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DIMENSIONS OF THE SHEKHINAH:

THE MEANING OF THE SHIUR QOMAH IN JEWISH MYSTICISM, LITURGY, AND RABBINIC THOUGHT

*Excerpts from a public lecture
presented June 13, 2010 at the
Academy for Jewish Religion California*

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I

The Shiur Qomah, “The Measure of the Body (of G-d),” is one of the most problematic, controversial, and misunderstood writings in all of Jewish tradition.¹ The Shiur Qomah is known primarily for its discussion of the measurements of the body of G-d. For example, Shiur Qomah section B states, “His height is 2,300,000,000 parasangs. From the right arm until the left arm is 770,000,000 parasangs. And from the right eyeball until the left eyeball is a distance of 300,000,000 parasangs. The skull of his head is 3,000,003 and a third parasangs... . Thus, He is called the great, mighty, and awesome G-d.”² A parasang is an ancient Persian measurement, equivalent to about three-quarters of a mile. The concluding statement, “Thus He is called the great, mighty, and awesome G-d,” justifies the immense measurements given for G-d’s body.

The Shiur Qomah grows out of the Merkavah mystical tradition of the late Talmudic period. It is an attempt to elaborate upon the experience of the priest and prophet Ezekiel, whose vision of G-d in Ezekiel 1-3 stands as the foundation for the Jewish mystical tradition. Particularly important in this respect is Ezekiel 1:26, which describes the presence of G-d in anthropomorphic terms, viz., “and above the expanse over their heads was the sem-

blance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and on top, upon this semblance of a throne, there was the semblance of a human form.” As we all know, the Bible prohibits the representation of G-d in human or any other tangible form. And we should note that as a priest of the holy Jerusalem Temple, Ezekiel is careful throughout his vision to use the language of simile to avoid any statement that G-d can be so portrayed. Nevertheless, the Shiur Qomah does portray G-d in human terms and therefore raises serious theological questions about the work, insofar as Judaism views attempts to portray G-d in any physical form as idolatry and apostasy.

I would like to argue that the Shiur Qomah is fundamentally a liturgical text intended for public recitation. The various depictions of the measurements of G-d’s body are interspersed among liturgical texts that, when read together, construct a heavenly liturgy based upon the standard Jewish prayer service. The incomprehensibility of the divine measurements is deliberate. Such a technique is intended to impress the audience of the Shiur Qomah with the majesty of the divine presence. By placing the divine measurements in the midst of a heavenly liturgy, the Shiur Qomah prompts those engaged in Jewish worship to attempt to imagine themselves before the incomprehensible grandeur and glory of G-d. In order to demonstrate this hypothesis, I will examine the construction of the prayer service that provides the basic structure of the Shiur Qomah’s presentation of the divine measurements.

II

We begin with Shiur Qomah section A.³ The superscription reads, *Sefer ha-Qomah ‘Inyenei Merkavah*, “The Book of the Body, Topics concerning the Chariot.” Immediately following, the Shiur Qomah begins with a prayer that initially corresponds to the opening paragraph of the Amidah, *Baruch ‘attah ‘Adonay ‘Eloqeinu, ‘Eloqei ‘Avraham, ‘Eloqei Yizhaq, ‘Eloqei Ya‘aqov, ha-‘El ha-gadol, ha-gibbor, veba-nora, ‘El ‘Elyon*, “Blessed are you, O L-rd, our G-d, G-d of Abraham, G-d of Isaac, G-d of Jacob, the great, mighty, and awesome G-d, G-d Most High” But the text

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diverges from the standard form of the Amidah, *Qoneh shamayim va'aretz, 'attah hu' melek, malkei hamlakim*, etc., "Creator of heavens and earth, You are king, king of kings," etc., in place of the expected *Gomel hasadim tovim we-qoneh ha-kol*, etc., "the one who keeps fidelity and creates everything," etc. Indeed, as the Shiur Qomah's version of the opening paragraph of the Amidah continues, it focuses on the throne of G-d and the fiery presence of G-d upon it, "And your seat on the throne of glory and the celestial creatures ascend to the throne of glory. You are fire, and your throne is fire, and your celestial creatures and servants are fire, etc." We may quickly recognize that the version of the opening paragraph of the Amidah presented in the Shiur Qomah is influenced by biblical texts that present the presence of G-d as a flaming presence, viz., Ezekiel's portrayal of a flaming presence of G-d in Ezekiel 1:26-27; Isaiah's portrayal of the Seraphim as flaming angels around G-d in Isaiah 6; and Daniel's portrayal of a stream of fire breaking out from below the throne on which G-d sits in Daniel 7. Such a flaming presence of G-d suggests a heavenly vision of G-d, and the liturgy that accompanies and conveys this vision of G-d's flaming presence suggests that it is a heavenly liturgy, analogous to the earthly liturgy that we pray as part of the standard worship service on earth.

