

Body Marks in Jewish Sources: From Biblical to Post-Talmudic Times

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the role of marks – signs and scripts – that Jews imprinted on their bodies during the course of two millennia. Although a Biblical prohibition exists against tattooing (Lev. 19:28), there were Jews who wrote the Lord's name on their body, probably with ink. Ezekiel 9:4-6 is discussed, and then Cain's Mark (Gen. 4:15), where the apotropaic character of the mark (or letter) is clear. Isaiah 44:5 is analyzed, and compared to Exodus 28:36 and 39:30, where examples of setting the Lord's Name on one's arm or forehead are delineated. It is surmised that this practice originated among priests and only later was imitated by the laity.

Special attention is given to Numbers 6:22-27; it is claimed here that 'setting' the Lord's Name was done literally by the priests, in contrast to previous commentators who interpret this verse metaphorically. Thus, priests blessed orally and committed their blessing into a bodily inscription on the people they had blessed. This custom most likely reflects the third commandment (Exod. 20:7): 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain', which is interpreted as inscribing the Lord's Name and then profaning it.

In the Talmud, there is evidence that in Late Antiquity there were Jews who had the Lord's Name written on their bodies in ink. Moreover, in Hekhalot literature there are two detailed descriptions of how people were inscribed with God's name accompanied by liturgy, in a kind of rite-of-passage ritual. Additional texts are cited and discussed in what follows (e.g., Revelation 19:16; Galatians 6:17) as evidence that there were Jews in Antiquity who inscribed the Lord's name on their bodies.

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Body Marks in Jewish Sources: From Biblical to Post-Talmudic Times

Meir Bar-Ilan

Modern scholarship on bodily marks is informed by extensive knowledge of human behavior throughout the ages, from pre-History to the Modern Age.¹ Time and again this broad subject has been dealt with by numerous scholars from different angles,² but it seems that awareness of this practice among the Jews has been entirely neglected for more than one reason. Outside of the fact that the Bible prohibits tattooing (Lev. 19:28), nothing is known. It appears that modern scholars have accepted the scriptural commandment as factual history without seeking evidence to support the possibility that there were Jews who did practice one form or another of bodily marking.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that in the Bible there is more evidence of body marks than has been traditionally thought. As a matter of fact, body marks are attested to more than four times in the Bible, and when rabbinic sources are considered, in addition to those that discuss the aforementioned, well-known verses, there is another instance that has somehow been ignored. Moreover, in Hekhalot literature, which emerged from Jewish mysticism in the 4-5th centuries, there are additional notations of body marks; all of these sources will be discussed in this paper. They will be analyzed first from the textual point of view, then from the historical perspective, and subsequently from a variety of aspects: religious, anthropological, and others, in order to portray the custom of inscribing the Lord's name from multiple points of view. However, we cannot authoritatively ascertain the extent to which these texts reflect factual history.

I Prohibition of Tattooing

Leviticus 19:28 states as follows: 'Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor imprint any marks upon you; I am the Lord'.³ There are a number of points that should be made here. First, the translation of *עקעק* as imprint does not do justice to the *Hapax legomenon* word, since imprint implies something created with ink, while the term *עקעק* means specifically tattoo. Second, the Hebrew text denotes tattoo on the one hand and inscription on the other hand, while the word 'marks' does not express the idea of writing, as does the Hebrew root, but rather an illustration. A better translation of the second half of the verse is: 'nor should you have tattoo inscriptions upon you; I am the Lord'. Third, in this verse there are two prohibitions against any permanent alteration of the body: one by tattooing and the second by scarring, and both proscriptions come immediately after two other prohibitions (Lev. 19:27): 'You shall not round the corner of your head, neither shalt

¹ Victor and Edith Turner, 'Bodily Marks', vol. 2 of *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Lindsay Jones (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson – Gale, 2005), 1000-05.

² O. Betz, 'Stigma', vol. 7 of *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 657-64; Christopher P. Jones, 'Stigma: Tattooing and Branding in Graeco-Roman Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies* 77 (1987): 139-55; Max Gustafson, 'Inscripta in fronte: Penal Tattooing in Late Antiquity', *Classical Antiquity* 16/1 (1997): 79-105.

³ All translations are taken from: *The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955).

thou mar the corners of thy beard'. It seems the common denominator of these four proscriptions is the injunction against alteration of one's body, either permanently or temporarily. It is also stated in the Torah (Deut. 14:1): 'ye shall not cut yourself', and it is clear that there was a Canaanite practice of cutting the body with swords or lancers (1 Kings 18:28), a practice that is still reflected today in the contemporary Shi'ites 'Ashura. In the Torah, there is no explanation of these prohibitions, but since the Torah conceived of the human body as created in the image of God, an idea that Rabbinic Judaism adopted,⁴ it is assumed that any alteration of the human body was considered to be forbidden (with the exception of circumcision, that was commanded by a divine directive to all male children of Abraham). Respecting the body was understood to represent respecting the Divine, and any change made to the physical body seemed to be a profanation of the Lord, as if Man knows better than God how to make the human body. In other words, in the Bible one encounters the concept that Man has no autonomy over his own body because of the divine nature of creation, and for this reason tattooing is forbidden.⁵

II Righteous People in Ezekiel

In Ezekiel 9:4-6 one reads the following words:

And the Lord said unto him: 'Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and cry for all the abominations that are done in the midst thereof'. And to the others He said in my hearing: 'Go ye through the city after him, and smite; let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity; slay utterly the old man, the young man, and the maiden, and little children and women; but come not near any man upon whom is the mark; and begin at My sanctuary'...

This text is well-known. The Christians took it as a "living command" in Antiquity,⁶ as is clear from Apocalypse 7:1-8, and some even comply with the decree found in this text in a specific manner today, on Ash Wednesday. This was also a practice of the Falasha Jews in Ethiopia that might have derived from Christian sources.⁷ The Rabbis, however, have several legends concerning the historical authenticity of this prophecy,⁸ for according to their tradition (or: theology) a prophet cannot innovate a new practice that is not in the Torah.⁹ There is almost no doubt that this practice was

⁴ Alon Goshen-Gottstein, 'The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature', *HTR*, 87/2 (1994): 171-95.

⁵ This whole subject must be reevaluated. For the time being, see: Charlotte E. Fonrobert, 'On Carnal Israel and the Consequences: Talmudic Studies since Foucault', *JQR* 95/3 (2005): 462-69; Sandra Jacobs, 'The Body Inscribed: A Priestly Initiative?' in *The Body in Biblical, Christian and Jewish Texts* (ed. J.E. Taylor; Library of Second Temple Studies; New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 1-16.

⁶ Jack Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament*, Second Printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972): 220-60; Finegan, 'Crosses in the Dead Sea Scrolls', *BAR* 6 (1979): 41-49.

