



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2014.03.02

Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. \$39.95. ISBN: 9780691142159.

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In this text, Peter Schäfer attempts a programmatic analysis of the early forms of Jewish mysticism. The text analyses different forms of mystical writing, beginning with the biblical vision of Ezekiel, before moving on to *1* and *2 Enoch*, the Common Era apocalypses of *Abraham*, *Zephaniah*, *John*, and the *Ascension of Isaiah*, Qumran literature, Philo, the Talmud and finally the Hekhalot literature.

This is indisputably an area in which Schäfer is expert; the study of the Hekhalot literature in particular would not be what it is today without his precise analytical research and historical achievements in the form of *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*¹ and *Geniza Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur*.² This text then offers a welcome analysis of what we know as “Jewish mysticism” during its early, formative period, from a scholar who is a recognised expert in the field.

Of course, the phrase “Jewish mysticism” is itself a disputed term, and Schäfer begins by offering a useful summary of scholarly opinions on its meaning and validity. This alone is a welcome and worthwhile endeavour, and while Schäfer does not provide a stable definition, rather problematizing the whole question (in fact every element of the book’s title is discussed and shown to be dubious), the overview is clear and rigorous.

Schäfer sets up the impetus for much of the later mystical typology through an analysis of Ezekiel’s vision by the Chebar canal, and as such, it is the visionary account by which Schäfer typifies Jewish Mysticism. This is reflected in the second chapter’s discussion of Enoch, where Schäfer focusses on Enoch’s ascension and his vision of the palace, throne, and finally of God himself. He discusses in passing the striking similarity also of Enoch’s vision with that of Daniel (60–62), and some features which ultimately suggest “a common source for both the *Book of the*

¹ Peter Schäfer, Margarete Schlüter, and Hans Georg von Mutius, eds., *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (TSAJ 2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981).

² Schäfer, ed., *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (TSAJ 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984).

Watchers and Daniel,” if we are not to go against all current estimates and re-date the former to the mid-2nd century B.C.E. (62 n. 38).³

However, while every mystic or seer receives revelation, this is not always as we may expect: in many of the texts, “it is not the vision of God that is the primary goal [...] but the message conveyed by God during the vision” (70). Schäfer makes a consistent case that the actual event of revelation is not a crucial part of the mystic’s experience;⁴ often the vision is glossed over in the texts, and either the message is imparted to the mystic by God, or the joining of the mystic in the praise of God appears as the climax of the ascent.⁵

The inclusion of Philo in a study of Jewish mysticism is unusual but very welcome. The influence of philosophy on mysticism is important to note, and especially in the case of Jewish mysticism, where the Kabbalah owed such a heavy debt to both Neoplatonism and Maimonides, the putative influence of Greek philosophy via a Jewish philosopher is an important avenue for investigation. Schäfer initially provides a careful argument for Philo’s reliance on the Wisdom of Solomon, but the main part of the section is devoted to the mystical ascent of the soul which, in leaving the body behind, attains divine perfection, and in merging with the divine achieves what “may be called, in the truest sense of the phrase, *unio mystica*” (352). My only negative comment here is that while Schäfer describes this process beautifully, he provides no account of how this would relate to later forms of mysticism, especially the transformation of the mystic into Metatron which is attested in the early kabbalistic writings of Abraham Abulafia. The absence also of some nod to the relationship between this transformation (which Philo describes most clearly in terms of Moses) and that of Enoch into Metatron is unfortunate, especially when he has already noted Himmelfarb and Andersen’s comparisons of 2 *Enoch* to Philo (77). This criticism, of the absence of discussion regarding thematic connections between the texts on offer, is one which I shall have cause to return to, frequently.

In his discussion of the rabbis (175–242), Schäfer offers a detailed discussion of *m. Hagigah* 2:1 and the subsequent additions and parallels which accreted to it. Beginning with a careful and well-implemented argument that *m. Hagigah* 2:1 is not a condemnation (or even a reference to) a mystical practice of visioning the Merkavah, but rather is a prohibition on the exegesis of Ezek.1, he follows this with an analysis of the story of the four sages ascending to *pardes*. Schäfer interprets this story as not linked to Merkavah mysticism or heavenly journeys,

³ Schäfer wisely steers clear of debates regarding the date of 1 *Enoch*. Since *Origins of Jewish Mysticism* was published, much work has been done to locate *Similitudes* in the pre-Common Era; see especially George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch 2: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch Chapters 37–82* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

⁴ Enoch “tells us nothing of God’s appearance;” *The Apocalypse of Abraham, the Ascension of Isaiah, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, and Revelation all “are strikingly reticent about the seer’s vision of God” (111). “In all Qumranic texts there is no emphasis whatsoever on the vision of God and a description of his appearance,” but rather the angels’ “praise, their appearance, and their task” form the crux of the narrative (152). “Any kind of personal encounter between the [Merkavah] mystic and God, any description of God seated on his throne, is conspicuously absent [...] The goal of the vision is the destiny of Israel, not the physical appearance of God” (252).

