

Dangerous Ascents: Rabbi Akiba's Water Warning and Late Antique Cosmological Traditions

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“When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, do not say ‘Water, Water’ for it is said, ‘The speaker of lies shall not be established before my eyes.’”
(Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 14b)

With this terse warning, the Talmud enlightened and terrified the intrepid Jewish mystics of its day. For those brave individuals who even contemplated making a heavenly journey in Late Antiquity, there were confusing, even contradictory, traditions about what one should expect to see along the way. This article will examine some of these traditions in order to better understand the background and significance of the enigmatic water warning.

The topic of early Jewish polemics still requires a great deal of scholarly research and analysis. Unlike their counterparts, the early Christian heresiologists, who frequently described the heresies they were attacking in great detail, the rabbis often employed a more elliptical and subtle approach. Indeed, it may be argued that certain rabbinic polemics are in themselves esoteric and were only intended to be understood by a limited audience of savants.

In such cases, the rabbis adopted a terse, even enigmatic approach, at least to the eyes of the average reader. This method was, in fact, highly pragmatic since explicitly describing the doctrine or practice under attack might actually encourage people to engage in heresy, even unintentionally introducing some readers to heretical positions for the first time. Such polemics are therefore directed to

those Jews who already know and in some sense appreciate the views considered heretical and can read between the lines of a more subtle attack. These individuals do not require explicit description to identify the target of the polemic and may even be more receptive to a less direct approach.

The chief argument of this article is that the talmudic water warning should be viewed within this broader tradition of esoteric rabbinic polemics.¹ To anticipate my conclusion, the warning is a sophisticated and compact refutation of a commonly accepted cosmological view in Late Antiquity, namely, that the heavenly traveler will encounter a body of water which, according to some traditions, must be overcome by the individual in order to successfully complete his ascent. Instead of real water, the Talmud warns the traveler that he will only encounter an illusion of water. This knowledge separates the true mystic from the pretender.

In addition to the Babylonian Talmud, the water episode appears in several places in the Hekhalot literature, including *Synopse* §§259, 345, 408–410, and 672. Unlike the talmudic account, all but one² of the Hekhalot passages locate the water at the sixth palace (*hekkhal*) and several³ threaten decapitation or mutilation by “iron axes” to those foolish enough to mistake the “stones of pure marble” for water.⁴

¹ I am currently working on a series of essays devoted to the topic of esoteric rabbinic polemics.

² Like the talmudic account, *Synopse* §672 does not mention the sixth hekkhal. As Peter Schäfer, *Hekhalot-Studien*, Tübingen, 1988, p. 244, has already noted, however, *Synopse* §672, “obviously cites the version from the Babylonian Talmud.”

³ *Synopse* §§408 and 410 mention mutilation of the head and decapitation by iron axes, respectively. *Synopse* §259 declares that “they throw upon him thousands and thousands of iron axes.” *Synopse* §§409 and 345 are more vague.

⁴ The relationship between the talmudic and Hekhalot versions of the episode has been discussed by numerous scholars, including Gershom Scholem, who writes in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1961, p. 53, that “Nothing could be more farfetched than to treat it [one of the Hekhalot versions] as a *post festum* interpretation of the Talmudic passage.”; Ephraim Urbach, “Ha-Mesorot 'al Torat-ha-Sod be-Tequmat ha-Tannaim,” in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem*, Jerusalem, 1967, p. 16 (Hebrew), who counters that the Hekhalot passages are “nothing but an adaptation” of the Talmudic account; Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, Leiden, 1980, p. 88, who argues that the Hekhalot sources preserve the tradition more extensively and originally than the Talmud;

The significance of the water warning has long been debated.⁵ According to Gershom Scholem, "The authenticity of the story's core, the ecstatic's vision of water, hardly requires proof."⁶ Against Scholem, Ephraim Urbach interprets the illusion of the waters as an allegorical warning against *Sobria Ebrietas*, instead of an actual ecstatic vision.⁷ André Neher and Johann Maier both argue that the water episode reflects a shift of rabbinic descriptions of the Temple in Jerusalem to a celestial Temple, whose "stones of marble" give the appearance of water.⁸ Peter Schäfer asserts that "The original *Sitz im Leben* [of the water episode] was certainly the examination of the adept" rather than an ecstatic vision achieved during heavenly ascent.⁹

