

What is Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism?

APRIL D. DeCONICK

And what mortal person is it who is able
To ascend on high,
To ride on wheels,
To descend below,
To search out the inhabited world,
To walk on the dry land,
To gaze at His splendor,
To dwell with His crown,
To be transformed by His glory,
To recite praise,
To combine letters,
To recite their names,
To have a vision of what is above,
To have a vision of what is below,
To know the explanation of the living,
And to see the vision of the dead,
To walk in rivers of fire,
And to know the lightening?
And who is able to explain it,
And who is able to see it?
Hekhalot Zutarti, Sections 349-50¹

As a word, “mysticism” has a notorious reputation. Its polymorphic associations make precise meaning difficult to isolate, especially across cultures and eras. It is often used as

¹ All references in this chapter to Hekhalot texts (excluding *3 Enoch*) are to P. Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1981) and English translations of passages from the Hekhalot texts (excluding *3 Enoch*) are those of P. Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

an antonym for so-called “rationalism,” associated with so-called “supernaturalism,” in contradistinction to our contemporary scientific view of the world. Broadly speaking, it has come to describe for us organized practices used to illicit direct contact with the divine.

As an “-ism,” “mysticism” is not an *emic* word, a word actually used by ancient people to describe their experiences. It corresponds to no single term in the ancient literature. In fact, when the early Jews and Christians describe their mystical experiences in a single word, they do so most often by employing the term “*apokalypsis*,” an “apocalypse” or “revelation.” In the Jewish and Christian period-literature, these religious experiences are described *emically* as waking visions, dreams, trances and auditions which can involve spirit possession and ascent journeys.² Usually these experiences are garnered after certain preparations are made or rituals performed, although they can also be the result of rapture. The culmination of the experience is transformative in the sense that the Jewish and Christian mystics thought they could be invested with heavenly knowledge, join the choir of angels in worship before the throne, or be glorified in body.

So “mysticism” is an *etic* term, a modern typology, contemporary analytic vocabulary that we are imposing on the ancients in order to investigate their religiosity. It serves the modern scholar heuristically as a taxonomy, aiding our engagement in historical investigation and research. It is a comparative analytic tool created and employed by outsiders-to-the-culture and imposed on insiders. In *etic* terms, it identifies a tradition within early Judaism and Christianity centered on the belief that *a person directly, immediately and before death can experience the divine, either as a rapture*

² See particularly, F. Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests. Jewish Dreams in the Hellenistic and Roman Eras*, JSJSup 90 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2004).

experience or one solicited by a particular praxis. This definition, although framed in *etic* terms, remains sensitive to the fact that the early Jews and Christians themselves made no distinction between unsolicited rapture and solicited invasion experiences – all were “*apocalypses*” – nor did they describe their experiences in terms of the *unio mystica* so central to later Christian mysticism.

1. A DYNAMIC BILATERAL TRADITION

“Early Jewish and Christian mysticism” serves to identify for us *a bilateral mystical tradition flowing through Judaism and Christianity during their formative years.* Since Judaism and Christianity are companion expressions of Second Temple Judaism, sibling religions that developed simultaneously within comparable historical contextures, the mystical tradition preserved in their literature is rightly characterized as manifestations of Jewish and Christian religiosity in the late Hellenistic and Roman periods. I would go as far as to suggest that the Christian mysticism of this period should be understood as essentially “Jewish,” beginning to take on its own individuality only by the mid- to late second century as can be seen, for instance, in the Alexandrian school run by Clement and then Origen.

As such, the early Jewish and Christian mystical tradition emerges in what I call, for the sake of brevity, the “period-literature” – that is, in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature,³ in the writings of the Jewish theologian, Philo of Alexandria,⁴ in

³ G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing House, 1941), pp. 40-79; *idem*, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1960); *idem*, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (trans. R. Manheim; New York: Schocken Books, 1965); *idem*, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem and New York: Meridian, 1974), pp. 8-21; *idem*, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (ed. R. J. Z. Werblowsky; trans. A. Arkush; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 18-24; *idem*, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the KABBALAH* (ed. J. Chipman; trans. J. Neugroschel; forward by J. Dan; New York: Schocken Books, 1991). I.

the Qumran literature,⁵ and possibly in the teachings of the Palestinian Jewish school of Yohanan ben Zakkai.⁶ There are a growing number of scholars, myself included, who think that these early currents of mysticism form the basis for Merkavah and Hekhalot speculation.⁷ Subsequently, these mystical traditions were absorbed into the Pharisaic and Tannaitic trajectory,⁸ some forms of Christianity,⁹ Gnostic schools,¹⁰ and later

Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (AGJU 14; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980); C. Morray-Jones, *Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1988).

⁴ See the classic work by E.R. Goodenough, *By Light, By Light* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1969). K. Kohler first determined that elements of Merkavah mysticism can be found in Philo: "Merkabah," *The Jewish Encyclopedia* 8 (ed. I. Singer; New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1904), p. 500. H. Chadwick has suggested that agreements between Paul and Philo may be the result of a common background in Jewish mysticism: "St. Paul and Philo of Alexandria," *BJRL* 48 (1966), pp. 286-307.

⁵ Gruenwald, *Merkavah Mysticism*, p. vii; L. H. Schiffman, "Merkavah Speculation at Qumran: The 4Q Serekh Shirot 'Olat ha-Shabbat,'" in J. Renharz and D. Swetschinski (eds.), *Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of A. Altmann* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1982) 15-47; C.H.T. Fletcher-Louis, *All the Glory of Adam. Liturgical Anthropology in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, STDJ 62 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002); R. Elior, *The Three Temples. On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004).

