
El Adon – An Historical, Literary,
and Spiritual Commentary

By Jeffrey Hoffman

א-ל אֲדוֹן עַל כָּל הַמַּעֲשִׂים
בְּרוּךְ וּמְבָרָךְ בְּפִי כָּל נִשְׁמָה
גְּדֹלוֹ וְטוֹבוֹ מְלֵא עוֹלָם
דָּעַת וְתְבוּנָה סְבָבִים אוֹתוֹ
הַמְתַּגָּאָה עַל חַיּוֹת הַקֹּדֶשׁ
וְנִהְדָּר בְּכָבוֹד עַל הַמְרַכְּבָה
זְכוֹת וּמִישׁוֹר לִפְנֵי כֶסֶא
חֹסֵד וְרַחֲמִים לִפְנֵי כְבוֹדוֹ
טוֹבִים מְאֹרֹת שֶׁבָּרָא אֱלֹהֵי-יָנוּ
יֵצֵרָם בְּדַעַת בְּבִינָה וּבְהַשְׁכֵּל
כֶּחַ וּגְבוּרָה נָתַן בָּהֶם
לְהִיּוֹת מוֹשְׁלִים בְּקִרְבֵּי תֵבֵל
מְלֵאִים זִיו וּמְפִיקִים נְגִיָּה
נְאֻה זִיוִם בְּכָל הָעוֹלָם
שְׂמֵחִים בְּצֵאתָם וְשׁוֹשִׁים בְּבוֹאֵם
עֹשִׂים בְּאִמָּה רְצוֹן קוֹנֵם
פֶּאֶר וְכָבוֹד נוֹתְנִים לְשֵׁמוֹ
צְהֵלָה וְרִנָּה לְזִכְרֵי מַלְכוּתוֹ
קָרָא לְשִׁמְשׁ וַיִּזְרַח אוֹר
רָאָה וְהִתְקִין צוּרֵת הַלְבָנָה
שָׁבַח נוֹתְנִים לוֹ כָּל צְבָא מְרוֹם
תַּפְאֵרֶת וּגְדֻלָּה שְׂרָפִים וְאוֹפָנִים וְחַיּוֹת הַקֹּדֶשׁ

I. INTRODUCTION

El Adon, “God, the Master,” is one of several *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) or *piyyut*-fragments embedded in the first blessing before *Keri’at Shema* (the recitation of the *Shema*) in *Shaharit shel Shabbat* (the morning service on the Sabbath) in the Ashkenazic rite. It is encountered soon after the opening of this blessing, which is known as *Birkat Yotser Or*, “The Blessing of the Creator of Light.”

The placement of this *piyyut* within this particular blessing is not by accident. The theme of the blessing is the same in every *Shaharit* (morning service) year-round, *Shabbat*, festival, high holiday, or weekday. It is the reaction of a poetic soul to the daily rising of the sun. Here, dawn occasions poetry and song – filtered through biblical creation imagery from Genesis, chapter 1 – extolling God’s creative power and celebrating the heavenly lights and angels. The parallel blessing in every *Ma’ariv* (evening service) year-round similarly contains praise for God in reaction to the emerging darkness and pinpoints of starlight. The morning blessing refers to darkness several times and the evening blessing refers to light several times because they both reflect human consciousness of the divine aroused by changes in natural light throughout the day. Feeling awestruck and pulled out of the ordinary is not unusual when we encounter fiery colors in the sky at dawn and dusk.¹

One would, therefore, expect *El Adon* – a poem embedded in *Birkat Yotser Or*, a blessing celebrating dawn – to contain some reference to the newly visible light, and indeed it does. We will find that this is a major theme of *El Adon*, though it is filtered not only through the language of the Bible’s creation story,² but also through Ezekiel’s vision of God on the “chariot.” These two scriptural passages are, not coincidentally, the two most famous biblical foci of early Jewish mystical contemplation, and are known as *Ma’aseh Bereshit* (“The Enterprise of Creation”) and *Ma’aseh Merkavah* (“The Chariot Enterprise”).

Ashkenazic Jews recite *El Adon* only on *Shabbat*, and so, one might expect some Sabbath imagery as we find in the *piyyut* which follows it, namely, *La’El Asher Shavat*. However, *El Adon* does not mention *Shabbat* at all, and in this, it resembles virtually all the rest of the *piyyutim* or *piyyut*-fragments added to *Birkat Yotser Or* on *Shabbat* except for *La’El Asher Shavat*. According to Reuven Hammer, “On the Sabbath, when time is of no consequence, several *piyyutim* are added, most of which are not specifically connected to the Sabbath as such.”³ While Hammer’s suggestion that the service was lengthened by the addition of these *piyyutim* because “time is of no consequence” on the Sabbath is reasonable (although I wonder if ancient congregants would have put it quite that way), he doesn’t adduce any evidence that this was, indeed, the motivation for the additions, nor have I seen any such evidence. While there is discernable order to many general trends in Jewish liturgy (such as the connection between the theme of natural light in *Birkat Yotser Or* and in *El Adon*), there has never been one grand “editor” of the various

versions of the prayer book, and therefore, one also finds considerable randomness in the *Siddur* as well. So, for example, *Sefaradim* recite *El Adon* on Festivals as well as on *Shabbat*,⁴ though one would be hard put to explain the connection between *El Adon* and Festivals on the basis of the prayer's themes.

