

ORIGINS OF RABBINIC MARTYROLOGY: RABBI AKIBAH, THE SONG OF SONGS, AND HEKHALOT MYSTICISM

Joseph Dan

Three ancient narratives sustained and encouraged Jewish martyrs in the Middle Ages. One was the Binding of Isaac, a biblical story that many believed did not occur exactly as told in Genesis: instead they believe that Isaac was really sacrificed by his father on the altar, and only later came back to life from the ashes. The second was the story of the “Woman and Her Seven Sons,” originally told in the Book of Maccabees, and later told in rabbinic literature as “Hannah and Her Seven Sons.” The heroine is a mother who witnessed each of her sons executed by the Hellenistic king Antiochus after she encouraged them to refuse to worship idols. Yet the most potent and prevailing ancient narrative, most often quoted in martyrological contexts and raised as an example of devotion to the God of Israel, was that of the martyrdom of Rabbi Akibah and his colleagues, the great *Tanaim* of the early second century, as told in several Talmudic tales and best remembered as the “Story of the Ten Martyrs.” This narrative was adopted into a hymn, a *piyyut*, entitled *Eleh Ezkera* (These I Remember), and recited in the synagogue, ensuring that the memory of the tortures and sacrifices of Rabbi Akibah and his

fellow martyrs endure forever in Jewish collective memory.

There is no doubt that the martyrdom of Rabbi Akibah and several other great teachers of the

narratives—describing in vivid details the tortures that these sages, especially Rabbi Akibah, Rabbi Ishmael, and Rabbi Hanina ben Tradion, endured before finally being killed—are well-known to anyone who has read some of the Talmudic *aggadot*. Yet it is significant that the text that became the cornerstone of Jewish martyrological literature is actually not a Talmudic one. It is an independent narrative, entitled *Aseret Harugey Malkhut* (Ten Who Were Martyred by the Empire), a text that derived material from the Talmudic stories but added several figures not found there and developed the stories in ways that have no basis in the Talmudic tradition. In several cases, the stories in this narrative even contradict those of the Talmud. The list of ten martyrs in the narrative is historically impossible: the sages included in it could not have lived and died at the same time, and the stories often contradict Talmudic chronology. Several scholars tried but failed to amend the list and construct one that could be regarded as reflecting true events. One can only conclude that *Aseret Harugey Malkhut* is actually a work of fiction. This raises an intriguing question: Why did Jewish tradition forsake the authoritative stories presented in the Talmud, and cherish the fictional narrative that in many respects differed from and contradicted that tradition?

The problem becomes even more perplexing when the sources of the



Depiction of Rabbi Akibah in the Mantua Haggadah, 1560. Reprinted from *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (Funk and Wagnalls, 1925), s.v. “Akiba ben Joseph.”

Mishnah was a historical event that occurred in the 30s of the second century and was connected with the persecution of the Jews by Emperor Hadrian in the context of the Bar Kochbah rebellion. The Talmudic

narrative are investigated. The earliest version of the narrative of the “Ten Martyrs” is incorporated within another text, *Hekhalot Rabbati* (The Greater Book of Celestial Palaces), an esoteric work that is the most detailed and profound expression of the experiences of the ancient Jewish mystics, the “Descenders to the Chariot.” The core of this ancient treatise (probably written in the third or fourth century CE), is a detailed description of the ascension of Rabbi Ishmael (described here as a “High Priest the son of a High Priest,” which was an impossibility because Rabbi Ishmael was born about the time that the second Temple was destroyed) to the divine realms, the seven palaces that are located within the seventh, highest firmament. Rabbi Ishmael was sent upon this mission by his teacher, Rabbi Nehunia ben ha-Kanah, when it was reported that the emperor of Rome decided to execute ten of the leading sages of the people of Israel. He was sent to inquire in the celestial realms whether the order of execution was a decision by the emperor himself—in which cases these great sages could nullify it without much trouble—or whether it was a divine decree, to which they had to succumb. Important as this question is, the treatise, *Hekhalot Rabbati*, is much more interested in the details of Rabbi Ishmael’s ascent, how he overcame the dangerous guardians of the gates of the palaces, and what magical means he used to go from one palace to another, than in the earthly fate of the great sages about to be martyred. *Hekhalot Rabbati* is clearly a text of mystical speculation

rather than a guide to proper behavior during the experience of martyrdom. How did a narrative that served as a literary framework for a work describing a mystical experience become the basis of the classical Jewish narrative about martyrdom?