David Halperin proposes what is perhaps the most complex explanation for the water episode. Halperin draws on the Gnostic motif of the divine image which is "captured" in the primordial

Peter Schäfer, *Hekhalot-Studien*, pp. 244–245, who postulates that the Hekhalot versions of the water episode represent an independent tradition vis-à-vis the Babylonian Talmud and, furthermore, argues that the water episode originally existed outside of the *pardes* tradition and was only combined with it after the *pardes* story had been recast as an ascent; and David Halperin, who, in *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, New Haven, 1980, p. 88, follows Urbach in declaring the Hekhalot accounts "later efforts to interpret BT's cryptic narrative." Halperin changes his view in *The Faces of the Chariot*, Tübingen, 1988, however, where he concludes that the earliest form of the tradition is *Synopsis* §259, which does not link the illusion of the water with the marble stones or the *pardes*. Furthermore, on p. 210, Halperin declares that "Precisely because text I [i.e. *Synopsis* §259] gives no hint that it is directly linked to BT Hag. 14b, we can use it with some confidence as an independent witness to the ideas underlying that source. It is surely, as Scholem says, no *post festum* interpretation of the Talmudic passage." See also, Joseph Dan, "The Entrance to the Sixth Gate," in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6, 1–2, Jerusalem, 1987, pp. 197–220 (Hebrew).

⁵ The most extensive and best review of scholarship on the water episode is R. Reichman, "Die 'Wasser-Episode' in der Hekhalot-Literatur," *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 16, 1989, pp. 67–100.

⁶ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 53.

⁷ Ephraim Urbach, "Ha-Mesorot 'al Torat ha-Sod be-Tequfat ha-Tannaim," p. 17.

⁸ André Neher, "Le voyage mystique des quatre," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* CXL, 1951, pp. 59–82; Johann Maier, "Das Gefährdungsmotiv bei der Himmelsreise in der jüdischen Apokalyptik und 'Gnosis'," *Kairos* 5 (1), 1963, pp. 18–40.

⁹ Peter Schäfer, *Hekhalot-Studien*, p. 245.

waters and becomes part of them. If water existed at the sixth hekhal, then the image of the Merkabah projected onto this water might be materialized and degraded, like the Gnostic deity. Or, as Halperin writes, "The merkabah that appears in the waters has become part of the waters. Far from protecting us against chaos, it becomes part of chaos. Like the Gnostic divinity, it has become degraded in some unspeakable and possibly irreversible way."¹⁰

Therefore, it was critical that the existence of water beneath the Merkabah be rejected. At a later stage, the illusion of water was linked to the "pure stones of marble," which, according to Halperin, ultimately represent the frozen waters of chaos which have been transformed into building blocks for the celestial Temple. By mistaking these stones as flowing water, the mystic admits that "chaos is still potent. This admission is too dreadful to be tolerated."

In the following pages, I will propose my own interpretation of the water warning in light of Jewish, Christian, Gnostic, and Mandaean traditions. The view that one encounters water in heaven was common in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. For example, the Testament of Levi 2:7 declares, "And I entered from the first heaven and saw a huge sea hanging there"; the Testament of Abraham Recension B 8 has, "And Michael went out and took Abraham in the body on a cloud and lifted him up to the river Ocean"; while 2 Enoch 3:3 states, "They placed me on the first heaven and showed me a very great sea, greater than the earthly sea."¹¹

While these passages merely mention the existence of heavenly water, Rev. 22:1 likens the heavenly water to crystal: "he showed

¹⁰ David Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, p. 235. Halperin also links the warning against seeing water immediately before arriving at the Merkabah with the combination of the Red Sea and the Merkabah which preceded Israel's creation of the golden calf.

¹¹ See Christopher Rowland's discussion of these traditions and their possible relationship with R. Akiba's warning in "The Visions of God in Apocalyptic Literature," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 10, 1979, pp. 147-149 and *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity*, New York, 1982, pp. 225ff.

me a river of living water as clear as crystal proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb," and Rev. 4:6 describes "a sea of glass like unto crystal."¹² Christopher Rowland has traced the apocalyptic identification of heavenly water with crystal to the combination of biblical verses such as Ez. 1:22, where the firmament between God and the *hayyot* is likened to crystal and Gen. 1:7, where the upper and lower waters in heaven are separated by a firmament. As Rowland writes, "Indeed the link between the water and the firmament here [in Gen. 1:7] could explain the resemblance of the sea in Rev. 4 to crystal, for the juxtaposition of water and the firmament in Gen. could easily have led to the comparison of the firmament to crystal found in Ez. 1, 22."¹³