One additional element that does seem to reflect editorial order is the central appearance of angels in *El Adon*. Ezra Fleischer, one of the most important modern scholars of Jewish liturgy – especially regarding the role of texts found in the Cairo Genizah – commented that *El Adon* properly comes before *Kedushah DeYotser* and is meant to thematically prepare the worshipper for it.⁵ *Kedushah DeYotser* is one of the many versions of the *Kedushah* – a prayer built around what was understood as the actual praises uttered continuously by angels – which appear in several places in Jewish liturgy.⁶ Those praises are the famous lines “*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh... holy, holy, holy...*” in Isaiah 6:3 and “*Barukh kevod YHVH mimekomo... Blessed is the Glory of God from His place*” in Ezekiel 3:12. The prayer's name, “*Kedushah*,” apparently derives from the threefold repetition of a form of this word at the beginning of the Isaiah verse. The form of the *Kedushah* that appears in *Birkat Yotser Or* contains a number of images related to creation that other forms of the *Kedushah* lack.⁷ The specific connection that Fleischer noted was, at the very least, that both *El Adon* and *Kedushah DeYotser* both prominently mention several classes of angels. Beyond that, however, it is likely that the author of *El Adon* viewed the sun, moon, and stars themselves as angelic beings. As will be demonstrated below, these beings are portrayed, in *El Adon*, as conscious entities who participate in the cosmic praise of God. Therefore, just as the angels that Isaiah and Ezekiel saw and heard glorify God through chant, so too do the sun, moon, and stars, fulfilling the verse from Psalm 19:2, *Ha-shamayim mesaprim kevod El, u'ma'aseh yadav magid ha-raki'a*, “The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims His handiwork.”⁸

One additional minor, but interesting, note regarding the location of *El Adon* may be in order. I wonder if the last three words of the second strophe, *befi kol neshamah* (“in the mouth of every soul”) may be placed early in this poem in order to connect to the conclusion of the liturgical section which precedes *Keri'at Shema U'Virkhoteha*, namely, *Pesukei DeZimrah* (“Verses of Song”). The original kernel of *Pesukei DeZimrah* was simply Psalms 145-150. The last verse of Psalm 150 contains wording very similar to the ending of this strophe, *Kol haneshamah tehallel yah*, “Let the souls of all praise Yah.” Furthermore, this same wording may be hinted at the beginning of *Nishmat*, the expanded blessing on *Shabbat* and Festivals that concludes *Pesukei DeZimrah*: *Nishmat kol hai tevaresh et shimkha*, “Let the souls of all living bless Your name.” If so, then the three words toward the beginning of *El Adon*, namely, *befi kol neshamah*, may serve as a *leitmotif* connecting the end of *Pesukei DeZimrah* (Psalm 150), the blessing after it (*Nishmat*) and *Birkat Yotser Or*.

II. HISTORY OF *El Adon*

The “Dean” of modern scholars of Jewish liturgical history, Ismar Elbogen, says little

about the history of *El Adon* except that it is found in all the rites.⁹ What that usually means is that this poem entered the prayer book at a very early stage. However, it cannot reliably be said that it is found in the earliest prayer books in our possession.¹⁰ Perhaps the first prayer book that can be said to have definitely included *El Adon* is *Siddur Ḥasidei Ashkenaz*¹¹ (ca. 13th C.).

Meir Bar-Ilan provides the most important history of the prayer in his groundbreaking research on the great influence that ancient Jewish mysticism had on Jewish liturgy.¹² Bar-Ilan searched the surviving texts of *Heikhalot* literature – so-called because the narrative consists of descriptions of mystical ascents to the *heikhalot*, heavenly “sanctuaries” or “palaces.” These texts are also sometimes referred to as *Merkavah* Mysticism, referring to the *Merkavah*, “chariot,” of the aforementioned *Ma’aseh Merkavah*, “The Chariot Enterprise” at the beginning of the Book of Ezekiel.¹³ This literature likely dates from sometime during, or toward the end of, the talmudic era, well before the appearance of the first prayer book in the 9th century CE (*Seder Rav Amram*). The particular text in which *El Adon* appears within this literature is known today as *Ma’aseh Merkavah*.¹⁴

Bar-Ilan cites a text, *Ma’aseh Merkavah*¹⁵, which parallels closely the second half of *El Adon*.¹⁶ The prayer as we know it from the prayer book is an alphabetic acrostic, with consecutive letters of the alphabet beginning each strophe. The passage from *Ma’aseh Merkavah* is not in alphabetical order, and so, Bar-Ilan logically theorizes that the version in the prayer book is later and depended upon the text from *Ma’aseh Merkavah* since alphabetizing can be considered a more developed form of the same passage.