⁷ Max Wurmbrand, *The Falasha "Arde'et"* (The Book of the Disciples) (Tel-Aviv: 1964), 53, 102 (Hebrew).

⁸ Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1942), 185-91.

⁹ Sifri, Numbers 8:7.

intended to refute several prophets who were seen and heard in Antiquity,¹⁰ and whose teachings were rejected because of this principle. The outcome is that the Jews understand the text of Ezekiel as a prophecy that was appropriate for its time, while Christians view it as a prophecy valid until the end of days.

According to Ezekiel, an angel, or cherub, was commanded to draw a mark or a letter with ink (since the ink-well is mentioned thrice in the text) to denote the righteous, and the apotropaic character of this deed is evident. A note should be added that in Biblical Hebrew, ם is either a mark or the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet. In old Hebrew paleography, this mark looks like an X, or if one wishes, like a cross. In other words, at least in one case, and possibly in many more (when it is hypothesized that the prophet was being imitated), Jews marked themselves by a sign or by a letter to be saved by the Lord.

III Cain's Mark (stigma)

In Genesis 4:15 we read as follows: 'And the Lord set a sign for Cain, lest any finding him should smite him'. How exactly and what sign was set on Cain is not clear,¹¹ though the apotropaic meaning of the sign is clearly stated. The story appears to be an etiological account, since Cain's mark may be understood as reflecting a much older practice, that of people who are with some sort of a divine mark that protects them from evil doers (including demons).

IV The Lord's Name on one's hand

Isaiah 44:5 reads as follows: 'One shall say: "I am the Lord's"; And another shall call him(self) by the name of Jacob; And another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord, And surname himself by the name of Israel'. In the last verse, the practice of inscribing is stated literally: 'And another shall write (on) his hand: To the Lord', which indicates that there were people who considered themselves the Lord's worshippers, or the Lord's slaves,¹² and who were inscribed with the Lord's name in a practice similar to that common among other nations.¹³ The prophet attested to peoples with two types of customs, oral and written, all of which demonstrated analogous beliefs of transformation of one's identity. The name Israel denotes a form of superiority, as was stated by the angel who surrendered to Jacob and subsequently gave Jacob the name Israel (Gen. 32:29). It is apparent that each of these customs attests to a kind of apotropaic habit, ensuring one of his life on earth;

¹⁰ David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983).

¹¹ Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

¹² A seal with the inscription '(to) Miqneyaw, Servant of Yahweh' should be considered here. However, its exact function is not clear. See: Frank M. Cross, "The Seal of Miqnêyaw, Servant of Yahweh," in *Ancient Seals and the Bible*, eds. Leonard Gorelic and Elizabeth Williams-Forte (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1983), 55-63.

¹³ According to Herodotus (*Histories* 7:233) the Persians tattooed their slaves with the name or sign of Xerxes, at about the same time that this Biblical text was recorded. See: Gustafson, "The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire and Beyond," in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, ed. Jane Caplan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 17-31 (this is a revised version of Gustafson's paper mentioned in n. 1).

supporting the argument of this paper, it is clear that there were Jews in the 5th century BCE who wrote the Lord's name on their arms.¹⁴

The practice of writing the Lord's Name on the hand should also be viewed as corresponding to the habit of lovers to write their names respectively upon each other. Thus the prophet says in the name of the Lord (Isa. 49:16): 'Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands, Thy walls are continually before me'.¹⁵ This practice might find its counterpart in Canticles 8:6: 'Set me as a seal upon thy heart, as a seal upon thine arm'. In the same manner, lovers often write the other's name in some form on their bodies, which tells that writing the Lord's name on the body is nothing but a kind of love and commitment.

It should be noted that there is a Biblical law that closely resembles the practice discussed here: inscribing 'to the Lord' on one's arm. This law will now be examined. Among the rules concerning the garments of the high priest, it is stated that the high priest should wear a special gold ornament with an inscription stating 'to the Lord' (Exod. 28:36, 39:30) on his forehead. First it should be noted that there is no significant difference between inscribing on the forehead or on the arm, since people used to inscribe on all parts of their bodies (as will be attested to later). That is to say, we are looking at the same practice, albeit with some modifications: 1) One is institutional while the other is optional; 2) One is restricted to a small circle of priests and the high-priest, while the other reflects anyone who wishes to be inscribed; 3) One reflects wealth and hierarchy while the other denotes the laity. However, regardless of these differences, the identical inscription: "to the Lord" clarifies that we are looking at the same practice with only a minute variation. Regarding the possibility that one practice derives from the other, one should recall that literacy originated in bureaucratic and priestly circles,¹⁶ hence it is quite clear that priests began the practice of writing on their bodies or an ornament, while the laity subsequently imitated the priests by doing (almost) the same: inscribing the Lord's Name on their arms. True, we cannot tell to what extent this custom was practiced, but what follows is testimony concerning the habit of inscribing the Lord's Name on the body as a manifestation of belief in the Lord.

V Priestly Blessing

With the exception of the verses discussed previously, no one has claimed that there are additional, specific Biblical verses that relate to the practice of writing on the body, as far as I am aware. However, it will be shown that there is another case that exemplifies this practice, a verse that has usually been misinterpreted, in my opinion.¹⁷

¹⁴ It should be stressed that the meaning of 'and another shall subscribe with his hand' does not imply the reflexive, that is, one did not write on his own hand, but rather the meaning is passive: his hand will be inscribed upon. In other words: the verse does not reflect literacy of the laity, but rather that they were aware of literacy, and let a scribe write upon them.

¹⁵ It has been suggested that instead of reading חומתִיךָ the reading חותמִיךָ (that is: metathesis) should be preferred, so that the translation is: 'Thy seals are continually before me'.

¹⁶ Aaron Demsky, *Literacy in Ancient Israel* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2012) (Hebrew).

¹⁷ For former study of the text, see: Meir Bar-Ilan, 'So shall they put My name upon the people of Israel' (Num 6:27), *HUCA*, 60 (1990): 19-31 (Hebrew).

The Priestly blessing is translated as follows (Num. 6:22-27):

And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying: 'Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying: On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel; ye shall say unto them: The Lord bless thee, and keep thee; The Lord make His face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee; The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.' So shall they put my Name upon the children of Israel, and I shall bless them.

The content of the blessing is beyond the scope of our discussion; the issue relevant to this argument is presented in the last verse. Former commentators have understood the word "put" metaphorically.¹⁸ However, it is argued here that its meaning is fundamentally figurative. That is to say, after the priests blessed the people they inscribed the Name of the Lord on each and every one who was blessed. Thus, the blessing was given first orally and then by writing.