The warning against mistaking the "stones of pure marble" for water may have been directed against the well established apocalyptic tradition which located water in heaven, particularly since this tradition was appropriated by Christian sources.¹⁴ Indeed, the "stones of pure marble" which appear like water may be interpreted as an ironic reversal, even a refutation, of the heavenly water which appears like crystal in the Book of Revelation. Although the pure marble is not crystal, *per se*, the illusory relationship between the clear stone and the waters in R. Akiba's warning is a mirror image of the heavenly water which only *appears* like crystal.

While the mere existence of heavenly water in apocalyptic (and, in particular, Christian apocalyptic) visionary traditions may have inspired R. Akiba's warning, there were other sources which provided equally, if not more provocative depictions of heavenly water. Indeed, Gedaliahu Stroumsa has already suggested that R. Akiba's warning may have been directed against contemporary Gnostic conceptions of heavenly water, sometimes located at the

¹² Actually, the "sea of glass like unto crystal" in Rev. 4:6 is not really water at all, but a "crystal like" substance. Rev. 15:2 also refers to a "sea of glass" but omits the reference to crystal.

¹³ "The Visions of God in Apocalyptic Literature," p. 148.

¹⁴ Not enough is known about the attitudes of the Merkabah mystics to apocalyptic traditions. Although both movements share common themes and motifs, it is also possible that some tension arose over particular issues which were adopted by Christian apocalyptic circles.

end of the ecstatic ascent. Stroumsa cites two Gnostic texts, Justin's *Book of Baruch* (Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.26 and 5:27.3) and the treatise *Melchizedek* (CG IX 8:1), where the image of "waters that are above" corresponding to waters from below, appears.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Gnostic treatise *Zostrianos* (CG VIII 18-5-9) mentions the presence of water at the end of the ecstatic ascent: "The great male invisible perfect Mind, the First-Appearing One, has his own water, as you [will see] when you arrive at his place." Stroumsa proposes that R. Akiba's warning may thus have been directed "against behavior similar to that of the Gnostics."¹⁶

In addition to Stroumsa's suggestion of Gnostic influence, I would like to offer another possible source for R. Akiba's warning: Mandaeanism. In Mandaean cosmology, the World of Light is separated from the physical cosmos by a body of water called the *hafiqia mia* or "water brooks" (Ger. *Wasserbäche*).¹⁷ The throne of Abathur, the figure who judges human souls and determines whether they may enter the World of Light, is located at "the gate of the House of Life" immediately below the *hafiqia mia*.¹⁸

And the world of Abathur is below the world of the outflowing waters [*hafiqia mia*], and the world of outflowing waters below the world of the pure Yushamin. [*ualma d abatur mn atutia alma d bhafiqia mia ualma d bhafiqia mia mn atutia alma d yushamin dakia*]¹⁹

Beneath the *hafiqia mia* lie seven or eight "watchhouses" or *mattarta*, which function as both dwelling places for a variety of demons and purgatories for the ascending soul.²⁰ Once the soul

¹⁵ "Aher: A Gnostic," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, Vol. II, ed. Bentley Layton, Leiden, 1981, p. 817.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ E. S. Drower, *The Canonical PrayerBook of the Mandaeans*, Leiden, 1959, p. 45, n. 6, writes, "*Hafiqia mia*, the name of the river of departure, of death, which is the frontier of the worlds of light. In the *Diwan Abatur* a ship ferries souls across this river."

¹⁸ E. S. Drower, *The Canonical PrayerBook of the Mandaeans*, Leiden, 1959, p. 7.

¹⁹ E. S. Drower, *The Thousand and Twelve Questions (Alf Trisar Shuialia)*, Berlin, 1960, English, p. 163; Mandaic, p. 45.

²⁰ In *Theogonie, Kosmogonie und Anthropogonie in den mandäischen Schriften*, Göttingen, 1965, p. 130, Rudolph charts the position of the *hafiqia mia* in the

has ascended through the *matarta* to the "gate of the House of Life," Abathur tests the soul to determine whether it is worthy to enter the Pleroma (i.e. the "House of Life"). If the soul is worthy, then it is helped over the *hafiqia mia* into the House of Light, if it is unworthy, then the soul is overcome by the *hafiqia mia* and remains in one of the purgatories, receiving punishment until the final judgement.

