

“THE NAME WITH WHICH YOU ASCEND TO HEAVEN”: SEMIOTIC AND  
LINGUISTIC IDEOLOGY IN THE *MIDRASH OF SHEMHAZAI AND ‘AZA’EL*

by

Aleah J. Cornett

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Approved by:

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Dr. John C. Reeves

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Dr. Eric Hoenes del Pinal

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Dr. Kent Brintnall

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## ABSTRACT

ALEAH J. CORNETT. "The Name With Which You Ascend to Heaven": Semiotic and Linguistic Ideology in the *Midrash of Shemhazai and 'Aza'el*.

The *Midrash of Shemhazai and 'Aza'el* may appear much like other midrashic exegetical texts that seem ubiquitous in Rabbinic Judaism. It is, however, different not only because it appears much later and is a part of a larger recontextualization concerning an angelic interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4, but also because the peculiarity of some of its plot points: the fact that a sexual encounter between an angel and a human that results in her pronunciation of the Divine Name, ascension to heaven and transformation into a star as her reward--is known nowhere else in Jewish literature. In this paper, I will focus my analysis on the human subject in the narrative, 'Asterah. Using the lense of linguistic anthropology and, following Charles Goodwin, focusing on the 'semiotic fields' of the text, I argue that 'Asterah's 'reward'--being installed as a celestial body, a star--is not *best* read as simply that her 'purity' is *necessarily or primarily* her escape of the sex act itself--but rather *her bodily ascension is the removal of the threat of potential procreation*, which is the main concern of the text. It is my contention, then, that an analysis of the *Midrash of Shemhazai and 'Aza'el* that prioritizes the subject and the body can lead to some possible and reasonable understanding to the meaning of the narrative encounter between 'Asterah and Shemhazai and how the pronunciation of the Divine Name is used not only to translate a human to heaven but also how it aids in her changing identity from a human subject to a celestial one.

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## INTRODUCTION

The *Midrash of Shemhazai and 'Aza'el*, at first blush, may appear much like other aggadic midrashic exegetical texts that seem ubiquitous in Rabbinic Judaism. It is, however, different not only because it appears much later as part of a larger recontextualization concerning an angelic interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4,<sup>1</sup> but also because of the peculiarity of some of its plot points: a sexual encounter between an angel and a human that results in her pronunciation of the Divine Name, and ascension to heaven and transformation into a star as her reward are known nowhere else in Jewish literature.<sup>2</sup> The version of this text that appears to be the oldest is part of a collation of stories and midrashim created in the eleventh century called *Bereshit Rabbati*, attributed to Moshe ha-Darshan, in Narbonne, France.<sup>3</sup> Although the ultimate 'source' of this text is

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<sup>1</sup> Annette Yoshiko Reed outlines how despite the celebrated multivocality that is the hallmark of classical Rabbinic literature--most notably in the genre of midrash--the *Book of Watchers* and Enochic texts as a whole were summarily abandoned for much of antiquity until the medieval period, "rendered largely irrelevant for Jews in the sphere of Rabbinic influence" and instead the 'sons of God' were interpreted as meaning purely human antediluvian corruptors. She also says that Rabbinic Judaism tended to adopt "a euhemeristic approach to Gen 6:1-4 in place of an angelic one" in which this story is possibly a condemnation of priests taking foreign wives whereas many Christian traditions read the 'sons of God' as as the sons of Seth who intermarried (and thereby sinned) with the 'daughters of men', meaning the daughters of Cain. (Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of Enochic Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 206-207 and 221-22.). This is also mirrored in *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer*, a possible 'source' of the *Midrash*, where it is the daughters of Cain that entice the angels to sin (Lesses, "Women and Gender", 301-302). Also see David Winston Suter, "Fallen angel, fallen priest: the problem of family purity in 1 Enoch 6-16." Hebrew Union College Annual 50, 1979, 115-135.

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Lesses, "Women and Gender in the Hekhalot Literature", Ra'anan S. Boustán, Martha Himmelfarb, and Peter Schäfer, eds., *Hekhalot literature in Context: Between Byzantium and Babylonia*, 2013, 302. The particular aspects of this narrative that are of concern to this analysis (a woman with astral associations who has a sexualized encounter with an angel) *does* have traces in Islam in the form of the *Tale of Harut and Marut*, which features a woman/star who escapes a sexual advance made by angels either by saying a few words or flying away. In the Quran, these angels are said to have taught 'magic' and other forbidden secrets to humanity. See Lesses, "Women and Gender", 304-308 and John C. Reeves, "Some Parascriptural Dimensions of the "Tale of Hārūt wa-Mārūt"", *Journal of American Oriental Society*, 135 (2015): 817-842.

<sup>3</sup> Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 258 and Strack, Hermann Leberecht and Günter Stemberger. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1991), 355.

unknown, some scholars regard *Bereshit Rabbati* an abridged version of a larger work<sup>4</sup> and also one of the first compilations to include the *Midrash of Shemhazai and 'Aza'el*.<sup>5</sup> Strack & Stemberger remark in their *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, that the *Bereshit Rabbati* is “hardly of value for textual criticism of earlier midrashim, since the author freely revises, combines, and abridges his sources.”<sup>6</sup> What such compilations lack in ‘value’ in analyzing earlier midrashim, these texts make up in forming a repository of nonrabbinic and parabiblical sources and motifs.<sup>7</sup> The earliest ‘source’ of the *Midrash of Shemhazai and 'Aza'el* (henceforth *Midrash*) appears in the *Book of Watchers*--a text that is a part of what is commonly called *I Enoch*--and more recently the possibility of the Aramaic *Book of Giants* has emerge as a possible source.<sup>8</sup> Both texts deal with similar themes: angels described as being the ‘Watchers’ descending to earth, the teaching of forbidden knowledge, the illicit ‘mixing’ of heaven and earth by mating with human women, the engendering of offspring from such unions, the Giants, and punishment for these transgressions. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein offers that “no longer subordinate to the proof-text and its language, the later midrashim offer colorful descriptions, employ

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<sup>4</sup> Strack & Stemberger, *Introduction to Talmud and Midrash*, 355. Rebecca Lesses says “R. Moshe, or more likely his source, adapted the story to make it explicitly Jewish.” Lesses, “Women and Gender”, 307.

<sup>5</sup> Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 259-260.

<sup>6</sup> Strack & Stemberger, 356. Martha Himmelfarb gives some possibilities to the traditions and stories that might have been available to R. Moses, see Himmelfarb, “R. Moses the Preacher and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs,” *AJS Review* 9 (1984): 55-78; also see Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 264; Rebecca Lesses also mentions the diverse roots of the *Midrash*, which include the possibility of the Qumranic *Book of Giants*, and *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer*, the last especially in regards to rest of the *Midrash* following ‘Asterah’s ascent: Lesses, “Women and Gender”, 303-304 and 304, n.96. The most notable ‘source’ for the text, as we shall see, is various Muslim commentaries (*tafsir*) of Qur’an 2:102 the mentions the angels Harut and Marut who are sent down and then teach people sorcery; also Lesses, “Women and Gender, 304-308 and Reeves, “Some Parascriptural Dimensions,” 817-42.

<sup>7</sup> Himmelfarb, “R. Moses the Preacher”, esp. 55-58 in discussion on later midrashim ‘sources’, in particular that of Moshe ha-Darshan.

<sup>8</sup> See Ken M. Penner, “Did the Midrash of Shemihazai and Azael Use the Book of Giants?” in *Sacra Scriptura: How "Non-Canonical" Texts Functioned in Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, eds. Charlesworth, James H., and McDonald, Lee Martin (London, New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015).

graphic verbs and compose unrestrained descriptions”<sup>9</sup> While Rubenstein argues that the later midrashim serve as “a step between the mythic perspective of the rabbinic period and the pervasive mythic thinking of kabbalah” and that these should be viewed as internal developments and not the result of mythic influence from outside cultures,<sup>10</sup> other scholars have pointed to the multitude of parallels in narration, themes and motifs of later midrashim to its medieval Near Eastern context to suggest the possibility of transmission of some stories/traditions through non-Jewish sources or to propose a dialogue between medieval Jews, Christians, and Muslims in some cases.<sup>11</sup>

The myriad of sources in later midrashim, then, are the means of its cultural production. In this paper, I will analyze the *Midrash* as one such example of an exegetical expansion of both biblical and parabiblical texts, embedding cultural ideologies that reflect a particular moment, one that is re-visiting and perhaps re-evaluating motifs and themes.<sup>12</sup> Through a close reading of the text, I will focus on the human subject in the

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<sup>9</sup> J. Rubenstein, “From Mythic Motifs to Sustained Myth: The Revision of Rabbinic Traditions in Medieval Midrashim.” *HTR* 89 (1996), 158.

<sup>10</sup> Rubenstein says that if there is any outside influence, it is from introduction to different narrative forms.

<sup>11</sup> Reeves notes in his use of ‘parascriptual’ that “communities of readers in Near Eastern late antiquity performed, experienced, and transmitted ‘Bible’ as well as other scriptures in a variety of registers and interpretive formats,” Reeves, “Some Parscriptual Dimensions,” 817-18. Martha Himmelfarb also sees the later midrashim as having a renewed interest in what is now termed ‘pseudepigrapha’--that is, ancient texts that attributed an author but their authorship is questionable or uncertain--and the possibility that some of these may have made their way back to Judaism through Christian transmission, Himmelfarb, “R. Moses the Preacher,” 56-7. Concerning the *Midrash*, Annette Yoshiko Reed says that Jewish apocalypses must have transmission or development elsewhere because later midrashim--including *Bereshit Rabbati*--“contain few parallels with the pre-Rabbinic interpretation of Gen 6:1-4 and the Enochian myth of angelic descent; there is little to suggest an unbroken link of development linking pre-Rabbinic exegesis of Gen 6:1-4 with the exegesis of this passage in early medieval Judaism.” Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 212.