The initial framework of the *Siddur* (Jewish prayer book) took shape during the first part of the talmudic era, namely, the Tannaitic period, the time of the Mishnah (ca. 100 BCE – 225 CE). It is in the Mishnah and its parallel literature, that the central prayer-cycles of Jewish prayer are mentioned, such as the *Shema* and its blessings and the *Amidah*. A number of other prayers derive from the later part of the talmudic era, namely, the Amoraic period, the time of the Gemara (ca. 225 CE – 500 CE). *El Adon* is not mentioned in any of the mainstream (i.e., non-mystical) texts of the talmudic era. Therefore, Bar-Ilan’s discovery of the text in *Ma’aseh Merkavah* that seems to be an earlier version of the second half of *El Adon* is quite significant. It testifies that the probable origin of this prayer is the talmudic era in spite of the fact that it is not mentioned in any of the mainstream texts of that period. Bar-Ilan has long championed *Hekhalot* literature as the origin of a great deal of Jewish liturgy while many talmudic scholars of his generation have been skeptical.¹⁷ In the case of *El Adon*, Bar-Ilan seems to be on solid ground. Therefore, while the earliest versions of the alphabetic and full version of *El Adon* are not found before *Seder Rav Amram* and the *Siddurim* of *Ḥasidei Ashkenaz*, a prose version can be said to date to the talmudic era.¹⁸

III. LITERARY ANALYSIS

The following literary analysis of *El Adon* will substantiate and expand upon a

number of points made above.

The poem is in the form of an alphabetic acrostic.¹⁹ Therefore, it consists of twenty-two strophes. The subject of the first eight strophes is God. They describe what may be understood as God's supernal attributes filling the world and surrounding God. They furthermore describe the setting of the poem: It is a vision of God seated upon "his throne" (*khis'o*) which, in turn, is upon the "the chariot" (*Merkavah*). The chariot, in turn, is above the heavenly creatures (*ḥayot hakodesh*). The scene of God upon a throne supported by celestial creatures (*ḥayot hakodesh* – mentioned in the *heh* line and at the end of the poem, in the *tav* line) as well as the chariot is reminiscent of Ezekiel, with some changes of nomenclature:

The word for throne, *kisei*, is consistent between the poem and Ezekiel (Ez. 1:26, 27). The word *Merkavah* is never used in Ezekiel. Rather, in the Book of Ezekiel, the "vehicle" upon which the throne rests is called a *demut*, "form," and *raki'a*, "expanse" (Ez. 1:22, 23, 25, 26). The term *Merkavah* was added by mystics as the biblical story became the focus of contemplation known as *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, "The Chariot Enterprise." The creatures in Ezekiel are called *ḥayot*, simply "creatures" (Ez. 1:5, and many times in the chapter as well as in 3:13). They are not called *ḥayot hakodesh*, "holy creatures" as in the poem.

In the poem, what may be understood as God's attributes are portrayed as follows: God's "greatness" (*godlo*) and "goodness" (*tuvo*) fill the world, while "knowledge" (*da'at*) and "insight" (*tevunah*) surround God. "Merit" (*zekhut*) and "straightforwardness" (*mishor*) as well as "lovingkindness" (*hesed*) and "mercy" (*rahumim*) are "before" God.

If the subject of the first eight strophes is, in broad strokes, God, the subjects of the final eighteen strophes are the heavenly luminaries, that is, the sun, moon and stars. Every noun or pronoun in these lines (from the line beginning with the letter *tet* to the end of the acrostic) refers directly to the sources of light in the sky.

These sources of light are either mentioned directly, or are referred to, some eleven times as follows:

Me'orot – luminaries.

Or – light.

Shemesh – sun.

Halevanah – the moon.

Ziv (twice) – radiance, light

Nogah – brightness.

VaYizrah – and shined.

Tseitam – their rising.

V'vo'am – their setting.

Kol tseva marom – all the supernal host (= the constellations or the stars).

Eleven references to the same image are significant in a passage of this short length.²⁰ The repeated use of this kind of wording points to a major theme of sun, moon, and stars. This theme connects to that of the blessing in which the poem finds itself, namely, *Birkat Yotser Or*, the blessing of the Creator of Light. The phenomenon in nature which elicits this blessing is the rising of the sun. The appearance of the sun is celebrated by reciting *El Adon* at this place in the liturgy as a symbol of all of the luminaries in the sky. That is why the sun, moon and stars and their brightness are mentioned.