The evidence supporting this interpretation is as follows. The Biblical verb used here, נָשָׂא (=put, set), is the same one used in Cain's stigma, and there is no doubt that in that instance the verb may not only denote "put" but "inscribe" as well. Moreover, when one looks at other Biblical ceremonies, one finds that dual transmission of the divine word, in both oral and written form, is well attested to as either apotropaic or as a curse.¹⁹ So, the priestly blessing was given in dual media: orally and in writing alike, and it is likely that the practice that is reflected here is exactly the one reflected in Isaiah 44:5, though from a different point of view (the process of inscribing by the priests rather than an inscription already written on the laity). All these ceremonies share the idea of the power of the inscribed letter, the power of literacy, and it seems that the priestly blessing was no exception. Only later, when the practice of literally "putting" the Name on one's body was abandoned, probably already in Antiquity, did commentators understand the verb "put" to denote the divine Name metaphorically. However, the Biblical *Sitz im Leben* of the priestly blessing was once a rite of passage ceremony during which the priests blessed the people and then wrote the Lord's name on (the hands of) the blessed people.²⁰ By being marked by the Lord's name the initiates crossed the border from the unprotected (by God) realm into the protected realm and thus came into closer contact with the divine. The Divine was now "on" them, and in a way they were "reborn".

VI The Third Commandment

¹⁸ In Hebrew, the verb נָשָׂא is also used in the case of Cain, though in Cain it indicates a sign (or a letter) while in the Priestly blessing it denotes the Lord's Name. The same expression appears also in 2 Kings 21:4, 21:7 (=2 Chro. 33:3), Deut. 12:4, and was also used in Phoenicia, where it relayed a very concrete meaning. See: Yitshak Avishur, *Phoenician Inscriptions and the Bible* (Jerusalem: Rubinstein, 1979), vol. I, 94-95 (Hebrew).

¹⁹ Compare: Exod. 17:14, 24:3-4, 31:18; Num. 5:21-23; Deut. 6:7-9, 27:8-26, 31:19, 31:22; Josh. 24:26; M. Bar-Ilan, 'The Torah written on the Stones on Mount 'Ebal', *Proceedings of Judea and Samaria Research Studies: The 2nd Annual Meeting*, Ariel, 1993, 29-42 (Hebrew).

²⁰ Michael Meerson, 'Rites of Passage in Magic and Mysticism', R. Boustan, Martha Himmelfarb and P. Schäfer (eds.), *Hekhalot Literature in Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), pp. 323-347.

In the biblical source of the Ten Commandments it is stated as follows (Exod. 20:7): 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain'. This commandment has caused much trouble for the commentators. *Prima facie* it is not clear what the meaning of this rule is: how does one take the Name of the Lord in vain? According to the rabbis, this rule forbids one from swearing in vain, when saying the Name of the Lord. If this is the correct meaning, why doesn't God command it explicitly? Moreover, towards the end of the commandments, it is stated: 'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor', which is understood as swearing in vain; it does not seem that in such a concise list of divine rules there would be two separate rules that relate to the same prohibition.

Therefore, it is assumed that taking 'the name of the Lord thy God in vain' does not relate to a metaphorical use of the Name on one's lips, but rather that the rule denotes one who has the Name on his body but behaves in a manner that does not correspond to the holiness of the divine Name, and thus he desecrates the Lord's Name. This explanation is augmented in a unique addendum to the prohibition. In the other commandments, there is no intimation of the consequences if one transgresses the law. It is self-evident that one is not allowed to kill, for example, and there is no need for a threat in this case (moreover, the less said the better). However, in this commandment the Lord promises to take revenge on one who bears His Name in vain. The answer to the presence of this unique (or: superfluous) threat is that it is profanation that is referred to in this commandment, and therefore the Lord will punish one who bears His Name in vain.

To explain the distinction further, during Ancient times one may have seen a person who was blessed by the priest, following which the Name of the Lord was written on him (Num. 6: 27; Isa. 44:5). However, this person then behaved improperly and subsequently everybody saw his behavior on the one hand and the Lord's Name on his body on the other, which raised the question: do all the worshippers of the Lord behave this way?

Before ending this discussion with an examination of the Biblical sources it should be noted that after this analysis there are additional references to this practice in the Bible, but that their meaning is not straightforward. For example (Deut. 28:10): 'And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the name of the Lord is called upon thee; and they shall be afraid of thee'. The Hebrew text is not normally translated as 'called upon' but rather 'read upon', that is, 'the name of the Lord is read upon thee'; perhaps this phrase reflects the practice of writing the divine Name upon the people of Israel (as a self-enforcement), so that their enemies will be frightened (see *infra*). Another verse that calls our attention to this practice is (Exod. 13:9, 13:16): 'And it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thy hand'; however, to eliminate unnecessary hypotheses or delving in an assumed original meaning of the Biblical text this is not the place to discuss these additional verses (and their counterparts: Deut. 6:8, 11:18).

All in all, in the Bible there are a few instances where it is explicitly stated that a divine mark is a form of shelter for one who has that mark. There is one place in the Bible where the practice of inscribing the Lord's Name on one's body is explicitly stated (in several variations), and there are at least two more that have

been depicted here as related to this practice; they explain the ceremony during which the Lord's Name was inscribed on the Lord's worshipper by the priests.

VII The Rabbis' Understanding of Tattooing

The Biblical prohibition concerning tattooing was understood by the Rabbis of the 2nd-3rd centuries in two different ways, as is clear from Mishnah Makkoth 3:6:

If a man wrote [on his skin] pricked-in writing [he is culpable].
If he wrote but did not prick it in, or pricked it in but did not write it,
he is not culpable, but only if he writes it and pricks it in with ink or
eye-paint or aught that leaves a lasting mark.

R. Simeon b. Judah says in the name of R. Simeon: He is not
culpable unless he writes there the name [of a god], for it is written,
*Nor print any marks upon you: I am the Lord.*²¹

That is to say, according to the first rule, the Rabbis saw in the Biblical verse the idea of actively tattooing, nothing more and nothing less, and only tattooing was forbidden. However, in the second rule, attributed to R. Simeon, the Rabbis tried to explain the idea behind the Biblical verse, and they took the end of the verse 'I am the Lord' as a key factor in understanding that verse. Therefore, they came to the conclusion that what is forbidden is not the tattoo by itself but rather the reason behind the act of tattooing in the first place, and that was—according to this explanation—to denote one's belief in his deity. In other words, only the written tattoo that was done in order to worship the gods (and being favored by them) was forbidden, while tattooing that was done for any other purpose was considered to be permitted.