When we turn to section B, we see a concern not with liturgy but with the dimensions of the body of G-d. Rabbi Akiba is the speaker in this section, and he reports what Metatron, the angel of the presence of G-d, has told him, "from the place of the seat of his glory and up is a distance of 1,180,000,000 parasangs. From his glorious seat and down is a distance of 1,180,000,00 parasangs. His height is 2,300,000,000 parasangs. From the right arm across until the left arm is 770,000,000 parasangs, and from the right eyeball until the left is a distance of 300,000,00 parasangs. The skull of his head is 300,000,003 and a third parasangs, and the crown of his head is 600,000 parasangs, corresponding to the 600,000 Israelite minions. Thus is He called the great, mighty, and awesome G-d." This statement is followed by a series of unpronounceable names concluded by the familiar statement from the Shema, *Baruch hu' ubaruch shem kavod malkuto le'olam va'ed*, "Blessed be He and blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom forever." Here we see an interest in relating the dimensions of the divine body to a key statement from the Amidah concerning G-d's size and other qualities as well as to a statement from the Shema concerning G-d's eternal royal glory. But we must

also consider the numbers given for the dimensions of G-d's body. As we observed above, these numbers are derived in part from the numerical equivalencies of the statement concerning G-d's stature in Psalm 147:5, i.e., the 2,300,000,000 parasangs of G-d's height are derived from the numerical equivalent 236 from the statement *verav koach* in Psalm 147:5, "Great is G-d, and mighty of strength." The number 230 is accounted for in the height of G-d, and the remaining number 6 is then related to the 600,000 who witnessed G-d's revelation of Torah at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19 (see Num 2:32).

Section C's opening statement reads, "And all who know this secret are certain to acquire the world to come." Following references to G-d's protection of the righteous, we then encounter a statement that appears to presuppose the Kaddish that marks the conclusion of the Amidah in the standard Jewish prayer service. But of course it deviates from the standard form, *lephikach 'anahnu hayevim lehalel lepa'er leshabach uleromam lebarech, ulehagdil melek gadol, melek gibbor, melek 'adir*, etc., "and therefore we are obligated to praise, beautify, glorify, and to exalt, to bless, and to magnify the great king, the mighty king, the strong king," etc. The passage goes on to heap praise upon G-d for all of G-d's actions on behalf of creation and Israel, much as the standard form of the Kaddish does in the standard Jewish prayer service. Of course G-d's qualities are here magnified beyond those of our standard Kaddish, but this would be a reflection of the role that this Kaddish plays in a heavenly liturgy. And we may note that in section Cx, an alternative paragraph identified by Cohen for this portion of the Shiur Qomah, a new and embellished version of the *Mi Kamocha* appears, "Who is like our L-rd? Who is like our G-d? Who is like our King? Who is like our Savior? There is none like our G-d. There is none like our L-rd. There is none like our King. There is none like our Savior." Again the embellishments of this version of the *Mi Kamocha* point to a heavenly liturgy.

When we turn to section D, we encounter an initial statement by R. Ishmael, the well-known sage who played a key role in the narration of the Heikhalot Rabbati, the Merkavah text that relates an attempt to ascend through the seven levels of heaven to appear before the throne of G-d. Here R. Ishmael makes a statement that is remarkably akin to the Kedushah of the Jewish prayer service, "I saw the king of king of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, as He was sitting on an exalted throne and His soldiers were standing before Him

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Last November, I presented at a national meeting of the SBL for the first time. My paper, entitled “Exile to Damascus and the Community at Qumran,” necessitated an examination of images of the Damascus Document. The relevant volume of Discoveries in the Judaean Desert did not contain photographic plates of the passages I addressed in my paper. However, thanks to the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center, I was able to study images of all three of the relevant passages at Qumran. This study allowed me to note a small additional phrase found in the Qumran manuscripts not present in the Cairo manuscripts, which I then noted in my presentation’s translation. The presentation was a success and most likely will be included in an edited volume of papers presented at this session of SBL.