⁶ Cf. Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 41; E. E. Urbach, "Ha-Masorot 'al Torat ha-Sod bi-Tequfat ha-Tannaim," in A. Altmann (ed.), *Studies in Mysticism and Religion: Presented to G. G. Scholem on his Seventieth Birthday* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), pp. 2-11; J. W. Bowker, "'Merkavah Visions and the Visions of Paul,'" *JJS* 16 (1971), pp. 157-173; J. Neusner, *A Life of Yohanan ben Zakkai: Ca. 1-80 C.E.* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2nd revised ed., 1970); A. Goldberg, "der Vortrag des Ma'asse Merkawa: Eine Vermutung zur frühen Merkavamystik," *Judaica* 29 (1973), pp. 9-12; C. Rowland, *The Influence of the First Chapter of Ezekiel on Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (Ph.D. Thesis, Cambridge University, 1974); *idem*, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982), 282-283, and 303-305; Gruenwald, *Merkavah Mysticism*, pp. vii, and 73-86; cf. Morray-Jones, *Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*; Kanagaraj, "Mysticism" in the *Gospel of John*, pp. 150-158.

⁷ On this, see now J.R. Davila, *Descenders to the Chariot. The People behind the Hekhalot Literature*, JSJSup 70 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2001); C.R.A. Morray-Jones, *A Transparent Illusion. The Dangerous Vision of Water in Hekhalot Mysticism: A Source-Critical and Tradition-Historical Inquiry*, JSJSup 59 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002); V.D. Arbel, *Beholders of Divine Secrets. Mysticism and Myth in the Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature* (Albany: SUNY, 2003). For a contrary view, see Halperin, *Merkavah*, pp. 107-140 and 179-185; P. Schäfer, "New Testament and Hekhalot Literature: The Journey into Heaven in Paul and in Merkavah Mysticism," *JJS* 35 (1984), pp. 19-35.

⁸ Cf. Schiffman, "Merkavah Speculation," p. 46.

⁹ On Paul's familiarity with mystical Judaism, see especially now A. F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 34-71; C. Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited (2 Cor. 12.1-12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate. Part 1: The Jewish Sources" and "Part 2: Paul's Heavenly Ascent and its Significance," *HTR* 86 (1993), pp. 177-217 and 265-292; J. Ashton, *The Religion of Paul the Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). On Thomasine traditions, see A. D. DeConick, *Seek to See Him. Ascent and Vision Mysticism in the Gospel of Thomas*, VCSup 33 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996); A. D. DeConick, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and Its Growth*, JSNTSup 286 (London: T & T Clark, 2005). On Johannine traditions, refer to A. D. DeConick, *Voices of the Mystics. Early Christian Discourse in the Gospels of John and Thomas and Other Ancient Christian Literature*, JSNTSup 157 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); J.J. Kanagaraj, "Mysticism" in the *Gospel of John. An Inquiry into its Background*, JSNTSup 158 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

Kabbalistic materials.¹¹

It goes without saying, I hope, that this literature is vast and variable, representing the opinions, interpretations and experiences of several different communities, most having no direct historical connection with or influence on the other, but all associated with Second Temple Jewish religiosity in one way or another. It is this familiarity with Second Temple Jewish religiosity, I think, which accounts for the emergence and development of a culturally and historically “unique” mystical tradition whose main features I wish to identify and describe. In this description, I do not write with any pretense or assumption that the tradition was monolithic or static. Rather I wish to emphasize its dynamism as it erupts within different social and historical contexts. My discussion of “early Jewish and Christian mysticism” should never be taken to suggest the linear progression or “evolution” of the tradition from one historical circumstance to the next. Rather, this tradition surfaces, sometimes simultaneously, within various social contexts and historical circumstances, and the communities involved are responsible for continually reusing and reshaping this “shared” mystical tradition for their own ends.

2. THE INTERSECTION OF HERMENEUTICS AND EXPERIENCE

The persistent core of early Jewish and Christian mysticism is the belief that God or his manifestation can be experienced immediately, *not just after death or eschatologically on the Last Day*. This belief appears to me to be the consequence of at least two aspects of

¹⁰ On this, see especially my recent articles, “Heavenly Temple Traditions and Valentinian Worship: A Case for First-Century Christology in the Second Century,” in C. C. Newman, J. R. Davila, and G. S. Lewis (eds.), *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus*, Supplements to *JSJ* 63 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), pp. 308-341; “The True Mysteries. Sacramentalism in the *Gospel of Philip*,” *VC* 55 (2001) pp. 225-261; Morray-Jones, *A Transparent Illusion*.

religiosity during the Second Temple period: hermeneutics and religious experience. It has been unfortunate that past academic discussions of the period-literature has been dogged by our need to treat these as antithetical. Although this attitude has encroached upon our analyses of the period-literature from the pseudepigraphical apocalypses to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi collection, it has emerged most aggressively in scholarly discussion of the Merkavah and Hekhalot corpus, some scholars insisting that this literature represents mainly exegetical activity¹² while others experiential.¹³

This dichotomy, of course, is a false dichotomy that has not served us well, as several studies have suggested.¹⁴ Elliot Wolfson, in fact, thinks that it is impossible to isolate phenomenologically an experience from its literal context, a position that seems to be akin to that of Steven Katz who has noted, I think correctly, that “*all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex

¹¹ Cf. E. R. Wolfson, *Through A Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹² Cf. D. J. Halperin, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1980); *idem*, *The Faces of the Chariot* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1988); P. Schäfer, "Tradition and Redaction in Hekhalot Literature," *JSJ* 14 (1983); *idem*, "The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism," in his *Hekhalot-Studien, Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum* 19 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1988); *idem*, "Merkavah Mysticism and Rabbinic Judaism," *JAOS* 104 (1984), pp. 537-554.