The statement of the Rabbis shows a form of reduction of the Biblical law because of the several conditions that they stipulated in order for one to be considered a sinner. However, the words of R. Simeon reflect, probably, the true sense of the law, that the main issue is not tattoo, or "spoiling" one's body, rather it is a prohibition against heathen practices. We do know that in Antiquity making marks upon one's body to denote one's belief was a heathen practice. For example, the priestesses of Ishtar inscribed a star on their arm, and centuries later believers in Dionysus used to brand an ivy leaf on their body (3 Macc. 2:29 ff.). Thus, the Rabbis understood the prohibition of inscribing on one's body to apply only in cases when it was practiced as a kind of paganism, interpreting the term to mean that the Jewish act of inscribing found in Antiquity was that of writing a word (which reflect literacy), and so not like the pagan inscriptions of an icon (which reflect illiteracy).

VIII Rabbis with the Lord's Name on their Body

In the Babylonian Talmud Yoma 88a we have the following Baraita (a Tannaitic teaching outside the collected 'formal' Oral Law):

²¹ Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 406. The "plain" meaning of the Hebrew text is that it is forbidden to write the Lord's Name. However, already in the Tosephta and the Talmud the text was interpreted as a ruling against a heathen name. It is assumed that the ambiguity derives from the dual meanings of the word $\text{D}\Psi$ in Hebrew (name, there).

It was taught: If he has had the Name [of God] inscribed on his body he must not bathe, nor anoint himself, nor stand in an unclean place; if it happens that he is obliged to immerse himself, he should tie some reed around [the Name], go down and immerse himself. R. Jose said: He may go down and immerse himself in the usual manner, provided he does not rub it off.²²

The Baraita was stated as a response to contradictory situations: one is obliged to bathe on the one hand, but on the other hand he is not allowed to bathe when the Lord's name is inscribed on him, since the water will erase the Lord's name,²³ and this appears to be profanation of the Lord. This is the only reference to writing the Lord's name on one's hand in the whole Rabbinic corpus,²⁴ but that should not lead one to misrepresent the historicity of the text.²⁵ Examples in the Tannaitic literature are derived from daily life, so it is assumed, unless proved otherwise, that the practice was common enough to be mentioned as an example that is aimed to teach the importance of bathing at certain times. In other words, from this Baraita it becomes clear that among the adherents of the Rabbis there were people who practiced a ritual whose praxis cannot be "officially" located.

Though we do not have any other historical testimony concerning this custom, it should be noted that the Amoraim, Rabbis in the 3rd-4th centuries, had a few legends concerning people who had the divine Name on their bodies. Though the historicity of these legends should not be taken as historical fact for certain, it appears that they augment the evaluation of the Baraita as a reflection of real history.

In the Midrash on Psalms, ch. 36, we read as follows:

R. Abba bar Kahana taught that two generations made use of the Ineffable Name: the men of the Great Synagogue, and the generation under [Hadrian's] persecution... Some say that they of the generation of Hezekiah and of the generation of Zedekiah also knew the Ineffable Name... what weapons of war could He have meant except His Ineffable Name! [Formerly], when Israel went forth to war, they had no need to fight battles, for their enemies fell before them. But after sins brought it about that the Temple was destroyed, the children of Israel fell at the hands of their enemies...

R. Aibu said: The angels scraped off the Name, which was on them.²⁶ The Rabbis said: It scraped itself off. After the Temple was destroyed, when the children of Israel went forth to war, they would

²² Isidore Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud: Yoma*, trans. Leo Jung (London: The Soncino Press, 1938), 440.

²³ B. Makkot 22a; rabbinic commentaries on Deut. 12:4; Num. 5:23.

²⁴ Parallels to this text are: b. Shabbat 120b; b. Yoma 8a.

²⁵ For an earlier study of this text and some of those that are discussed hereafter, see: Meir Bar-Ilan, 'Magic Seals on the Body among Jews in the First Centuries CE', *Tarbiz*, 57 (1988): 37-50 (Hebrew).

²⁶ The translator here added a word that is not in the Hebrew text: 'which was on the weapons'. It is evident that he had no knowledge concerning the custom under discussion.

say: "There is no soundness in my flesh because of Thine anger... For mine iniquities are gone over my head" (Ps. 38:4).²⁷

This legend discusses the greatness of the Ineffable Name in a very unusual way.²⁸ R. Aibu and his colleagues, who lived in the 3rd century, say that the Jews, at the end of the time of the first Temple, were inscribed in ink with the Lord's name. The Name was scraped off either by the angels or by natural means, and without the apotropaic sign the Jews fell in battle.

The tale is clear by itself, but one comment should be added here. In the modern study of Jewish legends the assumption is that a legend attributed to a Biblical hero reflects the time period of the sage who authored this legend, and does not necessarily reflect the history of a much earlier era. Adopting this hypothesis in the context of the present case leads one to confusion. No doubt, the story cannot be accepted as Biblical historicity, but the sages who made this observation lived in the 3rd century in [Babylon and] the Land of Israel. Thus, according to the former conjecture, one may assume that in the 3rd century there were Jews who had the Lord's name inscribed on their hands as an apotropaic sign, and this assumption coexists with the Baraita that was mentioned previously, in which the sage who composed it was aware of Jews who had the Lord's name written on their body.

IX Mystics who write Apotropaic Letters on their Body

Hekhalot literature – a collection of several treatises written in Hebrew with some Aramaic and a few Greek words – is a mystic corpus, dedicated to the heavenly palaces (*Hekhalot*), and how one can gain entrance. In former generations there was a dispute concerning the exact date of these texts, but today one can say quite confidently that the majority of them were written in the Land of Israel in the 4th-5th centuries.²⁹ One of these texts is a treatise known as *Ma'aseh Merkavah*,³⁰ literally: "A Story (about the) Throne," or how to appear before the (heavenly) Throne (or: ascending the Throne). In this treatise, there are two unique descriptions in which one is told exactly how he should inscribe the Lord's Name on his body.

The document is a unique combination of ritual liturgy and an assortment of magical secret words (that may be called: *Nomina Barbara*). The author wrote a manual to his followers instructing them how to reach the Prince of Torah, which is an angel that will teach them the practice of Torah. It reads as follows:

The Prince of the Torah, called Yophiel, told me: Anyone who seeks him should: fast for forty days; eat bread and water; abstain from eating polluted food; immerse twenty-four times; refrain from seeing

²⁷ *Midrah Tehilim*, ed. Buber, 251-52. The translation cited is that of William G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), I.420-21 (excluding the change discussed in the preceding note).

²⁸ Compare: Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 103-14 (Hebrew); Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 376-78.

²⁹ Meir Bar-Ilan, 'The Chain of Tradition in the Hekhalot Literature', *Da'at*, 56 (2005): 5-37 (Hebrew).

