes an extensive discussion of this material. On Hekhalot Rabbati, see also Smith, "Observations," and Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism*.

For an introduction to Merkavah mysticism, see Scholem, *Major Trends and Jewish Gnosticism*; Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic*; and Dan, "Religious Experience." The best discussion of asceticism in ancient Judaism is Fraade, "Ascetical Aspects"; Lowy, "Fasting," and Montgomery, "Ascetic Strains" are also valuable. On the influence of the ancient Jewish concept of purity on these traditions, see Levine, "Presence of God" and *In the Presence of the Lord*, and Neusner, *Idea of Purity*. Familiarity with the Jewish magical tradition is important for an understanding of the *šar-tôrâ* material; on this, see Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*.)

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32. Isa 6:3.

33. Heb. *Gezêrâ šawwâ*. In rabbinic exegetical terminology, an argument by analogy. Here the poet refers to choruses of angels facing each other, singing in unison.

34. Isa 6:3.