¹³ Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 45- ; Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah*, pp. 98- ; J. Dan, *Three Types of Jewish Mysticism* (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati Press, 1984) pp. 8-16; J. Dan, "The Religious Experience of the Merkavah," in A. Green (ed.), *Jewish Spirituality. From the Bible Through the Middle Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1986) pp. 289-307; J. Dan, *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism* (Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1993); R. Elijor, "The Concept of God in Hekhalot Mysticism," in J. Dan (ed.), *Binah, Studies in Jewish Thought II* (New York: Praeger, 1989) pp. 97-120; Elijor, "Mysticism, Magic, and Angelology," pp. 3-53; Elijor, "From Earthly Temple to Heavenly Shrine," pp. 217-267; K.E. Grözinger, *Musik und Gesang in der Theologie der fruehen juedischen Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1982); Morray-Jones, "Transformation Mysticism;" K.E. Grözinger, "The Names of God and the Celestial Powers: Their Function and Meaning in the Hekhalot Literature," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987) pp. 53-69.

¹⁴ Cf. P. Alexander, "The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch," *JJS* 28 (1977) p. 173 (156-180); Rowland, *Open Heaven*, pp. 214-240; Wolfson, *Speculum*; Arbel, *Beholders*. For complimentary views regarding mysticism generally, see B. Garaside, "Language and Interpretation of Mystical Experience," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 3 (1972) pp. 93-102; P. Moore, "Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique," in S.T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon, 1978) pp. 101-131; C. Keller, "Mystical Literature," in S.T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon, 1978) pp. 59-67.

epistemological ways.”¹⁵ It appears to me that this false dichotomy has been set in place because modernists have little patience for the so-called “supernatural,” feeling that the “supernatural” can and should be deconstructed in the wake of God’s death. But in so doing, we have forced our own demarcation between the natural world and the “supernatural” onto the ancient people we are studying, imposing as well our disposal of everything “supernatural” onto people who profoundly were invested in their “experiences” of God. The ancient Jews and Christians believed that they experienced the sacred, and they wrote about it. These people were deeply religious people whose texts are filled with feelings about and hopes for religious experience as they understood and imagined it.

In this regard, Paul's own first-hand testimony cannot be emphasized enough, because it demonstrates that the first Christian Jews believed that they were recipients of ecstatic experiences both in the form of rapture events and invasions of heaven.¹⁶ In the context of this latter discourse, Paul also implies that he knows of other Christian Jews, perhaps associated with the mission of the Jerusalem church, who boast of mystical experiences.¹⁷ This is implied by the author of Colossians too.¹⁸ We have a quite strong tradition that the disciples and members of Jesus' family who formed the initial church in Jerusalem had visions of Jesus following his death.¹⁹ To Paul's first-hand witness we must also add the waking visions of John of Patmos and the dream visions of the Pastor Hermas. Of course, the evidence for mystical experience from second-hand accounts in

¹⁵ Wolfson, *Speculum*, p. 120; S.T. Katz, “Language, Epistemology and Mysticism,” in his *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon, 1978) pp. 26 (22-26).

¹⁶ Gal 1:12; 1 Cor 15:8; 2 Cor 12:2-4.

¹⁷ cf. 2 Cor 11:21-12:11.

¹⁸ Col 2:16-18.

¹⁹ 1 Cor 15:5-7.

the early Christian literature is staggering, ranging from the transfiguration of Jesus to the post-resurrection appearances to the vision of Stephen.²⁰

As an historian, I am not concerned whether these ancient people “actually” experienced God. I can never know this. But this does not make its study pointless. As Bernard McGinn has aptly remarked, “Experience as such is not a part of the historical record. The only thing directly available to the historian...is the evidence, largely in the form of written records...”²¹ What I wish to understand and map is their belief that God had been and still could – even should – be reached, that the boundaries between earth and heaven could be crossed by engaging in certain religious activities and behaviors reflected in the stories of their primordial ancestors and great heroes.

It makes no difference to me whether or not we describe these narratives of the heroes as literary or experiential literature because this distinction misses the point. The point we need to recognize is that the early Jews and Christians who were reading these texts believed that the stories were reports of actual encounters with God. The images and descriptions in these texts deeply affected the way that the early Jews and first Christians described and interpreted their own perceived experiences, and the way that they framed their hopes for future experiences.

So this fundamental belief – that the sacred could be experienced – was supported by their reading and exegesis of their scriptures. In turn, it was this belief that the early Jews and Christians wrote about in new texts which they characterized as “revealed” scriptures containing heavenly *gnosis*, the *razim* or “mysteries” of God. Many of these works – from the Jewish and Christian apocalypses to the Nag Hammadi texts – freely

²⁰ Mk 9:2-8; Matt 17:1-8; Lk 9:28-36; Mk 16; Matt 28; Lk 24; Jn 20; Gos. Pet. 12-14; Acts 7:55-56.