³⁰ The name of this book is very difficult to translate. With some reservation, it might be translated as: "Practice of the Throne" or "How to get (before) the (Divine) Throne".

any [garments in] colors; his eyes focused on the floor; pray with all his energies; be heartfelt in his prayers; inscribe himself with His [=Gods'] seals, and utter twelve sayings: You, God, living in heaven... and seventy angels came down near me, and Shakhdozei, the Prince of Presence, was amongst them. And he should utter letters to prevent being harmed... I utter your name that is One above all creatures.... seal of Kadosh-Dish-Kodesh... seal above my head... seal unto my members... Mighty of wisdom did you create that are permitted to bring down secrets of wisdom from the environs of your name. You who are the sovereign of the world... And I will sing before You as it says "Who is like You among the powerful, O Lord?" etc. (Exod. 15:11). Blessed are You, Lord, Master of miracles and strength, the One who listens to one who sanctifies Your name, and satisfies those who know His name. He should then lift his eyes toward heaven to prevent dying, stay in one place and utter a Name, and he should beautify himself, so that he is inscribed in all his limbs, wisdom and search for understanding in his heart, and he should hurry and pray to Him in His name. He should make a circle for himself and stand in it, so that demons should not arrive presenting their image as angels and kill him.³¹

This text, ascribed to an angel, begins with the preparations one should make prior to appearing before the Lord. The ceremony begins with a prayer and ends with "beautifying" the body of the practitioner by inscribing on the limbs of the body the Lord's name (though it is not completely clear that this is the inscription). The purpose of the ceremony is unmistakable: 'to prevent being harmed' and 'so that demons should not arrive... and kill him'. In other words, the ceremony testifies to its apotropaic nature.³² Now, this meticulous description is followed by another description of the same type further on in the same text. It is stated as follows:

R. Ishmael said: I inscribed myself with seven seals the moment *Pedrakas* the Prince of Presence descended:
Blessed are you Lord who created heaven and earth in your wisdom and understanding. Eternally your name (is) *Chiuf SiSi Phayo Lo Sam Be Kail Tnail* name (of?) your servant.

<i>Auris Sstail</i>	On my leg
<i>Abag Bagag</i>	On my heart
<i>Arim Tiphera</i>	On my right arm
<i>Auris Tsi Ya'eh</i>	On my left arm

³¹ The text appears in: Gershom G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965), Appendix C, #11, 108-109. For more versions of the Hebrew text, see: P. Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1981), 212 #560-62 (according to Ms. Oxford 1531, cul. 2).

³² The discussion here is restricted to the ceremony only. However, all the symbolic deeds (and numbers) are elements that must be interpreted as well (e.g.: colored garments = women's dresses).

Abit Tl Bg Ar Yyv Deyuel
Auph Akh Kiter Ss Echad Yedid Yah

On my throat
To protect my soul

And above them all:

Aph PT Yhu Chyu Yv Zhu Yhu Titas Above my head.
Mr Gog Gadol Haph Yaph Tahor HH yyv Hhi hh hh Remembering the world.
Be blessed lord of wisdom for all the strength is yours.
Blessed are you Lord, the lord of strength. Lofty and lifted high in rule,
you are King, King of Kings, Blessed is He... Blessed are you Lord, the
Holy God.³³

Here it is evident that certain incomprehensible words should be inscribed on several body parts, as seals, and though these words are not explained it is assumed they are nothing but secret names of the Lord. These words were believed to serve as a passport before the angels that allow one who is sealed to appear before the Lord. They, like the circle that was mentioned above, saved the practitioner from any harm, or in his own words: 'protect my soul'.

These texts are unique in their details. Not only do they tell about people who inscribe their bodies with holy names, but they give a precise description concerning the preparations before and during the ceremony of inscription, unlike the Talmudic Baraita, for example. It seems the idea behind this practice is to spiritually elevate the body through the use of seals while the soul ascends to heaven in a kind of mystic "encounter" with the Lord. In the second paragraph, the teacher explains exactly where on the body the (seven) names should be inscribed: on the leg, the heart, the right arm, the left arm, the throat, the 'soul' (probably nose) and on the top of the head. These names appear as *Nomina Barbara* to the modern reader, but it is self-evident that they represent divine names that were too secret to be written down. Just as the name of the Lord was called 'Ineffable', and people didn't pronounce it, pious people in Antiquity likewise didn't want to commit sacred names to writing, either in secular matters or on one's body.

Another aspect of this ceremony is the blessings, or benedictions, that are said, that seem to be forerunners of the daily prayer known as the Amidah.³⁴ The third benediction 'Blessed are you Lord, the Holy God' is the same as in the daily prayer, while the second: 'Blessed are you Lord, the lord of strength' looks like a modified version of the well-known second benediction: 'Blessed art thou, O Lord, who revives the dead'.³⁵ As a matter of fact, in the Mishnah Rosh Hashana 4:1 this benediction is called 'strengths' (of the Lord), since reviving the dead is a particular case of the Lord's strengths. In other words, the benediction in the Hekhalot text is closer to the Mishnah's terminology than the normative benediction which is known from a later period. In addition, the first benediction in this ceremony: 'Blessed are you Lord who created heaven and earth' seems to be similar to the phrase 'קונה שמים וארץ' that appears in the Sabbath's Evening ritual,³⁶ and reflects an old version

³³ This text appears in: Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 109 #15; Schäfer, *Synopse*, 216 #566.

³⁴ Meir Bar-Ilan, *Sitrey Tefilah veHekhalot* (Mysteries of Prayer and Hekhaloth) (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1987), 132 (Hebrew).

³⁵ Philip Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1949), 266.

³⁶ Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book*, p. 274. This phrase was translated as 'Master of heaven and earth'. However, this phrase is taken from Gen. 14:19 and its meaning is: 'creator of heaven and earth'.

of the first benediction of the Amidah.³⁷ There is no place here to discuss the antiquity of the text or the development of the Amidah (from 3 to 18 and 19). Suffice it to say that the ritual of inscribing oneself in the Hekhalot goes hand in hand with benedictions that preserve the old manner of recitation.

Moreover, what we see here is much more than the ritual by itself, since the text exemplifies a kind of “Myth and Ritual” process.³⁸ In almost all the other texts, the ceremony that accompanies the inscription is not described. It is only in the priestly blessing that we have an opportunity to observe both aspects of the ceremony: the oral blessing together with the ritual of inscription in a dual-mode process, or in dual-media transmission: oral and written, as was observed in the Bible. Needless to say, the apotropaic character of the ritual is unambiguous in both cases, as well as the divine power of God’s Name.

X The Lord’s Name on His Body

Among the Hekhalot literary texts there is a small book by the name: *Shi’ur Qoma*, or literally: Measure of [the Lord’s] body. The aim of this book is to give “precise” measurements of the body of God. It begins by stating that the height of God is 236,000 *parsanga* (*pharsank*, a Persian Mile, about 4 miles). Before we continue to discuss the body of the Lord, it should be recalled that in Antiquity and even much later, Jews believed in the corporeality of God.³⁹ In a letter by Bishop Agobard of Lyons (c. 779 – 840), it is stated that Jews in his time, the ninth century, believed in an anthropomorphic God,⁴⁰ and though there is a modern dispute concerning the belief of the Rabbis in relation to the Mystics who wrote the Hekhalot literature, it is certain that those Jews conceived of God as having a body.