The origin of the *hafiqia mia* has long been traced to Persian sources. In *Das Schicksal der Seele nach dem Tode nach mandäischen und parsischen Vorstellungen*,²¹ Wilhelm Brandt hypothesized that the location and function of the *hafiqia mia* were modeled on the Persian "stream of tears" which the soul must cross over after death.²² In a Pahlavi text called *Sad Dar*, we find the "stream of tears" described as follows:

The ninety-sixth subject is this, when any one departs to that other world it is not proper for others that they should utter an outcry, maintain grief, and make lamentation and weeping. Because every tear that issues from the eyes becomes one drop of that river before the Kinvad bridge, and then the soul of that dead person remains at that place; it is difficult for it to make a passage there, and it is not able to pass over the Kinvad bridge.²³

As support for the parallel between the *hafiqia mia* and the "stream of tears," Brandt expanded his comparison to include the above mentioned "Kinvad bridge" which linked the physical world with the after life in Persian religion. Based on several passages in the *Ginza Raba* and *Mandaean Book of John*,²⁴ Brandt argued for the existence of an analogous "fixed bridge" in the Mandaean sources, which traversed the *hafiqia mia*.²⁵

various cosmological schemes found in the Mandaean sources. Also see, Svend Pallis, *Mandaean Studies*, Amsterdam, 1974 (Reprint), p. 78.

²¹ *Das Schicksal der Seele nach dem Tode nach mandäischen und parsischen Vorstellungen, Jahrbücher für protestantische Theologie*, XVIII, Braunschweig, 1892, pp. 405–38, 575–603.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 427–429.

²³ *Sad Dar*, Sec. 96:1–2, as cited in Pallis, *Mandaean Studies*, p. 75. Also see, *Das Schicksal der Seele*, pp. 427–428.

²⁴ For a list of the passages and their important features, see Pallis, *Mandaean Studies*, p. 85.

²⁵ See Wilhelm Brandt, *Die mandäische Religion, ihre Entwicklung und geschichtliche Bedeutung*, Leipzig, 1889, p. 76.

However, as Svend Pallis has pointed out, instead of referring to a fixed bridge such as the Kinvad, Mandaean sources valorize the ritual of baptism²⁶ as a symbolic “bridge” to the Pleroma, an observation which leads Pallis to argue “against the existence of a fixed bridge like the Kinvad, which everybody must cross.”²⁷ Pallis continues his critique of Brandt’s position by rejecting the parallel between the *hafiqia mia* and the “stream of tears” because it is strongly linked to the erroneous parallel between the Kinvad bridge and a non-existent Mandaean analog: “Neither am I able to agree with him [Brandt] when he declares that the idea of “the waters of Life” [Pallis’ translation of *hafiqia mia*] originated in the Pers. stream of tears, as this opinion is based on the assumption that *b’ApikiA mi’A* is the water under the Kinvad bridge.”²⁸ Unfortunately, Pallis does not offer a convincing alternative to Brandt’s clearly flawed theory for the origin of the *hafiqia mia*.²⁹

Instead of a “Persian” theory of origin, a biblical source for the Mandaean *hafiqia mia* offers many advantages. Foremost among them is the linguistic analogy between the Mandaic *hafiqia mia* and the Hebrew expressions *afiqe mayim* and *afiqe yam*, whose relevant biblical appearances occur in Psalms 18 and II Samuel 22, respectively. In these parallel passages, the terms *afiqe yam* and *afiqe mayim* signify the cosmic waters which must be re-defeated by God in order to save the righteous individual, who is “drawn up out of the mighty waters” by God.

²⁶ In Mandaean sources, the name “Jordan” is given to any body of water which is used for baptism. In addition to the earthly rivers which are called Jordan, the soul is baptised in like-named celestial counterparts during its ascent.

²⁷ Pallis, *Mandaean Studies*, p. 85. The Zoroastrian motif of a bridge to the after life was, however, adopted by Manichaean sources, such as the following Manichaean prayer cited by Hans-Joachim Klimkeit in *Gnosis on the Silk Road: Gnostic Texts from Central Asia*, San Francisco, 1993, p. 18, “May the bridge be wide, I would cross it without hesitation (lit., doubt).”