Furthermore, this theme of the sun, moon, and stars connects with the other focus of mystical contemplation, *Ma'aseh Bereishit*, "The Enterprise of Creation." Light (Gen. 1:3-5; 1:14-16), as well as sun and moon and stars (Gen. 1:16), is prominently mentioned in the biblical Creation story. The connection between *El Adon* and *Ma'aseh Bereishit* is strengthened through the poem's use of wording parallel to that of the Creation story. The four times that the word *kol*, "all," is used in the poem corresponds to the twenty or more times that word is used in Genesis 1 and 2 referring to creation. The poem's use of *bara*, "created," *yetsaram*, "formed them," or, "light," and *me'orot*, "luminaries," parallels the use of those terms in Genesis 1 and 2.

It is also worth noting that the difficult word used in Ezekiel to refer to the vehicle, *raki'a*, "expanse" (Ez. 1:22), also is featured in the Creation story where it refers to the division between the waters of heaven and the waters of earth (Gen. 1:6-8; 15-17). This may be a commentary of one part of the Bible (Ezekiel) on another (Genesis). The content of this *derash* may be that Ezekiel's divine vision included elements of primordial creation. The use of the word *raki'a* in Ezekiel serves linguistically to bind the vision of Ezekiel to the Creation story. *El Adon* itself also connects of these two stories, through the lens of ancient Jewish mysticism, the *Merkavah* literature, and through the significant use of language from both biblical passages.

IV. THE CENTRALITY OF ANGELS IN *El Adon*

In noting the wording that this poem is built upon, one finds several instances of language meaning "knowledge" or "wisdom" – *da'at* (twice), *binah*, *tevunah*, *haskel*. Two of these – *da'at* and *tevunah* – "surround" (*sovevim*) God, early in the poem, in the *dallet* verse. The second instance of *da'at*, along with *binah* and *haskel*, are found in the *yod* verse: God formed the lights "through knowledge, wisdom, and enlightenment." These may simply point to the deep, supernal wisdom of God, who, far beyond human capacity, has the ability to create worlds. That is how I characterized them earlier when I wrote that God's "attributes" are depicted as surrounding the throne. They may, however, refer not to wisdom in the usual sense, but to names of angels or angelic entities.

Support for interpreting not only these "attributes" as angelic entities, but also the sun, moon and stars as angelic entities themselves, comes from the context in *Ma'aseh*

Merkavah in which we find the non-alphabetic verses which parallel the alphabetic acrostic of *El Adon*.²¹ The section of *El Adon* that appears to be based on *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is from the *nun* line (*na'eh zivam...*) through the *tsadi* line (*tzohalah verinah...*).

The following is the context in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*: R. Ishmael asks R. Akiva "how can one gaze above the *Seraphim* who stand over the head of *Rozi'i*²² Adonai God of Israel?"²³ R. Akiva's answer is that when he reached the first (of seven) palaces/sanctuaries (= *hekhalot*), he prayed a specific prayer, as well as practiced several other rituals, and this was effective. It is in R. Akiva's prayer itself, that we find language paralleling *El Adon*. In this long prayer (59 lines), the passage of interest (lines 1119-1129 in Janowitz) is found in an extended section depicting the angels. The passage is as follows:

Full of splendor they give forth shining light.
Their splendor glistens throughout the world.
Joyful at their going forth, and happy at their coming in.
Their glow is pleasant before the throne of your glory.
In awe and fear they do your desires.
They bring to your name, great, mighty and awesome
adornment and glory.
And they recite for the recitation of your kingdom
shouting and gladness,
because there is none like you..."²⁴

Those same words, more or less, are found in *El Adon*. Aside from some changes in language, the main difference is that the words are arranged in a slightly different order in *El Adon* in order to facilitate the alphabetic acrostic and they are in the third person (when referring to God) as opposed to the second person. More importantly, the meaning of those words has changed because instead of describing the angels of the seven *hekhalot*, they are now describing the sun, moon, and stars. It is possible that the author of *El Adon* simply lifted the language of these lines from *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, where the subject is the angels of the *hekhalot*, and applied them to his poem about the heavenly luminaries. That is highly doubtful in my opinion since references to the theology of the *Hekhalot* Literature abound in this poem. More likely, the poet consciously applied these descriptions of the angels to the heavenly luminaries because to him, the two are one and the same: the sun, moon, and stars are angels or angelic entities. Similarly, the "attributes" of God are also angelic entities. Our poet was no philosopher, simply listing several metaphoric praises of God as surrounding God's throne. *Da'at* and *tevunah*, etc., which surround God, do so not metaphorically, but actually: the angels known as *da'at*, *tevunah*, *zekhut*, *mishor*, *hesed* and *rahamim* surround God upon the throne.