²¹ B. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, v. 1 (New York: Crossroad, 1991) p. xiv.

retell the biblical narratives under the auspices of an alternative revelation from an angelic being or primeval authority. In several ways, they were providing in these works counter-readings of the old scriptures, recomposing the stories through a new hermeneutic for a contemporary audience.²² In these new texts, the ancient Jews and Christians shared their revelation of the “things hidden” of the past, present and future, reinterpreting and rescribing the past to serve their present experiences and future hopes.²³

The authors of these new texts appear to me to be rebelling against the idea that the truth about the sacred can be reached through intellectual engagement, through normal epistemological routes like traditional reading and interpretation of the scriptures. This is not to say that they shunned intellectual endeavors like studying Torah, developing hermeneutics, or creating elaborate mythologies to explain questions of cosmogony and theodicy. In fact, in a passage from the *Hekhalot Rabbati* we are told that the mystic must prove his worthiness to enter the seventh heaven by having “read the Torah, prophets and writings, Mishnayot, Midrash, Halakhot and Haggadot” and having

²² Cf. H. Najman, “Interpretation as Primordial Writing. Jubilees and its Authority Conferring Strategies,” *JSJ* 30 (1999) 379-410; H. Najman, “Torah of Moses. Pseudonymous Attribution in Second Temple Writings,” in C.A. Evans (ed.), *The Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity. Studies in Language and Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 202-216; H. Najman, *Seconding Sinai. The Development of Mosaic Discourse in Second Temple Judaism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003) 41-69; H. Najman, “The Symbolic Significance of Writing in Ancient Judaism,” in H. Najman and J.E. Newman (eds.), *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation. Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2004) 139-173.

²³ This is a natural function of communal memory. On this, see M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Trans. L.A. Coser; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1925]) p. 40; M. Halbwach, *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land* (trans. L. Coser; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992 [1941]) p. 7; F. Zonabend, *The Enduring Memory: Time and History in a French Village* (Trans. A. Forster; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) p. 203; P. Hutton, “Collective Memory and Collective Mentalities: The Halbwachs-Aries Connection,” *RHist* 15 (1988) p. 314; J. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) p. 75; I. Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The dynamics of collective memory* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994) p. 7; B. Zelizer, “Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies,” *CSMC* 12 (1995) 228; B. Swartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) p. 9.

learned “the interpretation of the Halakhot, prohibition and permission” and having abided by “every prohibition that is written in the Torah” and having observed faithfully “all the warnings of the laws, statutes and instructions that were said to Moses at Sinai” (Section 234)!

What these Jews and Christians seem to me to be saying is that intellectual pursuit of God and “truth” can only advance a person so far spiritually. It can get the person to the gate of the highest heavenly shrine, so to speak, but no further. They insist that knowledge of the sacred itself comes only through the direct experience of God, that is by actually meeting him face to face. It was this experiential encounter, they thought, that transformed them, that pulled them beyond the limits of their ordinary human senses and perceptions. This new godlike perspective, they believed, would lead to new understandings and revelations, allowing them to reinterpret the concealed truths and hidden histories locked within their sacred scriptures.²⁴ So here lies the intersection between exegesis and experience. It is at this intersection, this crossroads that I think we should tarry, rather than running down either of these roads alone.

3. COMMUNAL IDENTITIES

“Early Jewish and Christian mysticism” as a tradition does not represent the imagination and opinions of isolated authors as much as those of *living religious communities of people*.²⁵ The nature of the communities, of course, varies in terms of its literature, social conventions and historical characteristics and any attempt to identify them must be done

²⁴ On this subject, see now Arbel, *Beholders of the Secrets*; “Seal of Resemblance,” 2005, 130-142.

²⁵ For a detailed account of the nature of traditions, see E. Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) and my own, “The ‘New’ *Traditionsgeschichtliche* Approach,” in *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas*, pp. 3-37.

systematically with reference to particular texts, resisting any temptation to locate a single community responsible for the tradition. While some of the literature is more forthright with communal information, referencing rules of behavior or handbook guidelines for communal life like those found among the Dead Sea Scrolls or in Paul's letters, most of the period-literature is very perplexing in this regard.

Some of the most challenging cases have been with reference to pseudepigraphical literature like the Jewish and Christian apocalypses, the Nag Hammadi literature and the Hekhalot texts. Most scholars have come to think that the Jewish and Christian apocalypses, with their interest in ascension and secret teachings about the Last Days, can be identified with apocalyptic circles or "conventicles" of pious ascetics anxiously awaiting the imminent Eschaton whose social formation could have mirrored John the Baptist's movement or the Qumran community.²⁶ But this opinion has been challenged recently by other scholars who have pointed to a prophetic group²⁷ or a collective of priests²⁸ as equally creditable possibilities. The Enochic corpus within the apocalyptic literature has been singled out recently by a number of scholars who think that it not only represents a socially distinct group in early Judaism, but one connected to the community of Jews associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls.²⁹

²⁶ Cf. M. Smith, "Palestinian Judaism in the First Century," in M. Davis (ed.), *Israel: Its Role in Civilization* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1956) p. 69; M. Stone, "Apocalyptic Literature," in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*, *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*, 2.2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) p. 430.

²⁷ R. Hall, "The Ascension of Isaiah. Community, Situation, Date, and Place in Early Christianity," *JBL* 109 (1990) pp. 289-306.

^F Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers*.

²⁹ Cf. G. Nickelsburg, "The Apocalyptic Construction of Reality in *1 Enoch*," in J.J. Collins and J. Charlesworth (eds.), *Mysteries and Revelations. Apocalyptic Studies Since the Uppsala Colloquium*, *JSPSup* 9 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); J.J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination. An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) pp. 56-63; G. Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmann's Publishing,); G. Boccaccini, *Enoch and Qumran Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmann's Publishing, 2005).