⁵ “All the fragments of ascent accounts presented in *Hekhalot Rabbati* have in common that they climax not in a vision—certainly not a vision of the physical appearance of God—but in a liturgical performance taking place in heaven” (281). Thus Schäfer prefers to label the experience of the successful mystic as not *unio mystica*, but *unio liturgica*.

but as an allegorical tale of the results of different approaches to learning God's mysteries as found in the Torah (most likely, given the context, either the mysteries of creation as found in Genesis or of the Merkava as found in Ezekiel). Thus the Mishnaic unit as a whole, in its original intent, was nothing to do with ecstatic spiritual practices as described in the Hekhalot literature, but was rather an account of how and how not to approach scriptural exegesis when reading certain biblical texts. So, "unlike their predecessors, who penned the ascent apocalypses, the rabbis seek their God through exegesis, and not through a heavenly journey" (213). However, by the time the *Bavli* re-interprets this material, it has become "imbued [...] with the language of the apocalyptic and, in particular, the Hekhalot literature" (224), substantially changing it in appearance.

In his coverage of the Merkavah mystics (243–330), Schäfer analyses *Hekhalot Rabbati*, *Hekhalot Zutarti*, *Shi'ur Qomah*, and *3 Enoch*. In line with the increasing trend, Schäfer locates the Hekhalot literature in Babylonia, largely post-6th century. It is only with these texts that we first encounter "a true visionary experience and not [...] a mere exegetical exercise" (248). Schäfer highlights the messianic nature of the Merkavah journey, emphasising that although the Messiah is never mentioned in the Hekhalot literature (excepting Hasidic additions to NY 8128) this is because "the mystic has rendered him superfluous" (257). This replacement of the Messiah with the mystic seer is not without previous mention in the scholarly literature, but Schäfer's analysis is deeper than any previous treatment and highly convincing (though I am disappointed that Schäfer does not relate this to the messianic current developed around the primordial heavenly traveller Enoch within the Enoch literature). Likewise, while Schäfer cites Aqiva's discovery of "the spell and the seal by which one binds the earth and by which one binds the heavens" (§367), I would, again, have liked to see some discussion of the similarity between this and *1 Enoch*'s pronouncements regarding the oath through which "the earth was founded [...] the sea was created [...] the [pillars of the] deep were made firm [...] the sun and the moon complete their course [...] the stars complete their courses" (*1 En.* 69:15–25).

Schäfer rejects Scholem's claim that the exegesis of Song of Songs formed the basis for *Shi'ur Qomah* traditions (309), an argument in which Schäfer is surely correct—but Scholem did not claim it was *exegesis* of Song of Songs which evolved into *Shi'ur Qomah* speculation; rather, it was the simple concept of detailed, limb by limb description of God's body which Scholem believed formed the basis of *Shi'ur Qomah*'s similar endeavour. Schäfer does not see this, rather misinterpreting Scholem's claim and rejecting it based on his own preferred method of reading texts and their linear influence on each other.

However, his takedown of Scholem's argument for the origin in *Shi'ur Qomah* of some Gnostic traditions such as Marcus' (311–313) is correct and well supported. This finds further support from the work of Kieran Barry,⁶ who has made a very strong case for the Greek origin of letter mysticism, explicitly citing Marcus' doctrine as the earliest example of a doctrine of creation via letters. The only problem with Schäfer's reading here is his repeated and pointed objections to Scholem's other evidence (*2 Enoch*, *Book of Elchasai*, Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, and the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*) on the grounds that the heavenly figure in question in these texts is not God but an angel. This is only partly relevant, given that *Shi'ur*

⁶ Kieran Barry, *The Greek Qabalah: Alphabetical Mysticism and Numerology in the Ancient World* (York Beach: Weiser, 1999).