<sup>12</sup> Himmelfarb details how past scholarship has treated pseudepigrapha and apocrypha (on which the *Midrash* is based off of) as “storehouses of motifs, traditions, and ideas, while denying them a basis in religious experience”. More recent scholarship has moved away from focusing on editorial and authorial intent to see it as “an organic part of the author’s activity”. As Himmelfarb notes, pseudepigraphical texts--that is, ancient texts that are attributed to an author but their authorship is questionable or uncertain--are best analyzed as social phenomenon and not as psychological artifacts because they are most importantly a

narrative, ‘Asterah, and how her subjectivity, agency, and performativity evolve as she is socialized into a new identity as a celestial subject through her use of the Divine Name. Using the lense of linguistic anthropology and focusing on the ‘semiotic fields’<sup>13</sup> of the text, I argue that ‘Asterah’s ‘reward’--being installed as a celestial body, a star--is not *best* read as simply the result of her escape as a sexual subject. ‘Asterah’s preservation of ‘purity’ is not *necessarily or primarily* her escape of the sex act itself--but rather the removal of her physical body through ascension into heaven constitutes her the removal of the *threat of procreation*, which is the main concern of the text. That is, the destructive and defiling presence of the Giants, the progeny of the angels and human women that appear later on in the *Midrash*. In this fashion, I will analyze how her potential exchange of human knowledge for that of Divine knowledge creates and identifies her as a certain class and kind of being and subject as well as her ‘escape’ from the illicit mixing of heaven and earth through her use of the Divine Name. The genre of midrash is a cultural production which embeds cultural ideologies and it is my contention that an analysis of the *Midrash* that prioritizes the subject and the body can lead to some possible and reasonable understandings of the meaning of the narrative encounter between ‘Asterah and Shemhazai and what ideologies about language it may espouse and embed. Because the subject of this narrative uses the Divine Name to ascend to heaven, I argue that the narrative employs a linguistic and semiotic ideology in which language does more than *cause* action; it *creates* agency, *creates action* that can aid in changing the identity of the speaker.

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part of a “genre of literature at a particular time in history” Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 96-98.

<sup>13</sup> I will be following Charles Goodwin’s use of this term as discussed below.

## PRAGMATICS OF LANGUAGE AND PERFORMATIVE THEORY

As a facet of semiotic ideologies, language ideologies are beliefs and thoughts held about the origin(s), function(s) or the uses of language. Language alone is self-reflexive: we must use language to talk about language. When talking about what language is or does we are doing more than talking about communication, but rather we are making distinctions about who, how and what kind of language is intelligible, appropriate, or legitimate and in what circumstances. Beliefs about language and its use are thus inevitably intertwined with and often embed thoughts about identity, culture and social systems of organization, hierarchy and power. Language thus has the capacity to *do* things in the world. This is understood as the pragmatic function, outlined by J. L. Austin in his landmark text, *How to Do Things With Words*, describing the performative use of language in terms of what he called ‘performative utterances’, which include statements like “I do” or “I promise” in which the words constitute the act. In other words, saying the words ‘I promise’ is the promise itself; the words are *doing* the doing, they are the thing that is being *done* rather than a description of an act outside of the words themselves.<sup>14</sup>

It is this pragmatic function of language then leads to the performative nature of language in general. Charles Peirce first identified indices as indications “which show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them.” In other words, when a hearer interprets a communicative event, they take into account not only the semantic meaning of the words said, but also the entire complex context of the event. This contextual field includes not only the socio-cultural and historical knowledge

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<sup>14</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to do things with words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.

(both formal and personal) the hearer has from experience, but also the wealth of information the hearer can gain from their senses and the hearer's place in that context as well as in history. In this way, the repeated use of words in various social interactions over time attaches or 'indexes' social ideas, such that there is some degree of connotation to all language. The use of indices and indexicality in language, then, is more than just isolated associations of certain words, but are part of a constitutive process that constantly reinscribes and reinforces social meanings to semiotic and communicative events such that "part of the meaning of any utterance (spoken or written) is its social history, its social presence, and its social future".<sup>15</sup>

In Judith Butler's theory of performativity she posits that language is markedly more than a mere performance; she argues that the indexicality means that language does not simply *perform* meaning, but rather that it *creates* meaning itself. Butler uses this to understand gender identification in which saying a child is 'female' or 'male' *creates* that identification, and thus *it is the process by which the subject appears*. This is because the very words 'female' and 'male' relate social understandings about identity that goes beyond the physicality of biological reproductive systems--which is, presumably, the semantic meaning of the words. These meanings, attached to the very words 'female' and 'male' through a indexical process over time then are associated with any child labeled as either sex. Butler says that this means that "gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect

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<sup>15</sup> Elinor Ochs, "Indexing Gender." In *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*, edited by Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 338.

the very subject it appears to express”.<sup>16</sup> In other words, ‘being’ a gendered subject requires the creation of the subject as a certain sex through this process of indexicality and the repetition of these indices is created and continued within a given culture through the child’s socialization to gender norms. The performativity of gender thus *creates* and *sustains* gender ideologies. In this way, we can see that identity can be created through the use of language. In the *Midrash*, as we shall see, the subject--’Asterah--is created as a different kind of being in certain ways through her both her calling as a sexual subject and ultimately her use of the Divine Name.

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<sup>16</sup> Butler, Judith. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” *In Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: a Reader*, edited by John Storey. (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 1998, 263.

## SEMIOTIC IDEOLOGY IN MIDRASH

In order to reach some reasonable conclusions about what the use of the Divine Name espouses with the narrative, I seek not merely a ideology of language but a semiotic ideology, which Webb Keane says includes “anything else that enters into actual semiotic practice functions within perceptible experience by virtue of its material properties.”<sup>17</sup> This approach to analysis allows two things: 1) to examine these semiotic functions as both reasonable and recognizable from the context of its known sources, primarily Enochic literature and traditions by 2) taking into account the subject and therefore the body in the *Midrash* in terms of the ‘semiotic fields’ of the narrative.

First, by focusing not only on a linguistic ideology but a semiotic ideology, the *Midrash* can be analyzed for semiotic functions that are both reasonable and recognizable from what can be understood of the cultural and religious context of its production--in specific themes and motifs of its known ‘sources’, primarily Enochic literature. While these texts do not fully encapsulate the context of the cultural production of the *Midrash*, they can aid in employing what Laura M. Ahearn calls a “practice theory of meaning constraint.”<sup>18</sup> In studying the effects of rising rates of literacy and the practice of writing ‘love letters’ on the cultural understandings of marriage in Nepal, Ahearn maintains that between the extremes of the indeterminacy of meaning and limitless meaning, a “bounded range of possible interpretations that the readers might construct” can be discerned when “both text and context [are] taken into consideration” because “they must

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<sup>17</sup> Webb Keane, *Christian moderns: freedom and fetish in the mission encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Ahearn, *Invitations to love: literacy, love letters, and social change in Nepal*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001, 57.

be understood to be intrinsically interwoven.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, in close analysis of the *Midrash* and its context, some possible interpretations of meaning will emerge and seem more likely to be situated in keeping with the cultural context and reception history of the text. No matter how careful and thorough the analysis, however, these interpretations (and any kind of conclusions or implications drawn from them) will be constrained by current and historical cultural and academic understandings of the contexts, the textual evidence available, and even my own temporally situated bias and perspective. More broadly, communicative events are constrained by their subjective nature,<sup>20</sup> but it is this practice theory that argues, as I do, that some reasonable interpretations of meaning of the text can be drawn from such an analysis.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, by pursuing a semiotic ideology that is in part focused on the spoken use of the Divine Name, I am foregrounding what Charles Goodwin calls ‘semiotic fields’ in which action and body, as well as material surroundings, play just as important a role in the creation of meaning as speech. Semiotic fields also serve as more than just context to aid in interpretation of meaning--they allow interpretation of a communicative event as an event; that is, a unified unit in which meaning is construed through the presence of multiple and concurrent sign systems, including visual, material, and linguistic.<sup>22</sup> This type of analysis is usually done in an ethnographic study where action is

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<sup>19</sup> Ahearn, 57.

<sup>20</sup> For more on this and considerations for the limitations of ethnographic study and modes of analysis and documentation in linguistic anthropology and the social study of communicative events, see Charles L. Briggs, *Learning How to Ask: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal of the Role of the Interview in Social Science Research*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> See Ahearn’s full Practice Theory of Meaning Constraint, *Invitations*, 56-58.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Goodwin, "Action and embodiment within situated human interaction," *Journal of Pragmatics* 32 (2000): 1489-1522. Goodwin says “It is argued that actions are both assembled and understood through a process in which different kinds of sign phenomena instantiated in diverse media,

clearly defined and documented and often recorded. The specific socio-cultural context of the communicative event is also usually studied and documented as much as is feasible in order to aid in analysis. It seems unusual, then, to turn to an analysis that centers on real-life speech, action and body to a written medium such as this midrashic narrative, especially in that the cultural context of its production is largely unavailable to us.<sup>23</sup> I argue, however, that because this text deals with bodily ascension into heaven through the use of spoken language, it necessitates an analytical approach that prioritizes looking at language and action as one unit. Language and action thus occur in relation to one another and that meaning can only be interpreted by taking into account their concurrence. I also contend that this type of analytical approach can be adapted to this narrative because the text itself prioritizes differences in space (earth/heaven) and subjectivity (human/angel, woman/man) as well as movement (ascending/descending) that emphasize the agency of the characters involved--that is, their socially constructed ability to act.