Identification of the “authors” of the Hekhalot books has been hotly contested in scholarly circles, as has their historical and literary relationship to the apocalypses. According to the early opinion of G. Scholem and several scholars since Scholem, a circle of rabbis may have been responsible for the Hekhalot literature, literature believed to have formal connections with the Jewish and Christian apocalypses.³⁰ Other scholars have thought the books should be identified with either a group of people in conflict with the rabbis – people who were protesting rabbinic Judaism through the composition of the Hekhalot literature – or a post-Rabbinic elite from the late Talmudic period.³¹ Others like M. Swartz and J. Davila identify the group outside the formal Rabbinic circles – with synagogue functionaries, poets, scribes, and even shamans, practitioners of ritual power.³² R. Eilior has set forth the most comprehensive thesis I am aware of – that the writers of these traditions identify themselves with a disaffected priestly class of the first century C.E., particularly as expressed in the Dead Sea Scrolls and some of the Jewish apocalypses. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., the priestly traditions are carried on by this disaffected class of Jews in the Hekhalot literature in order to transport the ruined earthly cult into the heavenly spheres.³³

Communal attribution of the Nag Hammadi collection has come up against its own problems. For years after its discovery, this collection was thought to be a library of ancient Gnostic writings. This led to an indiscriminate use of the materials by scholars and the development of theories about an umbrella religion called “Gnosticism,” a religion which in fact did not exist. Examination of the collection over the last decade

³⁰ Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 41-47; *Merkavah*, pp. 7-8.

³¹ Halperin, *Merkavah*, pp. 3- , 183- ; *Chariot*, cs. 1 and 9; P. Schäfer, “The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism,” in *Hekhalot-Studien*, p. 293; *Hidden and Manifest*, p. 159.

has brought with it the recognition that the texts themselves represent the opinions of different groups of early Jews and Christians and Hermetics. In fact, there are *at least* six religious communities represented in this corpus: Sethian Gnostic Christians, Valentinian Gnostic Christians, Simonians, followers of Julius Cassianus, Thomasine Christians, and Hermetics. It is significant to note that the majority of Sethian Gnostic and Valentinian Gnostic texts from the Nag Hammadi literature were written by people who self-identified with the Christian tradition, although some of the materials they rewrote look to be Jewish originally. It appears that those who authored most of these treatises considered themselves esoteric Christians who wished to pursue advanced spiritual study in some type of seminary or Christian study circle or lodge. So scholars have shifted to speak of them in terms of “schools” rather than religious communities separate from Judaism or Christianity.

This business of identifying social groups responsible for particular texts within the period-literature has been met with varying degrees of success. Here I wish to make clear that the early Jewish and Christian mystical tradition, in my opinion, is not the purview of a single religious community or to be located in a single community’s literature. There is no claim or assumption on my part that the early Jewish and Christian mystical tradition is founded by a particular body of people or maintained by a particular body of people. What I wish to fully articulate is the opinion that we are dealing with a variety of esoteric Jews and Christians over the course of several centuries who self-identified with different religious communities. There is no single social group

³² Swartz, *Mystical Prayer*, pp. 211-223; Davila, “The Hekhalot Literature and Shamanism,” pp. 767-789; *Descenders to the Chariot*.

³³ Eilior, *Three Temples*.

responsible for the practice and preservation of this tradition, although there is mounting evidence that one of the main origins of the tradition was within Jewish priestly circles.

At any rate, it should be recognized that various social groups familiar with the mystical tradition employ it with different emphases and applications. This to me is one of the most the fascinating aspects about the study this tradition – how it was shaped and used within various social contexts and time periods. Future study of this tradition will need to articulate more carefully and systematically, I think, the social boundaries of various groups of esoteric Jews and Christians, their use and reformulation of the tradition for their own communal purposes and benefit.

4. A “PRIESTLY” COSMOLOGY

The early Jewish and Christian mystical tradition is supported by a distinct hermeneutic, itself based on exegesis of foundational Jewish texts, particularly but not exclusively, Genesis 1-3, Exodus 24 and 33, Ezekiel 1, 8, 10 and 40-48, Daniel 7 and Isaiah 6.

Although the emphases and elements of this hermeneutic varies across the period-literature, several themes emerge as prominent and tend to cluster in regard to cosmology. The prominence of these themes can be tracked across the canonical and extra-canonical Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature of the Second Temple period, surging through many of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi texts, and flowing through the Merkavah and Hekhalot corpus as well as some Rabbinic stories. I mention this not to suggest or capture some linear progression of ideas from old to new as some scholars would like to do, but to underscore the insurgency of these themes in a variety of texts across many centuries and communities of believers. These themes collectively

represent the “worldview” or cosmology that under grids mystical discussions within early Judaism and Christianity, a cosmology that appears to have strong connections with older Jewish priestly traditions as the work of Rachel Eior, in particular, has convinced me.³⁴

4.1 The Glory of YHWH

The centerpiece of this cosmology is the belief that God has a “body,” called the “Glory” or *Kavod* of YHWH.³⁵ This idea grew out of the study of certain Jewish scriptures, particularly sections of Ezekiel which describe his visions of an enthroned “likeness as the appearance of a Man (*adam*),” a Man who looked like “fire” with “brightness around him.” This is “the appearance of the likeness of the Glory (*kavod*) of YHWH.”³⁶ This figure is the very manifestation of the hidden YHWH, depicted in the scriptures as an anthropomorphic figure of fire or light.³⁷ He presides over the created order oftentimes seated upon his *merkavah*, a special throne consisting of two cherubim with wings spread over the *kapporet*, the lid of the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple.³⁸

In the period-literature of the Jews and Christians, the God who is seated on the throne in heaven is presented as Yahweh’s manifestation or *Kavod*. Luminous anthropomorphic descriptions of the “Hidden” God are the culmination of many of the stories of the heroes who journey to glimpse Yahweh enthroned. A cluster of images are found in these descriptions. His body is enrobed in a splendid white garment with a face

³⁴ Eior, *Three Temples*.