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Pallis’ hypothesis concerning the origin of the *hafiqia mia*, namely that *hafiqia mia* was the ancient name for the waters of baptism, which later became identified with the Jordan, and his subsequent translation of *hafiqia mia* as “the waters of Life,” are problematic, though interesting. See Pallis, *Mandaean Studies*, p. 24.

In order to uncover the overall relevance of the biblical tradition to the Mandaean sources, the passages must be cited at length:

I. II Samuel 22:5–29

- 5 For the breakers of Death encompassed me,
The torrents of Belial terrified me;
- 6 The snares of Sheol encircled me,
The toils of Death engulfed me.
- 7 In my anguish I called on the Lord,
Cried out to my God;
In His Abode [*bekhalo*] He heard my voice,
My cry entered His ears . . .
- 14 The LORD thundered forth from heaven . . .
- 16 The bed of the sea [*afiqe yam*] was exposed,
The foundations of the world were laid bare . . .
- 17 He reached down from on high, He took me,
Drew me out of the mighty waters [*mayim rabim*]³⁰

II. Psalms 18:4–29

- 5 Ropes of Death encompassed me;
torrents of Belial terrified me;
ropes of Sheol encircled me;
snares of Death confronted me;
- 7 In my distress I called on the LORD,
cried out to my God;
in His temple [*bekhalo*] He heard my voice;
my cry to Him reached His ears . . .
- 14 Then the LORD thundered from heaven . . .
- 16 The ocean bed [*afiqe mayim*] was exposed;
the foundations of the world were laid bare . . .
- 17 He reached down from on high, He took me;
He drew me out of the mighty waters [*mayim rabim*]³¹

The biblical passages employ a number of terms to signify the destructive waters which threaten to overwhelm David, including the parallel expressions *afiqe yam* (II Sam. 22) and *afiqe mayim*

³⁰ As translated in *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, New York, 1985.

³¹ *Ibid.*

(Ps. 18). In order to save David from these waters, God descends on a cherub from his *bekhal*, shooting lightning, roaring, and blasting his breath. After exposing the *afiqe mayimlyam*, God reaches down and draws David out of the “mighty waters”.

Similar depictions of a divine being reaching down and saving individuals from destructive cosmic waters are found throughout Mandaean literature, where these waters are called by the Mandaean name *hafiqia mia* (=Heb. *afiqe mayim*). For example, in *The Canonical PrayerBook*, we find the following descriptions of the soul’s rescue from the *hafiqia mia*:

I. She [the soul] proceeded in the vesture of Yuzataq-Manda-d-Hiia and went onwards and reached the Waters of Death [*hafiqia mia*]. The waters covered her, (*but*) Radiance [*ziwa*] crossed over – his name abode in his *skinta*: honoured and chosen, he created himself – and said “Life, I am Thine, and for Thy name’s sake came I forth from the world of Pthail, from amongst evil plots and from beneath the throne of Abathur the Ancient, so that we may bring out this soul of N. of this *masiqta* (so that) she cometh before him”.

He is a ray of the great radiance of Life, a being who resteth upon the *skintas*, and upon the *skintas* doth his name rest.

He graspeth her [the soul] with the palm of his right hand and handeth her over to two ‘uthras, sons of light, to Adatan and Yadatan, of one *gnosis* and one mind.³²

II. The soul flieth and travelleth on until she reacheth spirits of Purgatory [*mataraiaa*]. The spirits of Purgatory abased their heads and the soul passed the purgatory-spirits by. The soul flieth and goeth until she came to the waters of death [*hafiqia mia*] there came forth towards her a great beam of radiance (and) of life, (*who*) grasped her by the palm of her right hand and brought her over the waters of death [*hafiqia mia*]. The soul flieth and goeth until she reacheth the House of Life.³³

The thematic³⁴ and terminological parallels between the biblical and Mandaean passages cited above suggest a connection between the biblical conception of the *afiqe mayimlyam* and the Mandaean *hafiqia mia*. The degree of biblical knowledge possessed by the Mandaeans is debatable, but it is generally acknowledged

³² *Canonical PrayerBook*, pp. 45–46.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 62–63.