These words, and others like them, are found in *Merkavah* Literature, and their meaning is not always certain, but they often seem mixed in with other terms for angelic

beings. Reuven Hammer noticed these terms, and connected them to *hesed*, “mercy” which also occurs in the poem. He commented that, “These and other descriptions refer to the *s’firot*, or Godly emanations described in kabbalistic mystical speculation.”²⁵ Indeed, one could point to six terms in the poem which are connected to the *sefirot*: *Da’at*, *Hesed*, *Binah*, *Gevurah*, *Tiferet*, and *Malkhut*. However, “kabbalistic mystical speculation” which centered on the *sefirot* is limited to the classic period of *Kabbalah*, especially the 12th-14th centuries, the period dominated by the *Zohar* and its attendant literature. *El Adon*, by contrast, derives from the much earlier mystical era of *Merkavah* Literature which does not know of *sefirot*. The question of the presence in this early mystical poem of so many terms which, much later, became central to *Kabbalah*, is an important one. No doubt later *Kabbalah* drew upon some of these terms from earlier mysticism and adapted and transformed their meaning from (possibly) angelic presences to the actual emanations, actual parts or segments, of God. However, what we find in the poem itself derives not from the ideational world of *Kabbalah*, but rather from that of *Merkavah* Mysticism.²⁶

In that world, a transformation of terms and ideas occurred: The sun, moon, and stars transformed from the status of gods in the pagan world into angelic entities in this poem.²⁷ If it is accurate to understand the planets and stars in *El Adon* as angelic presences, then this helps to elucidate two issues regarding the poem.

One issue is the location of *El Adon*. The fact that *El Adon* is found in *Birkat Yotser Or* is in accord with the theme of light in this blessing. However, within that blessing, it is located just before *Keshushah DeYotser* (with only one other *piyyut*, or fragment thereof, interrupting, namely, *La’El Asher Shavat Mikol HaMa’asim*, “To the God Who Rested From All Works”).

Regarding *Kedushah DeYotser*, toward the beginning of this article I cited Ezra Fleischer’s opinion that *El Adon* appears where it does in order to thematically prepare the worshipper for the form of *Kedushah* which occurs here in *Birkat Yotser Or*.²⁸ Fleischer connected *El Adon* to this *Kedushah* because the conclusion of *El Adon* explicitly speaks of angels praising God – including *ofanim* (wheel-angels)²⁹ and *hayot hakodesh* (celestial creatures) – two classes of angels deriving from Ezekiel and specifically mentioned in *Kedushah DeYotser*. In this manner, *El Adon* functions as an introduction to *Kedushah DeYotser*.

As we have seen, *El Adon* also makes sense in this particular place in the liturgy not only because it paves the thematic way for this *Kedushah DeYotser*, but also because it relates directly to the main theme of the blessing in which it is embedded: the theme of the renewed sunlight in *Birkat Yotser Or*. In this way, the poem is a paean to God elicited by the re-appearance of the sun not only in the poetic, but rational, sense of praise to God who created the lights, but it is also grand praise to God who created the flame-angels (*serafim* – mentioned in the last strophe of the poem), and the sun-angel and the star-angels and the moon-angel, who, together, illumine the earth, night and day.

The other issue that is clarified by the presence of an abundance of angelic beings in *El Adon* is that of the last two strophes of the poem. The usual understanding of these lines is reflected in the following translation – iterations of which may be found in virtually all *Siddurim* with translations:

Shin - “The host of heaven (= sun, moon, stars) give praise to him,

Tav - “Splendor and greatness – the *seraphim*, and the *ofanim* and celestial creatures.”

If *El Adon* consists, to large degree, of angels praising God – angels in the form of *ofanim* and celestial creatures, in the form of “intelligences,” and in the form of the sun, moon, and stars, then perhaps it concludes with another listing of some of these angels. That is, perhaps all the words in the final strophe refer to angels. This would clear up the syntax as well: In the *tav* line, understanding the first two words (*tiferet u'gedulah*) as descriptions of the praise that “the host of heaven” offers interrupts the flow of thought. If, rather, these two words are also names of angels, then there is consistency in the entire *tav* line – all the words refer to angelic entities. This understanding is reflected in the following translation:

Shin - “The host of heaven (= sun, moon, stars) give praise to him,

Tav - “*Tiferet* (the name of an angel), *Gedulah* (the name of an angel), the *serafim*, the *ofanim* and celestial creatures.”

V. CONCLUSION

The praise of God by beings non-human continues in the passage which follows *El Adon*, namely, *La'El Asher Shavat*. Here it is the *Shabbat* incarnate that engages in song. Between that passage and *Kedushah DeYotser* some transitional wording is found that is very suggestive. It is contained in the first of two sentences beginning with the word *titbarakh*, “may you be blessed” –

May you be blessed, our savior, through the praise of the work of your hands, and through the luminaries of light which you have made; may they glorify you, selah.

This sentence sums up *El Adon* and leads into the *Kedushah*: May the beacons of light in the sky which are the angels – the work of God’s hands – continue to praise you through the streaming of their light, which is one of their ways of praising you (the subject of *Birkat Yotser Or* and *El Adon*), and through their song (the subject of *Kedushat DeYotser*).