³⁵ For complete coverage, see J. Fossum, “Glory,” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. K. van der Toorn *et. al.*; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996) 348-352.

³⁶ Ezek 1:28.

³⁷ cf. Ezek 1:27-28; 8:2; Isa 6:1-4.

³⁸ cf. 1 Chron 28:18; 1 Kings 6:23-28, 8:6-7; 2 Chron 3:10-11, 5:7-8.

emitting sparks.³⁹ The *haluq*, or robe, is described as most holy, frightful and terrible, emitting tremors, terror, and vibration. Upon the inside and outside of the garment, from the top to the bottom, the tetragrammaton is etched.⁴⁰ None of the angels can look directly at the enthroned deity, and the devotee heroes are usually only allowed peeks at his luminous body.⁴¹ He is exceedingly beautiful, to the extent that in the Hekhalot literature the expression that the devotee wishes “to behold the King in his beauty” has become formulaic.⁴²

This luminosity of the *Kavod* acted as a mask or screen, functioning in such a way that protected the seer from direct gaze of God’s body and certain death, since it was believed that no one could directly see YHWH’s face and live. So on the one hand, it kept YHWH hidden from the *direct* gaze of his creatures. On the other hand, this covering of light served to reveal God *indirectly*, so that the presence of God would be available to the adept, usually as a quick glimpse.⁴³ In the later Hekhalot literature, the negative effect of the vision is still maintained: “He who looks at him will immediately be torn. He who views his beauty will immediately be poured out like a jug.”⁴⁴ At the same time, the devotee is told to report “what you have heard” and “what you have seen upon the countenance,” a countenance which is revealed “three times daily in the heights,” and which “no man perceives and knows.”⁴⁵ Here we note the paradox of the Hidden God whose very countenance or face cannot be seen, but only the luminous mask of the Glory which simultaneously covers him and reveals him. As Rabbi Akiba relates,

³⁹ *1 Enoch* 14:18-21; *2 Enoch* 22:1-4; 39:3-8.

⁴⁰ *Hekh. Rabb.* Section 102.

⁴¹ *Hekh. Rabb.* Section 102.

⁴² cf. *Hekh. Rabb.* Sections 198, 248, 259; *Hekh. Rabb.* Sections 407-409; 411, 412.

⁴³ cf. Philo, *Mut.* 7; *Fug.* 165; *1 Enoch* 14; *2 Enoch* 22.

⁴⁴ *Hekh. Rabb.* Section 159; 102; 104; 105; cf. *Hekh. Zut.* Section 356.

⁴⁵ *Hekh. Rabb.* Section 169.

“He is, so to say, as we are, but he is greater than everything and his Glory consists in this, that he is concealed from us.”⁴⁶

These anthropomorphic descriptions of the Glory look to me to be very early since such a description is present in Exodus 33:18-34:8.⁴⁷ In this passage, Moses wishes to see God’s Glory. When he asks permission, God reveals himself to Moses, but only his backside because “man shall not see me and live.” So the Lord said to Moses, “While my Glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back. But my face shall not be seen.”⁴⁸

Exegetical speculations about the *Kavod* led to the identification of the angelic figure in Daniel 7, the “one like a son of man” who is described as the special angel having the “appearance of a man” in Daniel 8:15 and 10:18, with the description of the *Kavod* found in Ezekiel 1:26, the “likeness as the appearance of man.” So in some period-literature, kavod-like angels sit on heavenly thrones and act as the great Judge and God’s vicegerent.⁴⁹ For example, Adam and Abel, in the *Testament of Abraham*, have thrones in heaven. Adam is described sitting on a golden throne and having “the appearance of the man” which “was fearsome, like that of the Lord.”⁵⁰ Abel is the great Judge of souls, and he sits on a crystal throne that blazes. He is “a wondrous man shining

⁴⁶ *Hekh. Zut.* Section 352.

⁴⁷ In the Priestly source, the Glory is not anthropomorphic but a phenomenon of light. It is associated with a pillar of cloud or fire that surrounded YHWH as he led the Israelites through the desert or when his presence resided in the Tabernacle and then the Temple (Exod 16:10; 24:16-17, 43-44; 40:34-35, 38; Num 17:7; 1 Kings 8:10-11; Lev 9:23-24; 1 Sam 3:3; 4:21). It appears that we are seeing in these texts an association of the Glory with cultic practices since it is directly said to “fill” the Tabernacle and Temple (Exod 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11), be present at the altar of sacrifice (Lev 9:23-24), and function as some sort of lamp connected with the Ark (cf. Exod 27:20-21).

⁴⁸ Exod 33:22-23.

⁴⁹ *I Enoch* 45:3; 55:4; 61:8; 62:2; 69:29.

⁵⁰ Rec A, 11:4.

like the sun, like unto a son of God.”⁵¹ In the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the angel who has God’s Name, Yahoel, is depicted as being “in the likeness of a man” and possessing a “golden scepter.”⁵²

Such honor is also accorded to Moses in the *Exagoge* of Ezekiel the playwrite. Moses has a vision of a noble “man” seated on an enormous throne on the top of Mt. Sinai. This kavod-like figure gives Moses his crown and scepter, and gets up from the throne so that Moses can take his place. This fabulous scene appears to be built from Exodus 24:10, “And they saw the God of Israel, and there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.” Interpretations of this passage in other literature, take it to be a throne vision of the Glory or *Kavod*.⁵³

Perhaps the most well-known angelic viceregent is Metatron, the great “enthroned” angel described throughout the Hekhalot literature.⁵⁴ Many scholars have speculated about the origins and meaning of his name, with almost a dozen suggested possibilities, none of which has emerged as the favorite.⁵⁵ He is called the “little YHWH,” “youth,” and “Prince of the World,” and is accorded many of the characteristics of the *Kavod*, although one tradition suggests that he is whipped for taking a seat on his throne.⁵⁶ The traditions of Enoch, of course, are bound up with this angel, traditions which relate Enoch’s bodily transformation into this great angel. The destructive, almost infernal, transformation brings his body into conformity with the enormity of God’s body, when he “was enlarged and increased in size until [he] matched the world in length

⁵¹ Rec. A, 12:5.