Qomah, like Merkavah mystical texts generally, consistently blurs the distinction between God and his highest angel. In this case Metatron is described in identical terms with God and at times it is impossible to tell whether it is God or Metatron (or the Youth, if these are accepted to be distinct) who is being described.⁷ In fact, that Schäfer does not address this is curious, because it is a frequently remarked aspect of *Shi'ur Qomah* that the body being measured is not in fact God at all but merely a demiurge, the *yotzer bereshit*.⁸ In fact, it is precisely this blurring between God and the highest angel, repeated throughout the Hekhalot corpus, which so strikingly reminiscent of the early Christian movement; and Schäfer himself had shortly before remarked on the almost God-like potency and stature of the highest angel in the *Apocalypses of Abraham* and *Zephaniah* (111).

Staying briefly with Metatron, Schäfer rejects the pressing scholarly drive to make this angel the precursor to Jesus (one which, phrased in those terms, I am certainly sympathetic to; there is zero evidence of Metatron prior to the 4th century C.E. and so at the most he could be understood only as a later Jewish expression of the same matrix which had first become unified in Jesus). Making Metatron a Jewish *answer* to Christ, however, as Schäfer does, goes too far in the opposite direction for my liking, and is a solution which, uncharacteristically for Schäfer, ignores the historical nuance of the situation in which Jews and Jewish Christians found themselves during this chaotic and culturally diverse melting pot of centuries. Surely the interactions between communities which were Christian, Jewish, Jewish-Christian, Samaritan, Gnostic, Manichean, pagan, ex-pagan Christian, and so forth, all developing their own theological inheritance while in close proximity to each other, and often outside the purview of any overarching doctrinal authority, deserve a far more thorough investigation—or at the least consideration—before making such a blanket judgment. This review is not the place for such an argument; Schäfer's more recent *The Jewish Jesus* (2012) presents a more comprehensive context for debate on the matter in that it develops his argument significantly from its statement here. Suffice it to say, though, that Metatron as a “response to the New Testament message of Jesus Christ” (330) already presumes a binary opposition between two monolithic faiths whereby one “responds” to the other, rather than a penumbra of different communities all influencing each other with their doctrines, creeds, and theological developments.

Schäfer provides an interesting debate on the question of an analytic-rational approach versus an experiential approach to mystical or esoteric texts. He does accept that the binary is questionable, writing that “it may even be that this dichotomy [between literature and experience] is a false and misleading one and that the very fact of establishing it inhibits its solution” (346–7). Thus, “reading and reciting the experience of the ascent has *become* the

⁷ A *Shi'ur Qomah* passage repeated in *Siddur Rabbah*, *Sefer Raziel* and *ShQ* contains a section which describes the Youth in exactly the same terms that Metatron described God—including his crown bearing the name of Israel, his horns, and his fiery, rainbow-like appearance. Similarly, the Genizah fragment 8. T.-S. K 21.95.C contains a passage where Ozhayah warns of the Youth, “who comes from behind the throne” and whose crown, shoes, robe, splendour and glory are like his king's but who under no account should be worshipped. Quite apart from the ubiquitous name-sharing, this seems to indicate some kind of continuity of essence between God and angel. Schäfer himself sees this, having recently written that it is “plausible to regard the angelic-divine names with divine epithets as just one more indication that the boundaries between God and his angels in the Hekhalot literature [...] become fluid” (*The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* [Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012], 137). See also the lengthy discussion of this in my “Chaos and Identity: Onomatology in the Hekhalot Literature,” *Bamidbar—Journal for Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (2012): 36–51.

⁸ E.g., Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism: Late Antiquity* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1998), 211.

ascent, or, to put it in terms of our dichotomy, reciting the literature *is* the experience” (347). This insight is an important one: the literature is very likely not intended to be descriptive; it is rather experiential. The text is to be engaged with, to be utilised, not merely to be read passively. Given this acknowledgment on his part, it is strange that he goes on to critique Elliot Wolfson’s almost identical fusing together of “exegetical activity” and “ecstatic experience” (351).⁹ There is only a hair’s breadth between the two writers’ claims, yet the fundamental similarity appears to be obscured by terminology such as “ecstatic experience” which for Schäfer conjures up something fundamentally opposed to rationality.