All of this, as mentioned above, may be seen as a long *midrash* on the verse from Psalm 19:2, *Ha-shamayim mesaprim kevod El, u' ma'aseh yadav magid ha-raki'a*, “The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims His handiwork.” A fitting title to this prayer may be: “The Celestial Angels– The Sun, Moon, and Stars – Join the Hosts of Angels by

Praising God Through Radiating Their Light.”

VI. SPIRITUAL MEANING FOR THE MODERN WORSHIPPER

At the conclusion of study of any given prayer, my students are used to hearing me ask, “How might a modern worshipper experience this prayer?” When I invoke “the modern worshipper,” I mean someone who is neither a complete atheist, on the one hand (because s/he is, after all, “a worshipper”), nor a fundamentalist on the other (because s/he is “modern”). Regarding *El Adon*, it must be admitted that for most modern worshippers, the close connections between this poem and angelic activity would probably not augment the experience of worship. The knowledge that angels play a central role in the theology of this prayer may be interesting to the modern worshipper, but most moderns, I’m quite sure, will not find their actual worship experience enhanced by this knowledge since they simply do not believe in the existence of angels.

Nonetheless, a modern worshipper may well benefit from knowing that the natural occurrence of the sunrise elicited the poetry of *Birkat Yotser Or* and *El Adon* within it. Jewish tradition tends to be wary of extended attention to, and consciousness of, the natural world for fear of its ancient enemy, paganism. However, many modern worshippers, in the wake of the spiritual reawakening in the western world over the last 30 years or so, have a deep interest in the connection between spirituality and the natural world. Rabbis, cantors, and Jewish educators would do well to draw attention to *El Adon* (as well as to much of *Birkat Yotser Or* and *Birkat HaMa’ariv Aravim*) as such focal points. The bottom line of these passages is awe and wonder at the seemingly miraculous reappearance of the sun at dawn, and stars and moon at dusk. Concentration on these simple, yet awe-inspiring, natural events as *El Adon* is chanted would, in my opinion, enhance the worship experience of the modern worshipper. Furthermore, keeping in mind the thrall inspired by the reappearance of the sun, which stands behind *El Adon*, may have implications for the appropriateness of melodies applied to it. Here, we enter an area of great subjectivity, but it seems to me that slow, meditational tunes may be more apt than triumphal, fast, anthems.³⁰

NOTES:

¹This awareness may be behind Rava’s rule in BT Berakhot 11b that each of these two blessings must mention both light and darkness. The attunement to the sky as the source of light and darkness accounts for the evening’s blessing to specifically declare that God’s name is *Adonai Tseva’ot*, “The Master of Constellations.”

²The fact that *El Adon* refracts its depiction of the sun and the moon through an image also found in BT Hullin 60b is well

known and cited by many commentators as far back as Abudraham (14th c. Spain). The image is of the moon complaining that there can't be two master-lights in the sky. This is based on Gen. 1:16a which records two "great lights" in the heavens, understood by the Talmud here referring to a time when the moon was as large as the sun. God "rewards" this observation by causing the moon to reduce in size. This accords with Gen. 1:16b which speaks of a "greater light" and a "lesser light." The story goes on, and the moon, like a recalcitrant but beloved child, is not consoled until God "atones" by offering a "sin-offering" to the moon on the occasion of every *Rosh Hodesh*. This conclusion of the story construes the sin-offering ordained for Israel to bring uniquely on this holiday (Num. 28:15) as if it were brought by God to the moon. *El Adon* hints at all of this – in style typical to *piyyut* – in the *resh* strophe, "(God) saw and ordained the size of the moon."

³Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer: A Guide to Personal Devotion and the Worship Service* (Schocken Books, New York: 1994), 139. Although it is not entirely clear which passages are *piyyutim* and which are fragments of *piyyutim*, Hammer offers a reasonable accounting of the *piyyutim* and *piyyut*-fragments (known as *yotserot*, based upon *Birkat Yotser Or*) in his *Or Hadash: A Commentary on Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*, (The Rabbinical Assembly, New York: 2003), xxiii.

⁴Macy Nulman, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer: Ashkenazic and Sephardic Rites*, (Jason Aaronson, Inc., Northvale, New Jersey: 1993), 61.

⁵*LeTefutsatan shel Kedushat Ha'Amidah VeHaYotser BeMinhagot HaTefillah shel Benei Erets Yisrael* ("On the Spread of the Kedushat of the Amidah and of (Birkat) Yotser Among the Inhabitants of the Land of Israel"), *Tarbiz* 38 (1969), 270-271.