Now, in *Shi’ur Qoma* it is stated that ‘on His heart [was] inscribed seventy names... and on his forehead these seventy letters: yh yha, etc’.⁴¹ Though it seems the text has been corrupted in its transmission, and one may surmise that more

³⁷ The whole paragraph there that begins with: ‘He with his word was a shield to our fathers’ seems to be a ‘concise’ Amidah and needs to be reevaluated. The text is a compilation of old phrases of benedictions, some of them now lost, such as ‘Dwelling of blessings’ (מַעוֹן נֹתַן מַעֲיָן) and ‘Lord of peace’ (אֲדוֹן הַשְּׁלוֹם), like אֲדוֹן גְּבוּרוֹת discussed here). See: G. Alon, *Mehqarim BeToldot Israel* (Tel Aviv: Haqibutz Hameuhad, 1970), II, pp. 128-132 (Hebrew).

³⁸ There is a vast amount of literature on Myth and Ritual theory, including: C. Kluckhohn, ‘Myths and Rituals: A General Theory’, in *Reader in Comparative Religion – An Anthropological Approach*, eds. W. A. Lessa and E. Z. Vogt, 4th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 66-78; Joseph Fontenrose, *The Ritual Theory of Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

³⁹ M. Bar-Ilan, ‘The Hand of God: A Chapter in Rabbinic Anthropomorphism’, in *Rashi 1040-1990: Hommage à Ephraïm E. Urbach*, Congrès européen des Études juives, ed. G. Sed-Rajna (Paris: CERF, 1993), 321-35; Naomi Janowitz, ‘God’s Body: Theological and Ritual Roles of Shi’ur Komah’, in *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 183-201.

⁴⁰ Robert Bonfil, ‘The Cultural and Religious Traditions of French Jewry in the Ninth Century, as Reflected in the Writings of Agobard of Lyons’, in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism Philosophy and Ethical Literature, Presented to Isaiah Tishby*, eds. J. Dan and J. Hacker (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1986), 327-48 (Hebrew).

⁴¹ *Merkavah Shlemah*, 32b-33a, 37a; M. S. Cohen, *The Shi’ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1985), 89-92, 173.

details of this type were circulated in Antiquity, the data it contains is enough to grasp its meaning. Before we analyze the text, we should look at its development in later generations, which is recorded in *Midrash Kohen*.

Midrash Kohen (literally: [God] established [the world]) is a small midrash that discusses the way God created the world.⁴² It has a special blend of rabbinic Talmudic sources combined with some mystical ideas. Some of these ideas come from Hekhalot literature, but there are several names of angels that do not appear elsewhere.⁴³ There is a cosmological section where not only is the world described, but there is a specific description of Paradise and the Gehenna. The first time this text was quoted was in the Piyyutim composed by Amitai, son of Shefatya,⁴⁴ who lived in Oria, Southern Italy, at the end of the 9th century, so one may surmise that this unique text was composed in Italy a short time earlier.

Near the beginning of the text it is written as follows:

Wisdom – in Gematria 73 (names): Het = 8, Kaf = 20, Mem = 40, He = 5, that is – 73 names inscribed on the arm of the Holy One Blessed be He. In one of them – the light was created, in one of them – fire, in one – water, here are 3, and 70 names are left that with each and every name (God) can create a world like this, and with them (He) will create in the future several other worlds to inherit righteous people in the world to come...

It is quite clear that the tradition in *Midrash Kohen* depends upon its forerunner: *Shi'ur Qoma*, and for our purpose it makes no difference if the 70 names appear on God's arm or on His heart. The idea is that God has a body, and on His body, He has (70) names. In other words, this tradition reflects the fact that Jews put names on their body, and (therefore) their God had names on His as well. This idea of similarity between man and God finds its counterpart in a rabbinic tradition. According to the rabbis, not only a Jew has phylacteries, but the Lord has phylacteries as well (b. Berakhot 6a).⁴⁵ This concept is easily understood, since both traditions—God's phylacteries and God's inscribed body—are rooted in one concept: *Imago Dei*: man walks in the ways of God,⁴⁶ a concept that appears in the Bible and of which the Rabbis were very cognizant, of course.⁴⁷

⁴² A. Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash*, 2nd printing (Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrmann, 1938), II, 23-39 (Introduction on pages XII-XIV).

⁴³ Meir Bar-Ilan, 'The Names of the Angels', in *These Are The Names*, eds. A. Demsky, J. A. Reif and J. Tabori (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1997), 33-48 (Hebrew).

⁴⁴ Jonah David, *Shirei Amitai* (Jerusalem: Achshav, 1975), 99 (Hebrew). The next quote from this text was done in a Piyyut of Zebadya who lived in (southern) Italy around 940. See: J. David, *Shirei Zebadya* (Jerusalem: Achshav, 1972), 53 (Hebrew).

⁴⁵ M. Bar-Ilan, 'The Idea of Crowning God in Hekhalot Mysticism and the Karaite Polemic' in *Early Jewish Mysticism: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Joseph Dan (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1987), 221-33 (Hebrew).

⁴⁶ Eryl E. Davies, 'Walking in God's Ways: The Concept of *Imitatio Dei* in the Old Testament', in *Search of True Wisdom*, ed. Edward Ball (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 99-115.

⁴⁷ B. Shabbat 133b; y. Peah 1:1, 15b.

It should be noted that just like the similarity that was envisioned between man and God, similarity between man and Angels in several aspects was also assumed, specifically in terms of inscriptions on the body. Already in the Odes of Solomon IV:8 we are told that the Archangels are clad with the seal of God,⁴⁸ that is: like man. A similar tradition appears in the book of Revelation 19:16, where we are told that one of the heavenly angels (that some commentators interpret as being Jesus) has 'on his vesture and on his thigh, a name written: King of Kings, and Lord of Lords'. Thus, not only people, and God, were inscribed with divine names, but angels as well.⁴⁹ It is needless to add that one can view the process in reverse: people envisioned angels (and God) as having inscribed Names, and they wanted to be like angels (or even God) by imitating them. The idea of men imitating angels is definitely ancient,⁵⁰ and the connection between the Apocalypse and the Hekhalot literature becomes even clearer, not only because of the similarity between the names in both books, but because of the Qedusha prayer (Sanctus) that originated in similar circles of mystics.⁵¹ Moreover, in the Qedusha it is stated: 'We sanctify thy name in this world even as they sanctify it in the highest heavens', and: 'We revere and sanctify thee in the words of the assembly of holy seraphim who hallow thy name in the sanctuary'.⁵² Man is imitating God or angels is no news and the concept that God, His angels and Men have The Lord's name on their body is just one example of this idea.