⁵² 11:3.

⁵³ *Tg. Onq. And Tg. Ps.-J.; b. Men.* 43b; Mem. Marqah, Crowley 1909:25.

⁵⁴ For an outstanding presentation of the materials about Metatron, see A. Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition*, TSAJ (Göttingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

⁵⁵ Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition*, pp. 92-96.

⁵⁶ *b. Hag.* 15a.

and breadth. He made to grow on me 72 wings, 36 on one side and 36 on the other...He fixed in me 365,000 eyes...There was no sort of splendor, brilliance, brightness, or beauty in the luminaries of the world that he failed to fix in me.”⁵⁷

The body of God tradition is perhaps most developed in the *Shi`ur Qomah* (the “Measure of the Divine Body”) material where the dimensions and the corporeal appearance of God are enumerated in great detail. These materials describe the revelation by Metatron of the “measurement of the body” to the seers, Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Ishmael. The materials depict anthropomorphic details of the body of God along with the mystical names of God’s gigantic limbs. The enormity of the body is a theme that can be traced to earlier texts, to some even located in the New Testament.⁵⁸

This Jewish *Kavod* doctrine had a profound impact on the development of early Christian christologies. For instance, Paul describes Jesus as the “image” or “form” of God.⁵⁹ In John’s gospel Jesus is depicted as God’s Glory or *Kavod* descended to earth.⁶⁰ Descriptions of Jesus as the High Priest of the heavenly temple and depictions of Jesus as the Lamb all are heir to this tradition.⁶¹

4.2 The Heavenly Temple

The celestial realm is understood to be a heavenly version of the Jerusalem Temple. The various heavens are the *hekhalot*, shrine rooms or sanctuaries within the Temple. In the approach of the highest heaven, each successive room is more holy than the last, the Holy of Holies where God’s manifestation resides. These firmaments generally number seven.

⁵⁷ 3 *Enoch* 9.

⁵⁸ cf. Eph 3:18-19; 4:13; Col 1:18-19; 2:9; Epiph., *Ref.* 30.17.6; 2 *Enoch* 39:3-6; *Merk. Rabb.* Sections 688-704.

⁵⁹ 2 Cor 4:4, Col 1:15; Phil 2:6.

⁶⁰ 1:14; 2:11; 11:40; 12:23, 28, 41; 13:32; 17:1-5, 22-23.

⁶¹ Heb 3:1; 4:14-16; 5:1-10; Rev 5:6-14; 7:13-8:1; 14:1-5.

The association with the number seven appears to be a reference to the seven planetary spheres in combination with aspects of the Temple that number seven: seven gates, seven steps, the seven-branched lampstand⁶² and even seven levels as enumerated by Rabbi Jose – the area within the balustrade, the court of women, the court of Israel, the court of the priests, the area between the altar and the entrance to the Temple, the sanctuary, and the Holy of Holies.⁶³ As Christopher Morray-Jones correctly notes, “The temple is not ‘in’ heaven: its seven ‘sanctuaries’ are the heavens.”

The angels associated with this heavenly Temple are the Temple’s functionaries: its priests performing cultic activities there.⁶⁴ They are the guardians of the Covenant and the heavenly Temple and its gates, as well as “servants of the throne,” petitioners and worshipers offering “sacrifices” and recitations to God. Prayers, praises, thanksgivings, blessings and glorifications are sung as liturgies, filtering up through the heavens. The angelology assumed by these texts is very complex, with several grades of angels, most having names that are permutations of the divine Name or an attribute of God.

In fact, speculations about the divine Name and associations of it with various angels are quite dominant in the period-literature. Usually there is one highly exalted angel, like the “Angel of the Lord,” the “Angel of the Countenance,” “Metatron” or “Christ.”⁶⁵ Sometimes, it is difficult to differentiate between this exalted Angel and

⁶² Josephus, *Ant.* 3.6.7; *War* 5.5.5; 7.5.5.

⁶³ André Neher, “Le voyage mystique des quatre,” *RHR* 140 (1951) 73-76.

⁶⁴ Elijah, *Three Temples*.

⁶⁵ Cf. Fossum, *Name*, 177- , 319- ; Fossum, “Jewish Christian Christology and Jewish Mysticism,” *VC* 37 (1983) pp. 260-287; Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 94-113; C. Rowland, “The Vision of the Risen Christ in Rev. 1:13ff: The Debt of Early Christology to an Aspect of Jewish Angelology,” *JTS* 31 (1980) pp. 1-11; Carr, *Angels and Principalities*, pp. 143-147; J. Daniélou, “Trinité et angéologie dans la théologie judéo-chrétienne,” *RSR* 45 (1957) pp. 5-41; J. Daniélou, *The Origins of Latin Christianity* (London, 1977) pp. 149-152; Wolfson, *Speculum*, pp. 255-269; G. Quispel, “Gnosticism and the New Testament”; G. Quispel, “The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge,” in P. Granfield and J.A. Jungman (eds.), *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quaesten* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1970) ; G. Quispel, “The Demiurge in the Apocryphon of John,” in R. McL. Wilson (ed.), *Nag Hammadi and Gnosis* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978).