⁶The best summary of the state of research on the history and meaning of the *Kedushah* is Meir Bar-Ilan, "*Kavvei Yesod LeHithavutah shel HaKedushah VeGibushah*," ("Major Trends in the Formation and Crystallization of the Kedushah"), *Da'at*, 25, 1990, 5-20. Bar-Ilan's unusually frank – for the scholarly world – admission that, in essence, we don't really understand the function of the *Kedushah*, is refreshing.

⁷*Borei kedoshim* ("Creator of holy ones <= angels>"), *Yotser meshartim* ("Maker of those who serve <= angels>"), *Retson Konam* ("the will of their <i.e., of the angels'> Originator"), *LeYotsram* ("their <the angels'> Maker").

⁸Translation from JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh, (The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia: 1999).

⁹Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. by Raymond P. Scheindlin, (The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia and The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York: 1993 – an English translation of the 1972 Hebrew translation and revision of the original 1913 German edition), 96.

¹⁰It appears in only one of the several extant manuscripts of what is functionally the earliest prayer book (actually a long *teshuvah*, or responsum), *Seder Rav Anram* from the 9th century, CE. Nevertheless, the manuscript tradition for *Seder Rav Anram* is irreparably compromised. Since it carries such great authority, later generations inserted – knowingly or not – prayers that were not found in the original version of *Seder Rav Anram*. See Daniel Goldschmidt, ed., *Seder Rav Anram*, (Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, Jerusalem: 1971), 71. It does not appear at all in the 10th century Siddur R. Sa'adia Gaon, eds. I. Davidson, S. Assaf, B. I. Joel, (*Mekitze nirdamin, Reuven Mass*, Jerusalem: 1951). The location in this edition of *Siddur Rav Sa'adia* that would parallel the location in which *El Adon* is found in later *Siddurim* would be 120-121, but *El Adon* does not appear there. See Israel Davidson, *Otsar ha-shirah veha-piyyut* ("Thesaurus of Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry"), (Jewish Theological Seminary, New York: 1924), I:155, #3320. Nor is *El Adon* found in the 11th-12th c *Malzor Vitry*. See R. Simḥah of Vitry, *Malzor Vitry*, (*Makhon Otzar ha-poskim*, Jerusalem: 2004), 181. Davidson lists Landshuth's theory – recorded also by Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 96, and by Lawrence A Hoffman in *My People's Prayer Book, Volume 10, Shabbat Morning*, (Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont: 2007), 81 – that *El Adon* is an expansion of a *piyyut* in a similar location in *Birkat Yotser Or* in *Shaharit shel Hol* (weekday morning service) known as *El barukh gedol de'ah*. That *piyyut* is an acrostic in which words begin with consecutive letters of the alphabet. *El Adon* is an acrostic in which strophes begin with consecutive letters of the alphabet. The fact is, as Fleischer points out (*LeTefutsatan*, 270, n. 53), that only the first four

strophes of the two *piyyutim* begin with the same word, and therefore this theory is not very securely grounded.

¹¹Moshe Hershler, ed., *Siddur Rabbenu Shlomoh, Siddur Hasidei Ashkenaz (Hemed, Jerusalem: 1971). 159f.*

¹²Meir Bar-Ilan, *Sitrei Tefillah V'Heikhalot* (The Mysteries of Jewish Prayer and Hekhalot), (Bar-Ilan University Press, Jerusalem: 1987), 115-120.

¹³A somewhat dated, but still useful, general introduction to this literature is Joseph Dan, "The Religious Experience of the *Merkavah*," in Arthur Green, ed., *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Ages*, (Crossroad, New York: 1986), 289-307.

¹⁴"Any dating of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is necessarily approximate. The text provides no historical allusions, accurate attributions, or citations in early Rabbinic literature to ground it in history. Therefore, the criteria for dating the text are necessarily literary and stylistic." Michael D. Swartz, *Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism: An Analysis of Ma'aseh Merkavah*, (J. C. B. Mohr, Tubingen: 1992), 216. Swartz, 218, ultimately says that the text was probably "composed in Palestine between the fourth and seventh centuries." See Ithamar Gruenwald, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism: Studies in Apocalypticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism*, (Verlag Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main: 1988), 53: "Jewish Apocalypticism and *Merkavah* mysticism are the two kinds of esoteric literature in the time of the Mishnah and the Talmud (circa 180 BCE to 600 CE)." Rachel Elior, in *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford University Press, Portland, Oregon: 2004), 232, holds that it was created "around the time of the Mishnah and the Talmud." See further in Elior, 232, n. 3, in which she cites other opinions from the earliest views (Tannaitic period – Gershom Scholem and Arthur Green) to the latest period (Peter Schafer, who places *Hekhalot* literature in a range from the late talmudic period to well into the Geonic era).