XI The Magician's Practice of Writing the Lord's Name on his Body

The book *Harba DeMoshe* (literally: The sword of Moses) was written in Aramaic and Hebrew, most likely in the Land of Israel between the 5th-7th centuries.⁵³ It is the manual of a Jewish magician(s) who wrote a variety of magic recipes (*inter alia*: how to walk on water, how to free someone from jail, etc.) and pseudepigraphally attributed his work to Moses.

From his preparations before acting as a magician it is clear that the author was a pious man, and from his (sparse) liturgy, as well as from his choice of heroes, one may assume he was affiliated with the Rabbinic "movement". Here is a quotation from the text:

'I conjure you in the name of X, who is mighty over all, and rules over all, and everything is in His hands, that you do not hurt me, nor terrify me, nor frighten me; verily in the name of the powerful, the head of...'. After this he may commence his conjuration, for now he has

⁴⁸ Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 133.

⁴⁹ In an old Piyut *seder b'riyot* (from roughly 5-6th centuries), it is stated that when the Lord created angels He decided with what seal to make them, assumingly, like a potter who finishes his clay dish and seals it. See: M. D. Swartz, 'Piyut and Heikhalot: Recent Research and its Implications for the History of Ancient Jewish Liturgy and Mysticism', Debra Reed Blank, ed., *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy: Studies Dedicated to Menahem Schmelzer*, (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2011), 263-281 (esp. 275).

⁵⁰ Y. Berakhot 1:1, Bc: 'Two Amoraim, R. Levi and R. Simon, one say like angels and one say like priests'.

⁵¹ Meir Bar-Ilan, 'Major Trends in the Formation and Crystallization of the Qedusha', *Da'at*, 25 (1990): 5-20 (Hebrew).

⁵² Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book*, 84, 394.

⁵³ Meir Bar-Ilan, '(Review of) J. Harari, *Harba de-Moshe*', *Da'at*, 43 (1999): 125-40 (Hebrew).

fortified himself and has sealed himself with the name of God of 42 letters, before which all who hear it tremble and are frightened, and the heavenly hosts are terror-struck.⁵⁴

It seems there is no need to explain this text, since the connection between one's safety – the heavenly body and the earthly host alike – and his ritual of inscribing the Lord's Name on his body in a dual-mode of oral conjuration and written text is unambiguous. This practice is quite similar to the two in the Hekhalot literature that have already been discussed. The 42-letter Name was secret, of course, and the author does not explain where on the body the Name should be inscribed. One can only guess that the 42 letters were not all written on one part of the body, but rather that the magician who wanted to be safe wrote the Name over all of his body, and each and every organ had 2-3 letters that together make the Divine Name.

We do not know to what extent these procedures were practiced, but it should be stated that centuries later, in Medieval Germany,⁵⁵ there were Jews who had similar practices, which indicate that one cannot construe these practices as being new. One of the texts is called 'the Book of the Garment'; it is a magician's manual outlining how to use a garment upon which the Name of the Lord had previously been written. This is a type of amulet on which the Name (of 72 letters) was inscribed. The date of the text is difficult to discern, but it should be noted that these texts reflect the trend of abandoning the practice of writing on the body in preference for the usage of amulets.

XII The Lord's Name Resurrecting a Dead Person

This discussion concerning the Name of the Lord on one's body ends with a story told by a poet by the name Ahima'az who wrote a book in Southern Italy in 1054 called *Sefer Yohasin* (literally: Book of Genealogies), or: the Scroll of Ahima'az. In this book he described how Rabbi Ahima'az, his ancestor (from the 10th century) resurrected a dead person by inscribing on his arm the Lord's name.⁵⁶ History, magic and folklore are combined in this book and one can see in this story a relic, or development, of the pious Jews in Antiquity who had written the Lord's name on their bodies in order to be saved (at times – resurrected).

XIII Meaning of the Marks

The common denominator of the above texts is that they all represent a similar religious practice. Except for the sources that deal with magic, it looks like the entire practice involves an attempt to achieve a kind of righteousness. In most of the

⁵⁴ Moses Gaster, *Studies and Texts*, 1928, rep. (New York: Ktav, 1971), vol. I, 333; vol. III, 91. For a parallel to this text, see: *Merkavah Shelema*, ed. Sh. Musayov (Jerusalem: Salomon, 1921), 3 (Ab); Peter Schäfer, *Hekhalot-Studien* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1988), 118-53 (p. 139 #625).

⁵⁵ Irina Wandrey, "*Das Buch des Gewandes*" und "*Das Buch des Aufrechten*" (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 45-53, 97-102, 136-147.

⁵⁶ Robert Bonfil, *History and Folklore in a Medieval Jewish Chronicle: The Family Chronicle of Ahima'az ben Paltiel* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2009), 251. See also: Moshe Idel, *Golem: Jewish Magic and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990).

cases, the apotropaic nature is unmistakable: the inscriptions were made to save the one who bears them, from the time of Cain until the time of Hekhalot literature (and the epoch of resurrection is not far away, of course). The holy names were inscribed in order to save the Jew who bears them from harm, either earthly or from an angel who might stop a man who wants to yield divine control over reality. All the marks provided some kind of identification – just like the tattoos were meant to supply, though they were inscribed with ink.

Inscriptions on the body are thus related to the ritual of circumcision, since inscribing the Name was part of a Rite of Passage, as was true of the original meaning of circumcision.⁵⁷ As a matter of fact, both rites: circumcision and inscribing on the body, denote incorporation into society and a change in one's status.⁵⁸ However, there is a difference between these ceremonies: circumcision is performed upon babies who have no awareness of the occasion and they are forced to submit to it (in public).⁵⁹ Inscribing the Lord's Name on one's body signifies a rite of passage, since it is done by a grownup who has full control over his deeds. It seems that in most cases the inscription of the Lord's Name was done by a singular person in private, as can be expected from one who has had the unique experience of ascending to heaven. However, the priestly blessing that begins with a "header" in plural suggests that the priests blessed the people and then inscribed the Lord's Name upon them in public.

No females could be seen among these texts, and this is no surprise. Men have traditionally been dominant in the cultural sphere (priestly matters and literacy) while women have been active in the realm of nature, and just as women are not circumcised they are not inscribed.⁶⁰ In some texts one can see the Myth and Ritual theory "at work" and it seems that we should understand the evidence of inscription on one's body as reflecting a ceremony, a myth, even when the text conceals this aspect of the practice.