In the Talmud, the martyrdom of Rabbi Akibah and Rabbi Ishmael is presented as the story of the cruel death of two of the greatest halakhic authorities of that time. In *Hekhalot Rabbati*, the martyrdom of these two sages is presented as the death of two great mystics, who knew the hidden secrets of the divine world and experienced a mystical meeting with the Lord

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God sitting on his throne of glory. The “Story of the Ten Martyrs” developed by additions and embellishments of the *Hekhalot* text, and not the Talmudic one. Why did Jewish tradition prefer the portrait of supreme martyr who is a mystic to one of a halakhic sage?

There is another matter that has to be considered with regard to the image of the prototypical martyr, Rabbi Akibah. This concerns the role of King Solomon’s Song of Songs in Rabbi Akibah’s (and to some extent Rabbi Ishmael’s) life, thought, and death. Another ancient mystical treatise that is attributed to these two sages is the

Shiur Komah (The Measurement of the Height), in which the physical measurements of the “Creator of Genesis” are listed in huge, astronomical numbers. This anthropomorphic treatise, an embarrassment to many medieval Jewish thinkers, contains a promise, guaranteed by Rabbi Akibah and Rabbi Ishmael, that anyone who studies it will “inherit this world and the world to come.” At the basis of this mystical work are the verses in the Song of Songs (5:10–16) that describe the beauty of the body of the beloved male figure. The *Shiur Komah* identified this figure as that of the Creator himself. It should be remembered that it was Rabbi Akibah who made

the radical statement that “all scriptures are holy, and the Song of Songs is the holy of holies” (Mishnah Yadayim). It was also Rabbi Akibah who stated that the Song of Songs was “given” to Israel on Mount Sinai by its real author, “the king who owns peace” (*melekh she-ha-*

shalom shelo) rather than *Shlomo*, Solomon, son of David. Some scholars understood this regard for the Song of Songs to be the result of the belief that it includes a self-portrait of God, presented in the *Shiur Komah* text.

Another meaningful connection between the sage who became a martyr and the Song of Songs is evident in the well-known narrative, “The Four Sages Who Entered the Pardes,” about a group led by Rabbi Akibah, who was the only one who successfully completed that mysterious, possibly mystical, journey. The text of this narrative, first presented in the Tosefta to

Hagiga chapter 2, includes a biblical verse that is attached to each of the four sages. The one describing Rabbi Akibah's experience employs a Song of Songs verse (1:4): "Draw me, we will run after thee, the king has brought me into his chambers." This may be the earliest example in rabbinic literature of the king in the Song of Songs being identified with God. Thus we find Rabbi Akibah's spiritual life closely associated with the verses of the Song of Songs, a text which he attributed to God himself and believed that the people of Israel had received in the theophany of Mount Sinai.

Is there a connection between Rabbi Akibah's radical reinterpretation of the Song of Songs, the traditions that associate him with mystical experiences and mystical texts, and his fate as a martyr? It seems that we have to give a positive answer to this question. In the *Mekhilta*, the

section *Shirah* (relating to the Song of the Sea, sung when the people of Israel crossed safely the Red Sea after escaping from Egypt), there is a commentary in the name of Rabbi Akibah to the third verse in the first chapter of the Song of Songs (just before the verse concerning the entrance to the *Pardes*): "therefore the virgins love thee." The Hebrew term is *alamot*, young girls. Rabbi Akibah reads this word in a different way: *al mot*, as two words, meaning: "because of death." That means: we love you [God] because you make us die for you. This became one of the most frequently quoted verses, expressing the deepest feelings of the martyrs who sacrifice their lives because of their love of God, the martyrs who love him not only despite, but because, he demands this ultimate sacrifice of them.

Do all these elements come together? I am not sure. Yet when

trying to understand the emergence of one of the most potent Jewish expressions of adherence to martyrdom, one should remain alert to the surprising fact that we have here an attachment to fiction rather than history, a close relationship to a classical mystical text, a unique adherence to a sacred text, the Song of Songs, reinterpreted as expressing the love of God, and an identification of this love with the experience of the death of the martyr.

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