Recently, I also brought my first-year classical Hebrew students from Pomona College to the ABMC to read directly from the image of the Dead Sea Scroll of Psalm 121. Thanks to the ABMC and its staff, I was able to show my students some of the writing habits of ancient scribes and the challenges facing modern textual scholars reading ancient manuscripts. The ABMC gave my students the opportunity to share with their families and friends over winter break that they had actually read directly from images of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Already they are looking forward to the possibility of returning to the ABMC to read from the Great Isaiah Scroll at the end of this semester.

In the fall of 2010, I had the privilege of using material from the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center in the process of doing research for my doctoral dissertation in Hebrew Bible at Claremont Graduate University. The ABMC is not only a rich resource of ancient texts, but it is a pleasant environment in which to work. In addition, the cheerful and expert assistance from Shelley Long also served to make my research time there most effective and efficient.

For the text-critical purposes of my dissertation, I needed to look at ancient Greek manuscripts that contain the Old Greek version of the biblical book of Esther, as well as a second Greek version of Esther, known as the Alpha Text. I used three manuscripts of Old Greek Esther from the 8th and 13th centuries, and three manuscripts of the Alpha Text of Esther from the 12th and 13th centuries. The study of these manuscripts was not only relevant to the text-critical relationship of the different versions of Esther, but it was useful for understanding the historical use of these texts as well. I am grateful for the resources and the accessibility to those resources that the ABMC provides for research such as mine.

Lucas and Tricia’s scholarship is only possible because of you, our *Folio* reader, and your generous contributions to the ABMC.

PUBLICATIONS AND UPCOMING EVENTS



Marvin A. Sweeney
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Publications

“The Problem of Ezekiel in Talmudic Literature” in *After Ezekiel: Essays on the Reception of a Difficult Prophet* (ed. by P. M. Joyce and A. Mein; LHBSOTS 535; New York and London; T and T Clark, 2011), 11-23.

The Portrayal of Assyria in the Books of Kings (ed. by R. Heskett and B. Irwin; LHBSOTS 469; New York and London; T and T Clark, 2010), 274-284.

“The Book of the Twelve Prophets” in *Dictionary of Early Judaism* (ed. J. Collins; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

Lectures, Courses, and Presentations

Synchronic and Diachronic Concerns in Reading the Book of the Twelve Prophets, Conference on “Perspectives on the Formation of the Book of the Twelve: Methodological Foundations, Redactional Process, Historical Insights,” Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, Germany, January 14-16, 2011.

Impromptu Shabbat Kiddish Talk on the Book of the Twelve Prophets and Modern Soviet Jewry, Jüdische Kultusgemeinde, Münster, Germany, January 15, 2011.

The Solomon Narratives. Three-part lecture

series. Har El Institute, Palm Desert, CA, January 18, January 25, and February 1, 2011.

The Book of Isaiah. Academy for Jewish Religion California, Winter, 2011.

Moderator. Inter-Religious Panel Discussion, Academy for Jewish Religion California Annual Retreat, Brandeis-Bardin Institute, American Jewish University, February 7, 2011.

Moderator. Faculty Panel Discussion. Claremont School of Theology Faculty Board Retreat, Claremont School of Theology, February 13, 2011.

Ezekiel’s Conceptualization of the Exile in Intertextual Perspective. Society of Biblical Literature Pacific Coast Region, Whittier, CA, March 28, 2011.

Organizer. Joint Meetings of the Claremont School of Theology, Academy for Jewish Religion California, and the Islamic Center of Southern California. April 3, 2011: “American Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Historical and Cultural Perspective”; May 9, 2011: “Holiness in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.”

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Carleen Mandolfo

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Publications

“Feminist Inquiry into the Psalms and Book of Lamentations” in *A Retrospective of Feminist Hebrew Bible Exegesis: Histories of Interpretation, Vol. 1* (ed. Susanne Sholz; Sheffield: Phoenix Publishing, forthcoming).

Lectures, Courses, and Presentations

What Do We Know about the Real David and Solomon, The Most Glorious Kings of Ancient Israel, and How Do We Know It? The American Jewish University, February 27, 2011. 9:30 - 4:30.