As a final comment on this practice it should be noted that a person who walks with the Lord's Name on his (uncovered) body is a mobile board that promotes the knowledge of the Lord's Name in the world. Thus, the bearer of the Lord's Name is not only a propagandist for God, but also for the importance of literacy in society, and he exemplifies socialized literacy in a unique manner.⁶¹ Everybody sees the power of the written word and the power of the word is part of the power of the Lord.

⁵⁷ Elliot R. Wolfson, 'Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the Transmission of Esoteric Doctrine', *JQR* 78/1-2 (1987): 77-112.

⁵⁸ M. Meerson, 'Rites of Passage in Magic and Mysticism', *supra*, n. 20.

⁵⁹ However, in Josh. 5:2-9 circumcision is done in public, by a group of grownup males (of different ages), in a sacred place and in a pre-sacred time. It seems this description reflects an old practice.

⁶⁰ It seems that the ceremony on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal was meant for men only (Deut. 27:14: 'all men from Israel'). However, in Josh. 8:35 it is stated: 'before the assembly of Israel, and the women and the little ones', so women participated but were not inscribed.

⁶¹ Erik A. Havelock, *Prologue to Greek Literacy* (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 1971), 14; Demsky, (*supra* n. 16), 33 (Hebrew); M. Bar-Ilan, 'Socialized Literacy in Antiquity', *MAARAV*, 21.1-2 (2014), pp. 237-250.

XIV From Centrality to Oblivion

While it is easily understood why this practice was developed and adopted in the first place, it is not clear why it was later discarded. Perhaps the whole procedure, or ceremony, was considered to represent a mystical experience, and the Jews preferred to focus on more explicit rituals and texts instead; it is hard to tell.

In any event, the sources discussed above reflect that in Antiquity (some of) the Jews inscribed themselves with the Lord's name, while in later generations this practice was abandoned. The centrality of this practice cannot be refuted, because of the importance of the commandments that were given on a special occasion, and the centrality of the priestly blessing as is evident in the Bible. As it is well known the priestly blessing is practiced until this very day in daily or weekly services (depending upon the specific rite), though it appears in its oral aspect only without the second step of the practical inscription, as explained above.

As already mentioned, the priestly blessing resembles other Biblical ceremonies on the one hand and the ceremony in Hekhalot literature on the other hand, not to mention the evidence of the prophet who saw people who had inscribed on their hands 'to the Lord'. Therefore, the question arises: why has this custom of inscribing the Lord's name on one's body disappeared?

The first answer to this question must be that the rituals of Judaism changed during the course of history, and one can bring forward many examples of practices that were abandoned, such as the *Lex Talionis* rule that was converted into monetary compensation, or many other Biblical laws that are no longer practiced.⁶² However, in this case one can see that the custom was still observed, to some extent, during the Talmudic and post-Talmudic periods (circa 2nd-9th centuries), so in inscribing God's Name on one's hand there is no dichotomy between written law and oral law, or the Tannaitic law, as is the case in many of these forgotten rulings.

An indication as to the disappearance of the custom may be seen in the sources themselves if they are read properly. These sources reveal the disappearance of the practice when a comparison is made between the priestly blessing and the Hekhalot literature in a chronological line. The priestly blessing begins with: 'Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying: On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel'. That is to say, we are dealing with a public ceremony aimed at all 'Children of Israel', and the participants' role in the ceremony is passive: they let the priest bless them and then inscribe them. This ceremony was part of the Torah given by Moses, hence it was normative: a religious experience, a public religion and a rite of passage (depending upon the number of times it was practiced). However, in Hekhalot literature, where one can see a similar practice, the ceremony is much different: it was done privately, as a private religion, in an active mystical experience. In other words, the ancient ceremony was aimed at many participants while the later ritual refers to only a few.

In other words, the sources themselves indicate a gradual disappearance of this practice while it was undergoing a change from public to private, from normative to esoteric. Since the sources do not reveal what caused the disappearance one can only guess that somehow the appearance of the Lord's name on one's hand seemed to be "too exalted"; people were reconsidering their own

⁶² There are many cases like this; compare, for example, Deuteronomy 21.

standing in relation to God. In *Tosefta* Yadaim 2:20 there is a dispute between the Pharisees and another Jewish sect of the time: 'Those that immersed [daily] in morning say: we complain over you Pharisees that you mention The Name by a body that contains defilement'. Thus, we can see a kind of refraining from physical use of the Lord's name because the body was considered to be too lowly in contrast to the sublime God.

Moreover, it is assumed that people began to look at those with the Lord's name written on their bodies as being ostentatious. Thus, people avoided this practice and therefore it stayed in the realm of private religion only. This hypothesis is supported by the similar practice of putting phylacteries on one's body and their disappearance (at least for some centuries),⁶³ though there may have been other causes for the phylacteries discontinuance (in the Middle Ages).

One more hypothesis should be stated here. The analogue between the Name on one's body and the Lord's body was already stated above. Perhaps the disappearance of the idea of a corporeal God – God has no body on which His name can be inscribed (and certainly He does not have phylacteries) – caused the disappearance of writing the Lord's name on people. Creation of man in the image of God received a new meaning, and people stopped thinking of inscribing themselves with the Lord's name as a kind of *Imitatio Dei*. Last but not least, it is assumed that these body marks disappointed while Jews with such marks were killed and the divine marks did not fulfill their purpose of protecting their bearers. Thus, instead of the marks showing the might of the Lord of Israel they caused the opposite – defamation of God. Without knowing the exact reason for the disappearance of the custom it seems that the disappearance of the practice led commentators to interpret Biblical verses in a metaphorical manner, and thus signaled the disappearance of a custom that millennium earlier had been part of normative Judaic practice.⁶⁴

Conclusion

We have discussed a non-formal Jewish custom that has somehow been neglected by old practitioners as well as modern scholars. It is true that there is not ample data, but it is easily seen that the evidence now available is much more abundant than was previously realized.

Inscribing the Lord's Name was a religious practice with more significance than has been officially stated. This divine practice among the Jews, God and angels somehow lost its validation, which led ancient commentators as well as modern scholars to reinterpret texts in an assessment far from their original meaning. It is hoped that with more work in the direction of the present study the whole subject of bodily marks on the Jews throughout the ages will become clearer, and an explanation will be given as to why this custom disappeared.

⁶³ Compare: M. Radkinoohn, *Tefilla Lemoshe* (Pressburg, 1883) (Hebrew).

⁶⁴ A similar disappearance occurred among the early Christians, and Gustafson (supra n. 10) gives his own explanation. It is interesting to note that on behalf of Galatians 6:17: 'I carry the mark of Jesus tattooed [*stigmata*]' Gustafson writes: 'Paul surely speaks metaphorically here', a claim that is not justifiable, especially after he had earlier presented material evidence of the practice of tattooing.