Schäfer’s book is not an analysis of Jewish mysticism *per se*; the Kabbalah and Hasidism are barely mentioned, and the nature and method of how these earlier “mystical” traditions evolved and fed into the systematic speculation of the medieval period onwards is not approached. This itself is not problematic, and is not at all the aim of the book; but it does serve to highlight the need for precisely such a study (Schäfer himself writes of this as “inadequately addressed and even conspicuously glossed over” [27]). Many years have passed since Scholem attempted this,¹⁰ and much new information has since come to light (much in terms of the development of the early Kabbalah, but also much on Merkavah mysticism which has been aided by Schäfer’s own publications). It is especially important to consider the relationship between the medieval mystics and Merkavah mysticism because the vast majority of the extant Hekhalot corpus (of the six main textual groupings, almost all manuscripts except those preserved in the Cairo Genizah) was transcribed, edited, and to a greater or lesser extent actively rewritten by the Ashkenazi Hasidim; a group which had its own theological agenda, the Hasidim were inclined to read *and write* into the texts. Thus, in order to understand what may be original and later manipulations, the interpretation of the Hekhalot literature must always be tempered by a historical sensitivity to these groups, something which Schäfer does little to provide, or even acknowledge. As a general point, this forms my major complaint about the book: while the analysis in each chapter is consistently excellent, very little is done to tie the different chapters together, to discuss themes which crop up in two or more of them, or to offer some suggestion as to how the materials under consideration have influenced each other historically. I understand why Schäfer has not done this: his criticisms of other scholars often centre on their tendency to speculate rather than to focus on what the texts actually provide in concrete terms. However, such an influence among texts and traditions has undoubtedly happened, and the reader is often left with the sense that Schäfer has provided a set of raw data, of which it is up to the reader to provide the interpretation. A prime example of this is in the analysis of the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, which Schäfer argues “is a graphic dramatization” of Gen.15’s “the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision” (87). This is an interesting analysis, and as always is soundly reasoned in terms of the first half of the *Apocalypse*, but Schäfer never attempts to relate this to the angel Yahoel’s apparent role in the second half as manifesting the Name/Word of God. Yahoel’s bearing of the Name is mentioned, and to any reader the association between this and Schäfer’s prior argument must be apparent, yet Schäfer himself never states the connection.

⁹ Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 121.

¹⁰ Gershom Scholem, *The Origins of the Kabbalah* (ed. R. J. Werblowsky; trans. Allan Arkush; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

This is particularly frustrating because when Schäfer does work to establish links he does it superbly. The stark similarities between the vision passage in *The Ascension of Isaiah* and those found in the Hekhalot literature, especially R. Nehunya b. Haqanah's journey in *Hekhalot Rabbati* (95ff.), are demonstrated with clarity and precision. However, on the very next page Isaiah's attempted worship of an enthroned angel in the second heaven (7:25)—something which surely prefigures Aher's mistaking Metatron for a second god (*b. Hag* 15a; *3 En.* 16:2; *HekhR* §295; *MMerk* §597)—is mentioned but left unremarked upon, as is a similar incident in the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*. It is plausible that there is no connection whatsoever between the incidents in these texts; but, whether or not it is likely, the reader is left wondering whether Schäfer has noticed this at all, or whether there is a valid reason to not make the connection which he apparently assumes every reader will know. Mentioning the similarity even simply to state that it is tenuous would have been preferable.

It is this unspeculative and resolutely analytic approach, grounded wholly in the text, which is Schafer's greatest strength and his greatest weakness; there are no sloppy arguments herein, and no flights of the imagination or attempted bridging of suggestive gaps *à la* Idel, Boyarin or Wolfson. And yet one feels when dealing with texts which are so speculative and so grand in scope and intention, that to reduce them to a scientific analysis and not allow some extrapolation about grand narratives or about the kind of metaphysics in which the authors (or the authors' ideas) were rooted misses some of the most crucial aspects; could it be that a scholar who refuses to "get into the spirit" of the text can only understand (and tell) so much? Schäfer himself does address this issue, both in the introduction and the conclusion; he defends his work's grounding in the text, in what the texts can offer us, and his locating of the texts within their specific histories. This approach, as Schäfer carefully explains, is somewhat at odds with many scholars in a field which he criticises for its frequently ahistorical approach, along with a passion for parallelomania. The purging of these from Schäfer's own work, then, is no accident, but is a deliberate part of his method, and the results are certainly worthwhile, even if sometimes the reader is left waiting in vain for Schafer to announce or dispute a connection which seems to leap from the page.

Schäfer's book offers an excellent examination of each textual group in isolation while leaving entirely up to the reader any speculation about potential relationships between these groups, or about how these influences merged and mingled at different points, eventually culminating in the systematic philosophical mysticism of the kabbalists (with the exception of the book of Ezekiel, which is constantly cross-referenced as the likely source of many of these traditions). It is not Schäfer's style to offer answers, or to indulge in speculation beyond what the evidence states for itself, but this leaves the reader feeling the book is somewhat lacking; it is an important stepping stone to a better understanding of the origins of Jewish mysticism, but it offers no conclusions or answers itself. Despite these criticisms, Schäfer's book is an important contribution to the discussion and is sure to offer much to the scholar interested in the specifics of any of the traditions and textual groups herein.