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what I call semiotic fields, are juxtaposed in a way that enables them to mutually elaborate each other", 1490.

<sup>23</sup> Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 58.

## MIDRASH AND THE SUBJECT

In analyzing semiotic fields, and the semiotic ideologies they evince and embed, I am also thus necessarily prioritizing the subject, the one who speaks the Name and ascends to heaven. Joshua Levinson, in looking at rabbinic legal texts and midrash aggadah, adapts the idea of the subject to a narrative character in midrash. He says that midrash reads between the lines of biblical narrative and that “verisimilitude is achieved when states and behaviors in the narrative generally conform to its readers’ ideology and/or model of the world”.<sup>24</sup> Asterah, then, can be understood as a subject within the narrative as a historically situated character in which cultural ideologies are played out through her actions, dialogue and characterization. Her character must then be understood (as best it can be) in the context of the intended readers’ worldview and perspective.

To this end, I will adopt Webb Keane’s notion of the subject as a “historically and culturally specific, and semiotically mediated, construction of the nature of the human and its capacities.”<sup>25</sup> In ‘Asterah’s use of the Divine Name and her subsequent bodily ascension, she is a culturally specific subject of a medieval midrash who has the capacity to act in a semiotically mediated way. While Webb Keane’s work is on Protestant Christian modernity in colonial and missionary encounters, Keane explores the moral implication of who has agency and who does not. He says that the idea of agency is inseparable to “people’s self-understanding from the historical specificity of the concrete

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<sup>24</sup>Joshua Levinson, “Post-Classical Narratology and the Rabbinic Subject,” in Constanza Cordoni and Gerhard Langer, eds., *Narratology, Hermeneutics, and Midrash: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Narratives from the Late Antiquity Through to Modern Times* (Göttingen: Vienna University Press, 2014), 90. Levinson, 89. Levinson, 89.

<sup>25</sup> Keane, *Christian moderns*, 55.

practices and semiotic forms in which their self-understanding is embedded”.<sup>26</sup> In other words, agency itself is a cultural ideology of what it means to be a social subject. In light of this, I resist a reading of the text that posits a model of subjectivity to ‘Asterah and thus assigns modern moral implications to her agency. As Annette Yoshiko Reeds suggests in “Gendering Heavenly Secrets?”, the sexual encounter of heaven and earth present in the antediluvian verses of Genesis 6 and the Enochic *Book of Watchers* can be read with modern notions of misogyny, but to make them the focus of the text “may cause us to miss much that is interesting about the rest of the ancient discussion surrounding women, fallen angels, earthly power, and heavenly knowledge”.<sup>27</sup>

By foregrounding the subject in this type of analysis, what is risked is to understand ‘Asterah in terms of our modern and culturally situated moral understanding of female subjectivity and issues of consent and agency in particular because of the sexualized interaction between ‘Asterah and Shemhazai that explicitly centers around ‘Asterah’s ‘answer’ to Shemhazai’s sexual request. The temptation to ‘read into’ the text these concerns, however, isn’t solely because of our modern cultural perspective, but because the text itself embeds ideologies about gender and sex in its discussion of the proper relationship between heaven and earth.

I propose, then, a mode of analysis that does not ignore what ‘Asterah’s subjectivity and agency says about embedded ideas of gender and sex, but seeks to re-embed such gender and sexual ideologies in order to understand what possible and reasonable interpretations can be drawn. Following Laura Ahearn’s definition,<sup>28</sup> I will

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<sup>26</sup> Keane, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Reed, “Gendering Heavenly Secrets?” 110.

<sup>28</sup> Ahearn, 53-55.

analyze ‘Asterah’s ‘agency’ in terms of ‘Asterah’s ability to act in culturally constrained ways and also in terms of what kind of semiotic ideology that action and the ability of that action may espouse. This is necessary because as we will see, her ability to act is socially constrained in a manner that remains crucial to the interpretation of the text. In this way, we can see the *Midrash* as a cultural production, and analyze the narrative as a communicative event that espouses embedded cultural, semiotic, and linguistic ideologies and begin to understand what ‘Asterah’s ultimate ‘reward’ --her installation as a star in the Pleiades-- might mean in its literary and socio-cultural context.

A keystone text of the *Midrash* seems to be the *Book of the Watchers* (hereafter *BW*), a part of what is commonly referred to as *I Enoch*, which details how the lead ‘Watcher’ angels, Shemhazai and ‘Aza’el, descend to earth in an interpretation and expansion of the first six lines in Genesis 6.<sup>29</sup> In the biblical verses, we are told that before the Flood, the ‘sons of God’ took human women as wives and engendered offspring, the ‘Nephilim’. Then, God regretted that he had created man because of his wickedness. The next verse starts with God’s instructions on how to build the Ark and warnings of the oncoming Flood. These scant verses have often been read as indication that the ‘Nephilim’ are, in fact, the children of the ‘daughters of man’ and the ‘sons of God, and are the same as the ‘men of renown’ and ‘heroes of old’ of the next verse-- half human, half-angel. This is then taken as a tale to explain how the earth became corrupted and the Flood became necessary, given God’s disappointment in man and the subsequent verses outlining the story of the Flood. The lines themselves, however, are far from clear,

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<sup>29</sup> Reed explains how the *BW* is a composite text with “a series of authors, redactors, and tradents” as well as its possible provenance as a ‘mainstream’ Rabbinic scribal text in the third century BCE and its popularity in Qumran (Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 58).

which opens them to a complicated history of clarification, interpretation and expansion which includes this elusive midrash.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See John J. Collins, “The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men,” in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity*, eds. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro. (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 259-274 and Ronald S. Hendel “The Nephilim were on the Earth: Genesis 6:1-4 and its Ancient Near Eastern Context,” in *The Fall of the Angels*, eds. Christoph Auffarth and Loren T. Stuckenbruck. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 11-37.

## THE CALLING OF 'ASTERAH AS A SEXUAL SUBJECT

The *Midrash* reads:

Immediately they descended (to earth), and the evil impulse gained control of them. When they beheld the beauty of mortal women, they went astray after them, and were unable to suppress their lust, as Scripture attests: 'and the sons of God saw, etc.' (Gen 6:2). Shemhazai beheld a maiden whose name was 'Asterah. He fixed his gaze upon her (and) said to her: 'Submit yourself (sexually) to me!' She answered him: 'I will not obey you until you teach me the Inexpressible Name, the one which when you pronounce it you ascend to Heaven.' He immediately taught her, she pronounced it, and she ascended to Heaven. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'Since she has kept herself pure from sin, I will make her an example so that she might be remembered in the world.' Immediately he fixed her (in the heavens) among the seven stars of the Pleiades. When Shemhazai and 'Azael saw this, they arose, married women, and engendered children.<sup>31</sup>

Like in Genesis 6, the 'sons of God' are unilaterally presented here as male and are thus juxtaposed with the 'daughters of man', who are the object of the Watcher's lust. Here, Shemhazai is presented as a divine male in direct juxtaposition to the human woman 'Asterah. As soon as Shemhazai arrives on the earthly plane, he is immediately overcome with our subject and tells her to 'submit' to him. The visual sight of her incites an auditory command: the word used is *השמע*, whose root letters, *שמע*, pertain to hearing sound and 'listening', but as in English, when one says 'listen' in its imperative form, it is a command to not only hear the speaker, but to obey them. This is then understood to be sexual request/demand supported by him previously 'fixed his gaze upon her', indicating his lust. This makes the command more closely translated as "obey!" 'Asterah uses the same word to reply that she won't listen to or obey him until he teaches her the Name. In asking her to 'submit' to him, Shemhazai is proposing (or supposing) a sexual encounter

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<sup>31</sup> I am indebted to John C. Reeves, who graciously provided me with the translation of the *Midrash* above from Hanokh Albeck, ed., *Midrash Berešit Rabbati* (Jerusalem: Mekitze Nirdamim, 1940), 29.14-31.8. Any subsequent clarification on words and their meaning/translation, however, are my own.

and ‘Asterah, willingly or unwillingly, is called as a sexual subject primarily by his demand, but also in choice to resist in another way than simply saying ‘no’ outright.