¹⁵*Ma'aseh Merkavah* was published by Alexander Altmann in 1946 in "Shirei Kedushah BeSifrut HaHeikhalot HaKedumah," *Melilah*, 2, 1-24. Gershom Scholem published the entire text in 1960 in his *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: 1960; rev. ed. 1965), 103-117, although Scholem did not acknowledge Altmann's prior publication. It is also included in Peter Schafer's critical edition of *Hekhalot* literature, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tubingen, 1981). The specific parallel passage containing the passage which parallels the second half of *El Adon* is found in Schafer, *Synopse*, 230.

¹⁶Bar-Ilan, *Sitrei Tefillah V'Heikhalot*, 118.

¹⁷Recent support for Bar-Ilan's position is found in Rabbi Dr. Barry Freundel, *Why We Pray What We Pray: The Remarkable History of Jewish Prayer*, (Urim Publications, Jerusalem, New York: 2010).

¹⁸Ezra Fleischer dated *El Adon* to a period earlier than that of the *payyetanim* whose names we know, and on the basis of this, Bar-Ilan dated it to the 3rd or 4th centuries, CE. See Fleischer, *LeTefutsatan*, 270 and Bar-Ilan, *Sitrei Tefillah VeHekhalot*, 120.

¹⁹The letter *sin* appears in *El Adon* where one would expect the letter *samekh*. In Medieval Hebrew literature, this is not unusual: the two letters are often used interchangeably.

²⁰That excludes the two references to these same images as pronouns or in possessive suffix: *yetsaram, bahem*, and the one reference to them in a verb: *notnim*.

²¹The text is found, with variants from five manuscripts, in Peter Schaefer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, (J.C. B. Mohr, Tubingen: 1987), 230. It is also found in Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 116-117, and in Altmann, *Shirei Kedushah BeSifrut HaHeikhalot HaKedumah*, 16-18. A translation of the entire book of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* is found in Naomi Janowitz, *The Poetics of Ascent: Theories of Language in a Rabbinic Text* (State University of New York Press, Albany: 1989), 29-81. Her translation of the prayer which contains the parallel to *El Adon* is found on 65.

²²Apparently, part of this name of God, from the root *raz*, “secret.”

²³Janowitz, *The Poetics of Ascent*, 64.

²⁴Translation mainly that of Janowitz, *The Poetics of Ascent*, 65. I modified her translation when necessary since she used, as the basis of her translation, Schaefer’s ms. New York 8128 while Bar-Ilan identified Schaefer’s ms. Munich 22 as the most reliable text.

²⁵Reuven Hammer, *Or Hadash*, 108.

²⁶Actually, the matter is a bit more complex. There was apparently a long process by which various divine attributes became the ten *sefirot*. One element in this process is certainly related to angels. But the attributes were also likely hypostatized in various other ways, and only gradually become the full-blown *kabbalistic* scheme. See Yehudah Liebes, “*Middotav shel ha-Elohim*,” (“The Attributes of God”), *Tarbiz* 70:1, 2001, 51-74; Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut: 2002), 226-230. I am grateful to Professor Daniel Matt for pointing out to me the additional complexities in this issue and for drawing my attention to the passages in Liebes’ article and in Idel’s book.

²⁷Rachel Elior records that “...Angelological traditions comprise the major part of the *Hekhalot* literature and are presented in hundreds of paragraphs in the Synopsis; so many that it would be impossible to list them in detail...” Rachel Elior, “Mysticism, Magic and Angelology: The Perception of Angels in Hekhalot Literature,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1, 1 (1993-1994), 4, n. 8. (The article is also found on the web at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/16613095/R-EliorMysticism-Magic-and-AngelologyThe-perception-of-Angels-in-Hekhalot-Literature>). She further says, 8-9: “...(t)he worship of the angels < she means “the worship by the angels”> in the celestial shrines is a liturgical model which is imitated by those who descend to the *Merkabah*: the ceremony which the angels celebrate before the Throne of Glory, which includes immersion, the recitation of praises, the singing of hymns, the recital of prayers, the attachment of crowns, and the uttering of the Name, is taken as a basic ritual pattern which those who descend to the *Merkabah* seek to learn and imitate... (T)he focus upon the figure of the angels and the deep concern with the details of the celestial ritual derive from the fact that the world of the angels is conceived as a source of authority for religious innovation, and its ceremonies serve as a paradigm determined at the time of ascent to heaven, as a cosmological framework and also as a background for the mystic and ritual conception of the worship of those who descend to the *Merkabah*.”

²⁸See n. 5.

²⁹The terms *ofan*, *ofanim* are found in Ezekiel 1:15f. They do not refer, in this context, to wheel-angels, but to wheels. However, in later mystical speculation, these terms functioned as the source for wheel-angels.

³⁰And perhaps it is not entirely off the mark to suggest that if a worshipper desires to study *El Adon*, outside of a *Shabbat* worship setting, with appropriate music playing in the background, s/he could do worse than to play recordings of the following pieces: *Nocturnes* by Debussy, *The Planets, Opus 32* by Holst, and *Dark Star* by The Grateful Dead.