³⁴ For example, in II Sam. 22:29 and Ps. 18:29, after God saves David from the waters, God is described as a “lamp” which lights up the darkness. This biblical light imagery recalls Mandaean depictions of a divine light being who saves souls from the *hafiqia mia*.

that the Mandaeans possessed at least as much knowledge of the Hebrew Bible as their Western Gnostic cousins. Even Edwin Yamauchi, who downplays the influence of Judaism on Mandaeism, in general, notes that "the Mandaeans' knowledge of the Old Testament was more extensive – if not more intensive – than that of many Gnostics whose knowledge seems not to have exceeded the prediluvian section of Genesis."³⁵ According to Yamauchi, a survey of Mandaean literature reveals an acquaintance with the early sections of Genesis, the Exodus from Egypt, several Psalms (22 and 114), and numerous biblical figures, including (but not limited to) Adam, Eve, Abraham, Moses, and Solomon.³⁶

Even if the similarities between the Mandaean *hafaqia mia* and the biblical *afiqe mayim/yan* are coincidental, however, the resonance between the two traditions would almost certainly have struck any contemporary Jew aware of both the biblical and Mandaean material. The degree of knowledge and contact between the Mandaean and Jewish communities in late antique and early medieval Babylonia is unknown. However, their geographical proximity, the great similarity between their dialects of Aramaic, and the generally syncretistic atmosphere of the Near East during Late Antiquity (particularly in esoteric areas) indicate the great potential for such contact. Indeed, there is evidence that some Mandaeans were aware of Jewish esoteric traditions and, in one case, even commissioned a Mandaic incantation bowl depicting Metatron, the most important angelic figure in the Merkabah tradition.³⁷

³⁵ E. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences*, Grand Rapids, 1973, p. 136.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 136–137. Also see Eric Segelberg, "Old and New Testament Figures in Mandaean Version," in *Syncretism*, ed. Sven Hartman, Stockholm, 1969; Edith Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*, Oxford, 1937, pp. 259–265; K. Rudolph, "Ein Grundtyp gnostischer Urmensch-Adam Spekulation," *Zeitschrift für Religion und Geistesgeschichte* 9, 1957.

³⁷ One of the Mandaic incantation bowls mentions "Metatron who serves before the curtain [*bargod* in Mand. = *pargod* in Hebrew]." See, W.S. McCullough, *Jewish and Mandaean Incantation Bowls in the Royal Ontario Museum*, Toronto, 1967, Text D, pp. 28–47. This fragment has been analysed by Baruch Levine, "The Language of the Magical Bowls," in an appendix to Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jewish in Babylonia*, Vol. 5, pp. 343–375; Jonas Greenfield in his

While such evidence does not prove that Jews were likewise aware of Mandaean traditions, in general, or the concept of the *hafiqia mia*, in particular, it does point to contact between the two communities, and a shared awareness of at least some esoteric traditions.

If, as is likely, the water warning were composed in a Babylonian milieu or by originally Babylonian tradents, then the possibility of contact with the Mandaean concept of the *hafiqia mia* would be increased. Moreover, the (dangerously) close proximity of the Mandaeans, themselves, would lend further impetus to a refutation of their ideas. Finally, because of its resonance with biblical concepts and language, the Mandaean tradition of the *hafiqia mia* would actually be *more* disturbing to contemporary Jewish religious authorities, since such a tradition would appeal to a biblically trained and attuned Jewish audience, who might be led astray by its apparent scriptural support.

Thus, the Jewish warning against seeing water during the heavenly ascent may have been at least partially directed against the Mandaean concept of the *hafiqia mia*. Instead of the heavenly waters themselves being dangerous to the unqualified individual as in the Mandaean sources, however, the danger in the Jewish accounts results if an unqualified individual believes that the illusory waters actually exist.

In conclusion, there is no reason to choose between the various traditions (Christian apocalyptic, Gnostic, Mandaean) which may have inspired the water warning. The Jewish sources acknowledge that during a heavenly ascent one may encounter what *appears* to be water. Yet, they turn the widespread tradition of heavenly water on its head by declaring that the water is only an illusion. This truly esoteric knowledge not only separates the qualified Jewish mystic from the unqualified, but it also differentiates Jewish mysticism from its late antique competition.

Prolegomenon to Odeberg's edition of *3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch*, New York, 1973 (Reprint), pp. XL–XLI, where Greenfield writes on p. XL, "Although it was written in Mandaic for a Mandaean, it was in all likelihood the product of Jewish scribe."