In his essay “No”, Don Kulick employs a theory of performativity that follows J. L. Austin and Judith Butler in understanding that everyday language “brings about a new social state”.<sup>32</sup> Kulick notes that “performativity theory insists that what is expressed or performed in any social context is importantly linked to that which is not expressed or cannot be performed. Hence, analysis of action and identity must take into account what is not or cannot be enacted”. He focuses here on “how particular uses of language, be they authorized or not, produce particular effects and particular kinds of subjects in fields or matrices of power”.<sup>33</sup> Kulick relates this to the ways in which the word ‘no’ can produce a female sexual subject with varying social and moral implications depending on the context in which it is said. He maintains that

“all of this configures a cultural grammar in which saying ‘no’ is part of what produces a female sexual subject, and not saying ‘no’ produces a male sexual subject...Its utterance invokes a domain in which one interactant can performatively produce himself as a man by responding to it by prolonging the encounter and ideally finally transforming it into a ‘yes’, and the other interactant can performatively produce herself as female by facilitating—willingly or not—that extension and prolongation of the sexual scene.”<sup>34</sup>

In this way, we can begin to understand how ‘Asterah is produced as a female sexual subject as she is called to Shemhazai’s demand. This instantly sets up a gendered and sexualized paradigm is understood in the context of the *BW* as a mirror to the relation of heaven and earth. ‘Atsterah, however, resists and subverts this role by her use of the Divine Name to ascend to heaven. Her resistance of Shemhazai’s demand is in part how

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<sup>32</sup> Don Kulick, "No". *Language and Communication*.(2003) 23 (2), 139.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-142.

she creates herself as a female subject within the narrative. While Kulick maintains that “the subject position ‘woman’ is produced in part by the normatively exhorted utterance ‘no’ when encountering male desire for sex”, ‘Asterah does not say ‘no’ outright but resists the sexual demand in another way that does give the same effect. Instead of using ‘no’ to participate and prolong the sexual scene in which Shemhazai will presumably eventually procure a ‘yes’, she instead resists him and prolongs the scene by giving a conditional ‘yes’ in exchange for knowledge that she will use to in order to engineer her escape.

It seems reasonable to speculate on the reasons for her choice to not outright refuse his sexual advance within what can be ascertained from both the narrative and its wider cultural context. ‘Asterah is likely constrained by her options for resistance to a sexual advance in a culture that emphasizes male authority, either for fear of upsetting the culturally established gender hierarchy or some perceived or real threat of rape and/or physical harm and violence to herself if she outright refuses him. The constraints on her ability to say ‘no’ outright are thus reinforced by the patriarchal milieu and by Shemhazai’s demands and the possibility that she recognizes him as an angel, or simply a different kind of being, thus stacking against her the payoff to risk saying ‘no’ outright to a sexual advance by an individual that is possibly physically and hierarchically more powerful than her. It seems likely that in the patriarchal worldview of the text, she is, as a woman, is expected to be a sexual subject. Her resistance to Shemhazai’s calling of her as a sexual subject by proposing a bargain, then, may be puzzling if we don’t consider the kind of female subject that she might be trying to create. ‘Asterah’s agency is contingent on Shemhazai’s actions and words. Shemhazai’s demand is a ‘call’ not only for her to act

or respond, but also a 'naming' of her as the object/subject that he 'fixed his gaze' on, indexing her as a sexual subject. His action ('fixing' his sight/eyes) and his words (the request to 'obey' or 'submit') thus aid in the production of 'Asterah as a sexual subject because it demands not only her attention, but compels her to some form of action--either towards or in rejection of him. Here, 'Asterah's resistance works in they same way to 'no' in that it defers the 'yes' to a future point in time and prolongs the encounter, which is vital in order to create a type of female subjectivity that carries no connotation of promiscuity. By saying 'not right now' and prolonging the scene, she is creating herself as a certain kind of female subject that was first proposed by Shemhazai's demand.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> A side effect of which, as noted by Kuclick, renders any female resistance in these culturally constructed sexual situations as ambiguous at best because it is culturally understood that a female who wants to be viewed as non-promiscuous would initially, at least, resist all sexual advances.

## PRONUNCIATION OF THE NAME

In his 1925 *Magic Science and Religion*, Bronislaw Malinowski, following ideas developed by James Frazer, sought to identify the difference in the worldview and practice of what he terms ‘magic’ and ‘religion’. He said that ‘magic’ is practices and rites performed with a practical aim, whereas ‘religion’ is practices and rites that are means within themselves.<sup>36</sup> While Malinowski overall worked under a schema of social evolution that misguides his attempts to classify and organize cultural practice as essentially either ‘religious’ or ‘magical’,<sup>37</sup> his observations underscore the pragmatic function that is often associated with the use of words or invocations of power. In particular, names have been thought to transcribe the essence or power of the thing named. Whereas in Saussurean semiotic theory words have an arbitrary relationship to their referent, ‘magical’ understandings of language posit a direct relationship with an object or person with the word or name used to refer to them. Therefore to ‘call’ a person is more than just speaking their name in order to catch their attention; in some manner, the physical act of speaking a word or name is imagined to bring the object forth. This can be thought of as simply bringing the object/subject into the proximity of the speaker, or, more dramatically, it can be thought to be bring the object/subject into *being*. This calling of the object/subject is reminiscent of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, but is different in that in what we may term as magical thinking, the name of the object/subject has a literal and physical connection so that by pronouncing its name, the

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<sup>36</sup> Bronisław Malinowski, "Magic Science and Religion," in Joseph Needham, ed., *Science Religion and Reality* (New York: the Macmillan Company, 1925), 81.

<sup>37</sup> Social evolution is a theory common in academia in the late nineteenth century that marks an upward trajectory of humanity wherein ‘primitive’ religions of indigenous peoples are linked to the religions of early man and--usually Protestant--Christianity is a more ‘evolved’ and superior spirituality.

speaker is literally reproducing the materiality of it. The auralit of the name is seen to contain the essentiality of the object/subject just as the physical form does. Joshua Trachtenberg notes in *Jewish Magic and Superstition* that “the essential character of things and of men resides in their names. Therefore to know a name is to be privy to the secret of its owner’s being, and master of his fate.” He continues: “To know the name of a man is to exercise power over him alone; to know the name of a higher, supernatural being is to dominate the entire province over which that being presides...This simple theory is at the bottom of the magic which operates through the mystical names and words that are believed to control the forces which in turn control our world.”<sup>38</sup>

The ‘Inexpressible Name’ that is the means of ‘Asterah’s (and the angels’) ascent to heaven is understood to be the personal name of the Israelite God, presumably the four letter Tetragrammaton, although Trachtenberg notes that in Talmudic times there is reference to twelve, forty-two, and seventy-two letter ‘ineffable’ names that all seem to be derived from the original four Hebrew consonants יהוה (Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey).<sup>39</sup> This is usually transliterated in English as YHWH and translated as Yahweh, although the original Hebrew pronunciation is somewhat a mystery in part due an overall shift in referring to the God of Israel as Elohim (meaning ‘God’) as the Israelite religion became a more widespread (rather than a local) practice after the Babylonian Exile and also a growing taboo of speaking the Name outside of cultic ritual conducted by Temple priests, particularly on the Day of Atonement.<sup>40</sup> In order to ensure the avoidance of speaking of the Divine Name in everyday observance, the scribal school of Masorettes in the ninth

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<sup>38</sup> Trachtenburg, Joshua, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 80.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>40</sup> Jacob Z. Lauterbach, “Substitutes for the Tetragrammaton,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 2 (1930-31): 39, n.1 and n.2.

century would either intentionally not place an vowel signs on YHWH when transcribing biblical texts, or they would insert the vowel signs of another name of God, such as Elohim or Adonai (Lord) in order to prompt the reader to substitute any attempt at the pronunciation of ‘real’ Name for Elohim, Adonai, or even Ha-Shem (literally meaning ‘the Name’) instead.<sup>41</sup>

The reverence for the power of God conveyed with the personal name of God as well as other names<sup>42</sup> and epithets associated with the Israelite God was a common feature of Jewish magic, in particular in the medieval period from which the *Midrash* originates.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps as a result of the power imbued in names for the Israelite God and the forbidden nature of the Divine Name in late antiquity and the middle ages, the Tetragrammaton and other related names were more widely used as common *voces magicae* in diverse Near Eastern practices. Names for the Israelite God show up in a diverse range of invocations, on talismans and amulets as well as curse and incantation bowls without clear indication whether the identity and origin of the deity is understood, but rather the use indicates it was known or reputed as a name that is imbued with great power. Webb Keane notes how language is a medium in which a identical sign can move into different contexts. While indexing refers to the building of social ideas and associations to word(s) over time through different social contexts, the recontextualization of a word must still be able to convey meaning. He says that this is what Jacques Derrida means when he points out the iterability of language, which

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<sup>41</sup> For more information on spoken and written substitutions as ways of avoiding rendering the divine name in speech or writing, see Lauterbach, “Substitutes for the Tetragrammaton,” 39-67.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Yah’ was often used as common shortened form of the Tetragrammaton. For more on the other forms of the Name used, see Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 90-92.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

“invites ‘nonserious’ uses of language, such as mimicry, sarcasm, and insincerity, as well as uses not intended by the author, such as magic, divination, or, say, the devil’s ways of quoting scripture.”<sup>44</sup> This use of language is ‘nonserious’ in the sense that it isn’t conveying inner thoughts or intention, but rather it references prior uses of the same language. The ability to convey meaning may depend on the limits of familiarity of the word and its indices to the audience, the hearer/reader of the language.<sup>45</sup> In this way, the use of the Name in contexts other than biblical, parabiblical or Israelite/Jewish ritual practice is not simply or even primarily referencing God--that is, the deity as referent--but instead calling upon the indices of that referent. Because the Name is used in rites and ritual with social power and prestige, its use telegraphs that power regardless of the knowledge of the deity it is intended to reference. The power that the ‘magical’ use of the Name holds is, then, in part a conveyance of social power and knowledge. While it is not clear if ‘Asterah understands who the Name refers to or simply the pragmatic function, it is clear that she understands that it is associated with Shemhazai, possibly because she understands that he is a different kind of being than her. The inclusion of the use of the Divine Name in the narrative as the type of language necessary for ascension does signal this power and knowledge to the audience of the *Midrash* and underlies her own gain in social power and knowledge through its use.