Violence in the Bible. Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA. Spring 2011.

Theological Issues in the Study of the Hebrew Bible. Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA. Spring 2011.



James A. Sanders

*Professor Emeritus,
Claremont School of
Theology/Claremont
Graduate University*

Publications

“They Dare Not Teach What They’ve Learned” in *Biblical Archaeology Review* 36/6 (2010), 12.

“Divine Transgressions,” “Jubilee in the Bible,” “America’s Two Great Awakenings,” and “The Psalms,” Facebook Webpage for Christ Church Ontario, links for downloads.

Lectures, Courses, and Presentations

“America’s Two Great Awakenings.” Adult Forum. Pasadena United Methodist Church, Pasadena, CA, February 6, 2011.

Introduction to the First Testament. Episcopal Theological School at Claremont/Bloy House. Claremont, CA. Fall 2010 and Spring 2011.

Member. Editorial Board of *Biblical Theology Bulletin*.



Shelley Long

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Lectures, Courses, and Presentations

Psalm 151 as Sacred Scripture at Qumran. Society of Biblical Literature Pacific Coast Region, Whittier, CA, March, 2011.

Introduction to Biblical Literature: Exodus-Deuteronomy. Azusa Pacific University, Azusa CA. Spring 2011.

Teaching Assistant. Teaching the Bible in Context. Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA. Spring 2011.

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to the right and to the left.” This statement then introduces another section concerned with the bodily measurements of G-d. R. Ishmael recounts how Metatron spoke to him and how he then asked Metatron the measurements of the body of G-d. He recounts Metatron’s lengthy statements concerning the measurements and holy names of each of the body parts of G-d pertaining to the feet, soles of the feet, calves, thighs, loins, heart, neck, head, mouth, beard, face, cheeks, forehead, eyes, arms, shoulders, palms of the hands, fingers, etc. At the end of this description, section D once again concludes with the familiar statement from the Amidah, “Therefore is He called the great, mighty, and awesome G-d.” Again, the measurements of the body of G-d are related to a liturgical context.

Following a large number of sections concerned with descriptions of the holy and awesome presence of G-d, section M then comes forward with another familiar statement from Jewish liturgy akin to the ‘*Aleinu*’ prayer that appears near the conclusion of the Jewish prayer service. Section M reads, ‘*aleinu leshabeka, lepareka, ulebarekha, ulegadlekha, ulehaktirekha, uleyahadekha, ’adon kol haberiot, ’eloqi kol hanishamt, ’eloqi kol hanepashot, hai hahayim harishon veba’aharon*, etc., “We are obligated to praise you, to beautify you, and to bless you, and to magnify you, and to crown you, and to declare your unity, O L-rd of all creation, G-d of all souls, G-d of all life, the Life of Lives, the First and the Last,” etc. Again the modified form of a standard liturgical prayer points to a worship service in the heavenly realm, beyond our normal experience. It

is followed by the concluding section of the Shiur Qomah, section N, which calls upon its audience to fall on its face before G-d who resides in heaven, and continues with a detailed portrayal of the heavenly temple and all of its retinue at a time of worship. An alternative Section Nx concludes with statements that the worshippers are to go out into the world to do acts of Torah following their encounter with the divine.

Our survey of the Shiur Qomah points to a very significant feature of this text, viz., the portrayals of G-d’s presence and the measurements of G-d’s body are interspersed among sections that present a modified version of the Jewish worship service, including the Amidah, the Kaddish, the mi Kamokha, the Kedushah, and the Aleinu, followed by instruction to go out into the world and practice the teachings of Torah. As we have observed, the modified nature of this liturgy points to a heavenly liturgy in which the worshippers pray the major sections of the Jewish worship service before G-d, whose bodily form and the measurements of the divine body parts are provided among the major segments of the liturgy.

¹ For a brief overview, see Gershom Scholem, “Shi’ur Komah,” *EncJud* 14:1417-19.

² See Martin S. Cohen, *The Shi’ur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 189-90. For the Hebrew text with English translation, see Martin S. Cohen, *The Shi’ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions* (TSAJ 9; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985), 127-28.

³ All quotes are from Cohen, *The Shi’ur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy*; and idem, *Shi’ur Qomah: Texts*.

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