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<sup>44</sup> Keane, *Christian moderns*, 7. The iterability of language is the ability to reproduce the sign and still retain effective communication--in other words, for the sign to be recognized and meaning to be understood regardless of the different contexts it appears. This is ‘nonserious’ language from the perspective that language is ideally a reflection of true intention and inner thoughts. Keane also notes that this is the “one condition for the possibility of cultural circulation.”

<sup>45</sup> For example, if I don’t know the social indices of the word ‘girl’, then the phrase ‘you run like a girl’ spoken by a male to another male is a nonsensical phrase to me. Likewise, I have to understand those indices and the use of the phrase in previous contexts to understand its use when a female says the same phrase to another female. Recontextualized, the phrase is a joke that depends on the hearer’s social understanding of the word ‘girl’ as well as knowledge of the prior contexts which used that phrase and an understanding of its meaning in those contexts.

## THE EXCHANGE OF ILLICIT KNOWLEDGE

The secrecy and power that surrounds the pronunciation of the Name with the *Midrash* is most notably an example of the motif of teaching illicit or forbidden knowledge common in tales about the Watcher angels. The teaching of illicit knowledge is one of the ways that a transgression, a ‘mixing’ of heaven and earth, threatens God’s order in the *Midrash* and in wider related Watcher literature. Enochic literature in particular ties both Shemhazai and ‘Aza’el to the teaching of various forms of divine knowledge. In the *Book of the Watchers*, Shemhazai (1 Enoch 6:7-8) is the leader of the Watcher angel group while Azazel teaches instruments of war and seduction (1 Enoch 7: 1-5) along with various other angels who taught other subjects (1 Enoch 7: 6-17) which are forbidden to humans. In some ways this works as an etiology of evil whereby evil enters the world at the same time that humans gain the means or knowledge necessary to create culture in similar ways to tales about Prometheus as well as well as the story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1.<sup>46</sup> The heavenly secrets that are taught are forbidden because they bring danger, but they are also the foundations of what we would see as civilization. In stories about Prometheus, fire is dangerous (and thus forbidden) because not only is it physically harmful to humans, its power to create culture can potentially threaten the balance of power. Fire brings with it the knowledge and physical means to forge weapons, cook food and keep warm--which are all indications of civilization and culture. This type of powerful knowledge is dangerous and forbidden

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<sup>46</sup> The evil, as we shall see, is in part the danger of the divine secrets--knowledge about how to create instruments of war and incite lustfulness--but also the etiology of evil is explained by souls of the Giants becoming demons after they die in the Flood. In “Gendering Heavenly Secrets?” Reed says “Such concerns make sense, notably, in the context of the ancient discourse about the origins of civilization in both Jewish and Hellenistic cultures--including but not limited to Genesis and the traditions surrounding Prometheus”, 119.

because it threatens the distinction between heaven and earth, divine and human. If humans have the power and capacity to create civilization and to take care and organize themselves, they risk becoming too self-sufficient to rely on the gods. Similarly, the motif of teaching illicit knowledge in Watchers' tales underscores the separation of heaven and earth and the proper relations between the two. The teaching of Name, similarly, works to emphasize the tension between heaven and earth and the types of knowledge accorded to each.<sup>47</sup> The Name is powerful primarily because it provides the means for transport to heaven--a physical transgression of boundaries, but also because it is a type of knowledge that is kept to only heavenly beings (here, angels), and 'Asterah's learning the Name should be read as potential threat to the established order of the cosmos. The use of the Name potentially signifies her as a heavenly being. Yet, as we shall see, the text introduces a much bigger threat to cosmological order if she does not escape Shemhazai and transgress those boundaries.

Shemhazai is the instigator of the encounter, the one who 'fixed' his eyes on her. 'Asterah, however, seems to understand something of what/who he is because she asks for 'the Inexpressible Name, the one which when you pronounce it you ascend to Heaven.' It isn't clear that she even knows who the Name refers to, but rather that she understands what the Name *does* when someone *says* it; she comprehends its pragmatic rather than referential function. This suggests she knows several things: 1) there is a place to ascend *to*--we may assume she understands it as heaven although that isn't explicit; 2) certain people/beings can ascend to this place; 3) *the Name*, in specific-- is used to ascend to heaven--presumably by simple pronunciation; 4) that Name is known by some or

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<sup>47</sup> It also speaks, as we shall see, to a larger context of women's role in Watcher tales as the mediators between heaven and earth.

certain beings/people; 5) Shemhazai is one of these beings/people who know the Name and use it to ascend; 6) that Name can be taught through speech--she asks for him to 'tell' her. It does not say how 'Asterah came by all this information--in particular, it is curious upon meeting Shemhazai, she seems to instantly know that he would possess this type of knowledge. This implies that she recognizes him as a divine being, an angel or, at the very least, a different order of being, and that she has some previous knowledge of heaven and the different order of beings that inhabit it and what kinds of knowledge they possess. If only angels know and use the Name to ascend to heaven then the use or lack of use of that kind of language indicates the social position of the speaker. Like saying 'no' can create a sexual subject, the use of the Name here *does something socially*--it signifies that the speaker is a divine subject precisely because they have knowledge of and use the Name in its pragmatic function, which is also thought to *do* something--make the speaker ascend to heaven, a action that *also* marks the speaker as a divine subject. In asking to learn the Name, 'Asterah is thus necessarily asking not only for the means of ascension, but the social identity implied in the knowledge *and* use of the Name.

The text does not explain how 'Asterah came by this knowledge, but rather presents it as a natural fact within the narrative, underscoring the sexualized power dynamic between them--she understands him as a different order of being and thus more powerful, perhaps because of his knowledge of the Name. She seems to instantly grasp the power dynamic between them and uses that, for reasons untold, to escape it. However, instead of saying 'no' outright, 'Asterah's socially constrained ability to act leads her to trade human knowledge (sexual intercourse) for divine knowledge (the pronunciation of the Name) that allows her access to heaven and aids in her becoming a

celestial being. This social aspect of the use of language is what Pierre Bourdieu means when he discusses the use of ‘linguistic capital’: that is, the inherent social value that is the effect of using specific kinds of language in order for accessibility or acceptability in society. He says that

The social uses of language owe their specifically social value to the fact that they tend to be organized in systems of differences (between prosodic and articulatory or lexical and syntactic variants) which reproduce, in the symbolic order of differential deviations, the systems of social differences.<sup>48</sup>

Bourdieu points here to the fact that ‘linguistic capital’ is a kind of ‘social capital’ that either allows or disallows a speaker to access and acceptance into a social group by virtue of their linguistic competence. In asking for a ‘trade’ in types of knowledge, ‘Asterah is depending on the social value placed on human knowledge--sexual intercourse--and Shemhazai’s desire to know something previously barred to him by the boundaries (both physical and social) of heaven/earth. Annette Yoshiko Reed notes, concerning the *BW*, that “In the voice of God Himself, moreover, is placed the assertion that the angels transgress in taking wives, not because taking wives is sinful, but *rather because marriage, sex, and children are the domain of humankind* (1 Enoch 15:4-7); their sin, as here conceived, lies in transgression of divinely established distinctions” (emphasis mine).<sup>49</sup> Their exchange of knowledge, therefore, highlights the gendered dichotomy between Shemhazai and ‘Asterah, but moreover it underscores the dichotomy of heaven

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<sup>48</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>49</sup> Annette Yoshiko Reed, “Gendering Heavenly Secrets?” in Kimberly B. Stratton and Dayna S. Kalleres, eds., *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 117. Thus, the domain of humans is related here as a type of knowledge they possess and contrasted to the divine knowledge of the angels.

and earth--the differences in the two types of beings and the types of knowledge they possess, that which is mortal and material and that which is immortal and immaterial.<sup>50</sup>

While Bourdieu describes a complex system of socialization imbued and embedded within cultures, our text represents ‘Asterah’s socialization through the Name is truncated to serve the narrative structure of the tale. The use of the Name in the *Midrash* as a form of socialization, however, is reminiscent not only of the familiar motif of the Watchers teaching divine knowledge to their wives, but also of Hekhalot texts featuring visionary heroes who go through some type of socialization process in order to enter heaven. Hekhalot (from hekhal, meaning palace or temple, referring to heaven as God’s temple) literature is a genre devoted to visions of the heavenly firmament taken on by a human hero and guided by an angel. These texts not only focus on the celestial and cosmological order mandated by God, but also underscore the magnitude of separation between divine and earthly space and the difficult processes by which humans can ascend. As Rebecca Lesses notes, the heroes of these texts must go through extensive purifications and acquisition of knowledge as well as encounter resistance from angels to show them such places and secrets. These processes are that of socialization--the human hero has to undergo purification to rid the body and mind of earthly, material concerns and things in order to enter an immaterial, immortal plane--a physical transformation becomes necessary in order to enter that space. Similar prescriptions are given to the magical practitioner in order to prepare the body for the use of the Name.<sup>51</sup> It is not

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<sup>50</sup> This is also true of the *BW*, in which Annette Yoshiko Reed notes: “the governing contrast throughout the work is between earth and heaven, rather than women and men. This contrast is explored through its structure as well as content”, *Ibid*.

<sup>51</sup> Trachtenberg says that “the practitioner was repeatedly warned to prepare himself conscientiously for his rites: to purify himself in body and soul with ritual cleansings, by abstention from

wonder, then, that the Name features prominently in both the *Midrash* and Hekhalot texts as characters are seeking to enter divine spaces.<sup>52</sup>

The Name, then, is an index of angelic status and being that ‘Asterah must have been aware of in general, and some semiotic sign must have clued her into the fact that Shemhazai was an angel, whether his appearance, demeanor, or perhaps her witnessing his descent from heaven. All of these examples would have encased Shemhazai’s performativity as a divine being. ‘Asterah reproduces these indices of angelic status and Shemhazai’s performativity of those indices through his identity as divine when she correctly identifies Shemhazai as that type of being by *specifically* asking him to teach her the Name that he uses to ascend to heaven. The *Midrash* does not explain how Shemhazai taught ‘Asterah the Divine Name, only that he did. The reader is left to assume that the process of teaching might involve Shemhazai pronouncing the Divine Name, but this is unclear because presumably pronouncing the Name would have caused Shemhazai to ascend. However, the reader knows that he transmitted the knowledge successfully because it results in ‘Asterah proving that she is socially competent--she pronounces the Name and instantaneously ascends to heaven.<sup>53</sup>

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women and from unclean things, by following a restricted diet , and even fasting , over a period of days. ‘If a man who is about to utter holy names does not properly sanctify himself beforehand not only will he fail in his efforts, but he must expect to suffer for his presumption.’” *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 83.

<sup>52</sup> Lesses, “Women and Gender in Hekhalot Literature”, 303. She says here regarding the *Midrash* and Hekhalot literature: “In both cases, the ascender must use the divine name in some way, either by reciting it or by showing seals with the divine name to the angels who guard the entrances to the seven hekhalot”. Lesses also notes that the ascender must be sexually pure. While this is true for ‘Asterah, I argue below that ‘Asterah’s reward isn’t for sexual purity in and of itself--but rather for its material implications.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Asterah’s becoming of a new being is telegraphed by the emphasis of the difference between the two spheres through the different types of beings that inhabit them and the types of knowledge they possess, but also in the physical bodies they possess. While there is clearly a gender demarcation between ‘Asterah and Shemhazai --there is also the notion that divine and human bodies appear differently in their respective sphere. Immediately following ‘Asterah’s ascension and transformation into a star is speculation about the feasibility of angels appearing next to/with corporeal beings because Scripture (Ps 104:4) states that angels are supposed to be made of fire, but explained as when the “evil impulse gained control of them

## BODILY ASCENT TO HEAVEN

When treating the text as a communicative event, the subjectivity of the body is prioritized within the narrative. In particular, the designation of ‘Asterah as a sexual subject and her subsequent upwards ascension in which her human body is transformed to that of a celestial body. Her female body is juxtaposed with the male body of Shemhazai’s. As the object of his gaze, the reader’s attention is drawn to that of her corporeality and her female form. This sets up a gendered juxtaposition of the earth/heaven divide that is echoed by Genesis 6: the earthly bodies are the ‘daughters of man’ whereas the ‘sons of God’ are identified as the Watcher angels.<sup>54</sup> As Rebecca Lesses notes, women are the “reproductive link between man and God,”<sup>55</sup> and it is this procreative power that institutes the condition of materiality. That is, the cycle of birth and death is made through the female form and thus serves in stories of the fallen Watcher angels to represent the corporeal, earthly condition in contrast to the heavenly, immaterial sphere. The encounter between earthly and heavenly beings in these stories is thus gendered and sexualized in order to emphasize understood categorical and

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as it does of human beings, and their size was made consonant with that of humans, and they were garbed with a mass of dirt”. This indicates that the very act of transgressing the boundary between heaven and earth changes a being in some way that transforms them to be *like* the beings that inhabit it in order to appear there.

<sup>54</sup> As quoted above from the *Midrash*: “Immediately they descended (to earth), and the evil impulse gained control of them. When they beheld the beauty of mortal women, they went astray after them, and were unable to suppress their lust, as Scripture attests: ‘and the sons of God saw, etc.’ (Gen 6:2)” See also John J. Collins, “The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men” Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro, eds. *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity*. Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2008 and Ronald S. Hendel, “The Nephilim were on the Earth: Genesis 6:1-4 and its Ancient Near Eastern Context.” eds. Christoph Auffarth and Loren T. Stuckenbruck. *The fall of the angels*. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 11-37.

<sup>55</sup> Lesses, “‘They Revealed Secrets to their Wives’”, 197.

hierarchical norms.<sup>56</sup> Sexual activity (like the teaching of illicit knowledge) is the mode of transgression *not only* because it emphasizes categories and differences in heavenly and earthly space--incorporeal/corporeal, immortal/mortal-- but it *also* serves as a way of physically ‘mixing’ different categories through the sex act itself, and *most importantly* by the possibility of creating progeny: a physical manifestation of transgression in the half-divine, half-human Giants.

Through prioritizing the semiotic fields of the narrative and regarding how the text itself focuses on bodies and space, we can begin to understand a body that is sexualized and then removed, translated upwards towards another plane.<sup>57</sup> We can then theorize the possible implications of a female body removed from this sexualized encounter: in particular the *possible physical effects that could have happened if she was not removed*. While there are certainly concerns over the sexual union itself that might take place between heaven and earth, we can see from reading the rest of the *Midrash* and the context of Enochic texts that the crux of the earth’s ruin--and thus the Watcher’s transgression--was the birth of their children, the Giants. The Giant’s actions are contrasted with God’s order with imagery of consumption, destruction, disorder, and chaos. The seriousness of these actions lies in the nature of their transgression to influence the whole--in particular, to make the land impure and to necessitate the Flood. Following the formative work of Mary Douglas on purity systems in Judaism, Jonathan

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<sup>56</sup> Rebecca Lesses notes how women as well as female characters are not present in Hekhalot literature because the Rabbinic context does not allow for the imagining of woman able to enter the Merkavah precisely because of concerns over the impurity of the female body--impurities tied to reproduction in childbirth and menstruation as well as women being disruptive to a male’s attempt at sexual purity in order to attain ascension. See Lesses, “Women and Gender”, esp. 308-312.

<sup>57</sup> The upwards movement also underscores the hierarchical dichotomy between heaven/earth and man/woman in that heaven is conceived of as a plane higher spatially than earth as man is conceived of as higher in a patriarchal paradigm.

Klawans makes a distinction between what he terms ‘ritual impurity’ and ‘moral impurity’. Ritual impurity is distinguished by the fact that it is considered natural, impermanent and, in fact, unavoidable in many cases. Moreover, this kind of impurity is not a dilemma if properly mitigated in a timely manner.<sup>58</sup> Acts of moral impurity, by contrast, are much more serious offences and the result of sinful acts-- in particular sexual sins, idolatry and bloodshed--that have lasting effects and consequences. They defile the land and the sanctuary as well as the sinner in such a way that causes a “permanent debasement” in which God’s favor is revoked and expulsion from the land may follow.<sup>59</sup> That is, something ‘set apart’ (the meaning of the Hebrew root k-d-sh, ‘holy’) has intermingled with something common or something of a different category and threatens the whole system. This, unchecked, results in God’s removal of His blessing and the exile of the people from the land because they are no longer ‘set apart’ because of the illicit ‘mixing’ of Divinely established categories. Thus, these acts not only threaten the subject that committed them, but the land, its inhabitants, and the entire system it was built upon.

Sexual sin causes a moral impurity not only for those involved, but it is then conveyed to the land. Here, the transmission of sin is not only a theoretical impurity, but a physical destruction of the earth. The Giants are described in the *Midrash* as “those who were insolent and arrogant and who deliberately engaged in robbery, violent behavior, and the shedding of innocent blood.” It is however, the Giant’s and Watcher’s subsequent punishment for their transgression which occupies most of the rest of the *Midrash’s*

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<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 23-26.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

attention. It details how the angel Metatron was sent to tell them of the coming Flood, their lamentation over their deaths, the destruction of the world as a result of their actions, and their punishments. As Klawans concludes: “Thus in its own particular way, the *Book of Watchers* also articulates the idea of moral defilement: The watchers engage in sexually defiling behavior, which leads to their permanent degradation and their exile from Heaven.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Klawans, 26-27.

## CELESTIAL ORDER &amp; THE NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT(S)

In the *BW*, God's order is exemplified by the stars in heaven and the changes of seasons on earth that are revealed to Enoch not only as a testament of God's power and divine cosmic order, but also in personified terms whereby their regularity is an attestation of their faithfulness to God in contrast to the unfaithfulness of his other creations. The text emphasizes the routine performance of these celestial bodies:

Contemplate all the events in heaven, how the lights in heaven do not change their courses, how each rises and sets in order, each at its proper time, and they do not transgress their law. Consider the earth, and understand from the work which is done upon it, from the beginning to the end, that no work of God changes as it becomes manifest. Consider the summer and the winter, how the whole earth is full of water, and clouds and dew and rain rest upon it (1 Enoch 2:1-3).<sup>61</sup>

Annette Yoshiko Reed says that the story of Asterah is "best explained as a product of the circulation of traditions about the fallen angels in the 'scientific' discourse of Jewish astronomy/astrology, consistent with the common equation between angels and stars."<sup>62</sup>

The celestial and astronomical themes in *BW* relate back to older Near Eastern religions and are then echoed in the *Midrash*.<sup>63</sup> In Babylonian myth, the stars are mediators between divine and heavenly beings, which mirrors the intermediary roles of angels. In *BW*, we are introduced to Enoch's vision of stars that have disobeyed God by not ascending and descending at their allotted times. Andrea Portier-Young says that this "inverts key features of this cosmic relationship between humanity, God, and divinely appointed heavenly mediators by means of a partial correlation between the Watchers and

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<sup>61</sup> Sparks, H. F. D. *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 185-6.

<sup>62</sup> Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 264.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 264-266 and 68, where she argues against the idea that 'scientific' concerns in *BW* and the *Astronomical Book* use Mesopotamian traditions in which "ancient Near Eastern heritage of Israelite culture has been reinterpreted to fit Jewish monotheism and redeployed for the needs of a new age."

stars. Like the stars, the Watchers are to mediate between humans and God. Yet in abandoning their heavenly sanctuary (1 En. 12:4, 15:3) they have also forsaken their proper role as mediators”<sup>64</sup> That proper mediation is taken up, then, by Enoch in his heavenly journey.

Reed notes that the “The primary contrast explored in the *Book of the Watchers* is between heaven and earth, and the text reflects upon the proper relationship between these realms through the descent of the Watchers, on the one hand, and the ascent of Enoch, on the other.”<sup>65</sup> This process of proper access seems to qualify the efficacy of the knowledge gained, in particular that of astronomical or celestial knowledge about the workings of the world. Enoch’s knowledge of the heavenly sphere is contrasted with the illicit knowledge taught by the Watchers.<sup>66</sup> The concern with God’s order, then, is tied to the motif of teaching illicit knowledge and related discussions of the prominence of humans over angels and the origin of evil,<sup>67</sup> and reveals the concern of the text about the proper conveyance and mediation between heaven and earth.

Within the context of the *Midrash*, I contend that ‘Asterah also serves as a model of proper mediation between heaven and earth. Just as women in Genesis 6 “are

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<sup>64</sup> Portier-Young, Anthea, “Symbolic Resistance in the Book of Watchers,” in *The Watchers in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Angela Kim Harkins, Kelley Coblentz Bautch, and S. J. Endres (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 47-8.

<sup>65</sup> Reed, “Gendering Heavenly Secrets?” 111-112.

<sup>66</sup> Anthea Portier-Young argues that while *BW* “can be identified with various cultural legacies from Babylonian and Greek traditions”, they are also “degraded as the false teachings” and “the role of transmitter of salvific knowledge is transferred to Enoch, a human being”, (“Symbolic Resistance in the Book of Watchers”, 42-43). Reed, however, resists a reading in which the possible influence of Mesopotamian traditions exposes a supposed anti-Hellenistic attitude. Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 67-68.

<sup>67</sup> As a story that describes the intersection of sex and illicit angelic instruction, the antediluvian tale of Genesis 6 is often thought to be an alternate etiology of evil to that presented in Genesis 2. See Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 84-121 and “Gendering Heavenly Secrets?” 112; Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “The Origins of Evil in Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition: The Interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4 in the Second and Third Centuries B.C.E.” eds. Christoph Auffarth and Loren T. Stuckenbruck. *The Fall of the Angels* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 87-118.

mediators between human and divine beings, providing a sexual and reproductive link between man and God,”<sup>68</sup> ‘Asterah’s intermediary role is instituted by her calling as a sexual subject. Her ascension that warrants her transformation to a star because the it is the *absence of her female body* from the earthly, material plane that precludes the creation of a earth/heaven hybrid child, a Giant. It is then her bodily ascension which evinces her role a proper mediator of heaven and earth, reiterated, as Reed notes, by the “intercultural exchange suggested in her name, ‘Asterah’”,<sup>69</sup> which echoes pagan goddesses of the ancient Near East. In particular, it is reminiscent of the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar/Innana, who is associated with Venus<sup>70</sup> just as the character in the various versions of the Islamic *Tale of Harut and Marut*, the most direct ‘source’ to this section of the *Midrash*. All versions of the tale include a feminine character who has some kind of sexualized encounter with angelic/heavenly being(s) and subsequently leaves by ascension to heaven.<sup>71</sup> It is interesting to note that in some versions of the tale she is identified as al-Zuhara--Venus--and thus is already a celestial being rather than is turned into one as a result of her escape.

Whether authored by R. Moses or existing in a source text, the sexualized encounter of the female character with an angelic being from the Islamic *Tale of Harut and Marut* seems to have be conferred to association with the Pleiades in part due to the

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<sup>68</sup> Lesses, Rebecca. “‘They Revealed Secrets to Their Wives’: The Transmission of Magical Knowledge in *1 Enoch*”. Andrei A. Orlov and Daphna Arbel. *With letters of light: studies in the Dead Sea scrolls, early Jewish apocalypticism, magic and mysticism in honor of Rachel Elijor*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011, 197.

<sup>69</sup> Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 264.

<sup>70</sup> See Jeffrey Cooley. “Early Mesopotamian Astral Science and Divination in the Myth of Inana and Šukaletuda.” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 8, no. 1 (2008): 75–98.

<sup>71</sup> The character in these tales does not always use the Name to ascend, sometimes she bargains for the angel’s wings instead, or, as previously stated, she is a star and therefore has the means to ascend to heaven without the need to strike a bargain at all.

sexualized origin story of the Pleiades in Greek culture and because of the constellation's previous connection with the Flood narrative within the *Midrash*.<sup>72</sup> Both Milik and M. Grünbaum contend that one influence of her name and her astral connections is tied to the Greek myth of Pleione, the mother of the Pleiad nymphs who were sexually pursued by Orion and were turned into doves by Zeus so they could flee and subsequently turned into stars; the Pleiades constellation. Ellen Robbins, in "The Pleiades, the Flood, and the Jewish New Year" says that a correlation was made between the time of year when the Pleiades were visible and the Flood because the visibility of the constellation coincided with the rainy season. This was given causative significance as it coincided with the autumn New Year festival, which was marked as the annual period of divine judgment. She says that "the *idée fixe* underlying these texts is that the Flood was brought about by a substantial change in the structure of the universe and was justified by a prior change in the terrestrial realm, the defiling of the created order that in the Enoch (and biblical) traditions resulted from an incursion of divine beings."<sup>73</sup> The plight of 'Asterah, however, serves more than a mythic explanation of how the Pleiades came to be. Orion's pursuit of the seven mortal women doesn't stop with their catasterization but continues as the constellation of Orion chases the Pleiades across the night sky at a certain time of the year. Thus, at some point, the stars are no longer visible and are 'replaced' by another constellation. Annette Yoshiko Reed says that "the specific tale of Asterah may have

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<sup>72</sup> There are other narrative elements that parallels the *Tale of Harut and Marut* with this *Midrash* that points to the latter's compositional dependence on the former including the eventual punishment of the two angels and in some versions their use as consultants for magicians as they are carrying out their punishment. See Reeves' table of the elements from ten versions in "Some Parascriptural Dimensions of the 'Tale of Hārūt wa-Mārūt'", 822-24.

<sup>73</sup> Ellen Robbins, "The Pleiades, the Flood, and the Jewish New Year", in R. Chazan, W. Hallo, and L. Schiffman, eds., *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*. (Winona Lake, 1999), 336.

developed from more ‘scientific’ speculations about the Pleiades and the Flood” in which “the stress on two stars being removed from heaven to cause the Flood might help to explain the consistent focus on two fallen angels in Jewish traditions about fallen angels.”<sup>74</sup>

It is easy to see how a the *Tale of Harut and Marut*, which centers around the two angels who are sent to earth as judges and subsequently have a sexual encounter with a female character with astral connections could be adapted to fit into a narrative that expands on stories about the Watcher angels following Enochic literature. The convergence of these ideas surrounding the cosmological significance of the Pleiades serves to underscore the order that is disrupted by the Watcher angels and their progeny precipitated by the sexualized encounter of heaven and earth. In this way, we can begin to see how integral the boundaries of heaven and earth are to cosmological order within the *Midrash* and what it might mean when different subjects/characters transgress those boundaries, both in space and being. We can also begin to see that ‘Asterah’s installation as a star points to the fact that text’s chief concern is not with necessarily ‘Asterah’s sexual ‘purity’ per se, but the fact that she maintained God’s order and thus represents the proper mediation between heaven and earth. ‘Asterah’s potential sexual activity, as we are beginning to see, constitutes the danger of the illicit mixing of heaven and earth through the birth of the destructive children of the Watchers and the daughters of man, the Giants.

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<sup>74</sup> Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 264, n.116. She also notes here that the astronomical chapters of *Pirqa Rabbi Eliezer* where “reference to the fallen angels in a discussion about the cycles of the constellations and their relationship to the cycles of the moon” and that the *Aggadat Bereshit* may ultimately inform this and where Uzza and Uzael come forth from their “place of punishment once a year in a cycle of shrinking and growing.”

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

When highlighting body, agency, and subjectivity, it becomes clear that ‘Asterah’s agency--and in fact her action along with her words--is the crux of the narrative within the *Midrash*. The narrative offers little concerning her motivations; namely, whether she intended to ‘trick’ Shemhazai in order to gain access to heaven or used her circumstances to save herself from sexual sin and perhaps even violence.<sup>75</sup> It is tempting, then, to conclude that rather than the subject of the narrative, she must be the object. The text seems to insinuate that the female body is problematic because it both forms a link between heaven and earth and constitutes the cycle of birth and death which has the potential to ‘trap’ any divine/human child to the material plane. This danger seems evident in the presentation of the ‘evil inclination’ that overwhelms the Watcher angels as a natural aspect of the earthly realm, furthering negative and sinful associations onto the female body and its role in sexual reproduction.<sup>76</sup> And yet, ‘Asterah is the

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<sup>75</sup> Rebecca Lesses concludes that ‘Asterah “seizes upon the divine name to escape him, not in order to ascend to the merkavah”, (Lesses, “Women and Gender”, 302). I maintain that while she is called as a sexual subject by Shemhazai’s proposition to her and called to act, her motivations are not entirely clear and perhaps more accurately--not the point of the text. Although her motivations are ambiguous, her circumstances of her request for the knowledge of the Divine Name should be interpreted in light of Shemhazai’s request for carnal knowledge as a proposed exchange. She seems then, to understand that saying the Name will relate her to heaven and we cannot assume otherwise, especially on the basis of our own culturally situated understanding of sexualized encounters.

<sup>76</sup> Rebecca Lesses writes extensively on the subject of women’s supposed culpability in enticing the Watcher angels in its various incarnations, however, she says of the *Midrash*, that “the image of Esterah as wholly innocent seems to me to come from the Jewish adaptation, perhaps to present her not just in contrast to the Islamic story of the women whom the angels lust after, but also in contrast other Jewish versions, including that found in *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer*, where the daughters of Cain entice the angels to sin.”(Lesses, “Women in Gender in the Hekhalot Literature”, 307). For more about the negative associations of women in tales about fallen angels, also see Lesses, ““They Revealed Secrets to Their Wives’: The Transmission of Magical Knowledge in 1 Enoch.” Annette Yoshiko Reed, in contrast, in “Gendering Heavenly Secret?” says that while *BW* has a “textual situation” that is “notoriously complex”, and that the “passages pertaining to women also seem to have a nexus for textual variation during the course of the work’s translation and transmission,” (113). She reflects “upon some of what has been assumed and effaced in past research on these materials by virtue of the modern habit of judging ancient writings as more or less misogynous as if such judgments had some universal, normativizing force that exempts from the dangers of

subject of the narrative. *She* is the one called to action by Shemhazai --and she isn't shown without agency, presented as a source of defilement to the Watchers, or otherwise shown to be culpable to their sins. Quite the opposite: she is the one who remains 'pure' and is rewarded for her actions of removing herself from the situation.

While we may be attempted to assume or read her escape from Shemhazai is one made from fear of potential sexual violence and violation, we also may be tempted to read her subsequent 'reward' as a protection of her 'virtue'. That is, that her sexuality and sexual reproduction potential is protected from being forfeited outside of marriage and therefore she has cleverly thwarted Shemhazai's attempt to steal *things* that don't belong to him. In doing so, however, we risk reading into the text our own discomfort with a nonconsensual sexual encounter and our own culturally obtained understandings of sexual 'purity' instead of what most concerns the text itself.

What we must do, then, is capitulate to the notion that understandings and conceptions about gender and politics of sex are embedded into all narratives by the culture that produced them. In reading the *Midrash*, we must acknowledge the silence of female voices but also read the text in a way that resists an attempt to reconstruct their voice, in part because such a reconstruction (no matter how well-meaning) would be false, but also because pointing out the silences throughout history is an indispensable part of feminist critique.<sup>77</sup> I suggest, moreover, that in order to read the *Midrash* in keeping with its own cultural context, that we practice a mode of analysis that re-embeds

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anachronism,"(110) and notes that "not coincidental that the notion of women as temptresses and the association of women with 'magic' in the *Book of the Watchers* are both attested most strongly in the Greek versions," (120). She cites in particular, the version found in the Codex Panopolitanus and Syncellus' reading of the Watcher myths as later interpretations that specifically cite women as responsible for seducing or enticing the Watchers, 121-22.

<sup>77</sup> See Lesses, "Women and Gender", 280-281 for more on academic feminist approaches Judaism and biblical studies.

those understandings and conceptions about gender, including the silence of women. This takes into account that what we may be tempted to label as our ‘modern’ concern about gender ideologies and sexual politics are *not* being necessarily *read into* the texts but rather that *they are already embedded in the text*.

To say reading into this *Midrash* issues of gender, power, and agency is completely modern bias and has no place in analysis of the text, on the other hand, is to ignore the fact that women had little or no input in the production of these texts<sup>78</sup> and therefore such input cannot be accounted for. This text was produced and read for and by men. The fact that women are silent within the production and reproduction of the text is embedded into this text, so our task must be to re-embed it in our analysis of the text. In other words, part of the analysis should be to read the text (as much as is possible) from its own social context as a piece of work that has certain hierarchical gender constructions and is not taking into account the voice or perspective of women. In this way, we can try to construct possible contextualized readings of the text but also be able to highlight any absences that there might be. As Rebecca Lesses notes in her analysis of women in Hekhalot literature: “Although women are not the center of Hekhalot literature this [type of] reading places them in the center, if only to reveal how absent they actually are.”<sup>79</sup>

In focusing on the semiotics of the text, we can see that ‘Asterah does, in fact, transgress her domain: she is socialized into a divine being through the knowledge of the Name. ‘Asterah’s installation as a star follows God’s pronouncement that because she has

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<sup>78</sup> For a discussion on what is known or speculated about the community that produced these texts, see Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 58-83, for *BW* and its social context, esp.61-69.

<sup>79</sup> Lesses, “Women and Gender”, 281-282.

kept herself pure from sin, she will be installed as a star as an example. The ‘example’ that she sets, as we have seen, is connected to ideas regarding celestial order, telegraphed through the astral connotations of her name and the nature of her reward--being literally turned into a star. Her example, we can see, has less to do with her keeping away from sexual sin in-and-of-itself and due to the impurity it causes *her*, but rather the possible effects it has on the land. Her installation as a star, visible to the world, serves as a reminder to resist sins that defile the land. What is salient when examining the semiotic fields of the sexualized encounter between Shemhazai and ‘Asterah and her escape from him is that she remained ‘pure’ not simply because she refused sex, but because she did not allow for her productive potential to be realized in a way that would transgress God’s order, threatening the land and its people. In this way, we can see that while the *Midrash* does embed ideas about gender and sex, its main concern is a theological, eschatological and ethical concern with the separation of heaven and earth and the ways and circumstances in which that boundary may be properly transgressed.

Prioritizing the subject has allowed for an integrated approach to analysis of language and movement within the text. I argue that this type of analysis is well-suited to the text because of the theme of bodily ascension coupled with the use of the Divine Name to achieve ascension. This type of analysis proves promising because while it focuses on a close analysis of the text itself--both the movement and the language--it also accounts for the cultural and literary contexts of its themes and motifs. Midrash as a genre embeds previous texts as part of its cultural production, and utilizing a practice theory of meaning constraint, we can come to reasonable conclusions about what it

espouses in terms of ideologies about of language involving human and heavenly subjects.

By focusing on ‘Asterah, and her subjectivity, we can begin to see a semiotic ideology in which language is seen as opening the door to agency, allowing and empowering the speaker to change not only their physical space, but also their identification(s). ‘Asterah, while culturally constrained, has agency, but it only through the use of the Divine Name. When confronted with Shemhazai’s demand, she offers carnal knowledge for the social capital of the Divine Name. When she is taught the Name, she is socialized to its use. Transgressions of categories like ‘Asterah’s use of the Divine Name to aid in changing her identification from a human subject a divine subject could be thought of in term of a transgression of the separation of heaven and earth that early Enochic texts set up. ‘Asterah’s transgression, however, is not punished, but rewarded. The circumstances of her culturally constrained agency--her inability to say ‘no’ to Shemhazai’s calling of her as sexual subject--necessitated that she transgress her identity as a human being in order to physically escape his advance. Her transgression, then, was her only recourse to escape an even greater sin that could have occurred had she acquiesced to his advance, a physical ‘mixing’ of heaven and earth that could have resulted in a child--a Giant.

Saussure’s semiotic theory attests that words have an arbitrary relationship to thing they refer to. In this *Midrash*, however, the Name of God has a direct relationship to the object it refers to. Once the Name is spoken out loud, the speaker is transferred instantaneously to heaven and into the presence of the referent of the word--to the presence of God. By prioritizing the subject, we can discern that this not a semiotic

ideology in which the Name *creates* the object. By speaking God's Name, the referent to the word, it does not *make Him appear*. It does, however, relay the speaker *to the object* which it refers to--to heaven with God--and thereby the narrative espouses not a semiotic ideology of language creating reality, but rather a semiotic ideology in which language can create agency--the ability to act--and is cause of that action, but only if the speaker knows and is socialized to its use. We learn from the *Midrash* that the primary function of the Name is not to 'call' or even refer to God, but instead to ferry angels to heaven. This pragmatic function of the Name underlies this semiotic ideology in which the power of language--especially language connected to the Divine and divine space--is agentive and transforming. Language, then, is a crucial part of a cohesive semiotic ideology in which it has the potential to not only change physical reality, but the speaker's relationship to cosmic order, to reorder the speaker's position and identity in the universe and subsequently their relationship to the Divine.

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