God's glorious manifestation, the *Kavod* or *Doxa*, who is enthroned on the *merkavah* seat in the Holy of Holies, the *devir*, the highest of the heavens. As we will see, the celestial *merkavah* is the special wheeled chariot made of four sacred creatures whose outspread wings formed the seat itself, much like the Ark of the Covenant in the earthly Temple. The throne in some cases is exalted, personified as an object of worship and a representation of God.⁶⁶

As the work of Rachel Elior has especially pointed out, all aspects of the celestial Temple in fact correlate to an ideal aspect of the earthly Temple, including associations with the liturgical calendar, the seasons, creation, the Garden of Eden, life and fertility, betrothal and sanctification. Priestly concerns like holiness and purity are consistent, even excessive themes. Even angels must bathe in fiery rivers flowing near the throne. Humans crossing the heavenly threshold must be exceedingly righteous and able to endure a bodily transfiguration into a flaming being. One of the reasons that this particular cosmology appears to have developed was as a guarantee that the Temple cult would not be disrupted even when the priesthood and the earthly Temple in Jerusalem was threatened, contaminated or destroyed. The continuation of a holy cultus in the heavenly Temple meant that continuity of creation and life would be maintained, a standard concern of the Jewish priests since the time of ancient Israel.⁶⁷

4.3 The Merkavah

The chariot-throne from Ezekiel 1 in the period-literature is located in the heavenly Temple, in the highest and most holy heaven. A fabulous passage from *Massekhet Hekhalot* highlights its prominence: "And the throne of Glory is high up in the air, and

⁶⁶ cf. *Hekhalot Rabbati* section 236 and 257.

the appearance of his Glory is like the appearance of the hashmal. And a diadem of brightness is upon his head, and the crown of the explicit Name is upon his brow. One half of him is fire, and the other half is hail. On his right is life, and on his left is death. And a scepter of fire is in his hand. And the curtain is parted in two before him, and seven angels who were created in the beginning minister before him inside the curtain” (Section 28).

This *merkavah* is described as a chariot with wheels like the sun.⁶⁸ It is a crystal throne, blazing like fire, called the “Throne of Great Glory.”⁶⁹ In the Hekhalot tradition, the throne is not only wheeled, but hovers like a bird underneath God’s splendor.⁷⁰ God, in fact has remained seated on his throne since its creation, and will not leave it for all eternity.⁷¹

There is much speculation about the “faces” of the “chariot of cherubim” – the faces of the lion, the eagle, the ox, and the man.⁷² One tradition even identifies the man’s face with the patriarch Jacob whose “image” was engraved on the throne.⁷³ Jarl Fossum has noted that the Fragmentary Targum Genesis 1:28⁷⁴ and the *editio princeps* reprinted in the London Polyglot,⁷⁵ explicitly states that the image of Jacob was “upon” the throne, not engraved on the throne as the other Targumim. This is highly significant when it is realized that Targum Ezekiel 1:26 says that some people think the Glory on the throne is

⁶⁷ Elijior, *Three Temples*.

⁶⁸ *I Enoch* 14:18-21.

⁶⁹ *Test. Abr.* Rec. B, 8:5; Rec. A, 12:5.

⁷⁰ *Hekh. Rabb.* Section 98, MS Vatican.

⁷¹ *Hekh. Rabb.* Section 119.

⁷² 1 Chr 28:18 LXX; Ecclus 49:8; cf. *Hekh. Zut.* Sections 368-374; *Hyp. Arch.* 29; *Orig. World* 32.

⁷³ *Tg. Ps.-Jonathan*; *Tg. Neofiti I*; *Fragmentary Tg.*; *Gen. R.* 68:12

⁷⁴ MS Vatican.

⁷⁵ Venice.

the form of Jacob.⁷⁶ So some appealed to the likeness of Jacob as the *Kavod*. The angels, who long to see the Glory, but cannot, descend to earth to look upon his image in the flesh!⁷⁷

The *merkavah*, in fact, in some texts is anthropomorphized like God himself. The throne holds converse with God, the King, even singing glorious hymns of praise to him.⁷⁸ So glorious is the throne-chariot in these traditions, that there may have been some who thought it an object worthy of veneration, if not worship. So in the *Hekhalot Rabbati* we find the statement that the throne, like God, will “reign in all generations,” but that God is to be “honored beyond the throne of your Glory” and to be “appreciated more than your precious vessel.”⁷⁹

Perhaps the most intriguing tradition about the *merkavah*, is the journey that devotees thought they could make to stand before it and hymn in the presence of the Glory. In the *Hekhalot* materials there is a unique development of this tradition, that the ascending devotee is a “descender to the chariot,” the *yored merkavah*. What this means and how it developed has really not been adequately resolved in my opinion although two explanations stand out from the rest. E. Wolfson has made a convincing case that the phrase refers to the enthronement of the devotee during the final stage of ascent.⁸⁰ And Christopher Morray-Jones has offered in this book an article that suggests that the term is linked to the “downwards” posture assumed by the devotee so that the “ascent” through the heavens could also be viewed as a “descent” within the “temple” of the body. The

⁷⁶ MS Montefiore No. 7.

⁷⁷ Fossum, *Image of the Invisible God*, 135-142.

⁷⁸ *Hekh. Rabb.* Sections 94, 99, 154, 161-162, 634, 687, 686.

⁷⁹ Section 257.

⁸⁰ E. Wolfson, “*Yeridah la-Merkavah: Typology of Ecstasy and Enthronement in Ancient Jewish Mysticism*,” in R.A. Herrera (ed.), *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, and Typologies* (New York: Lang, 1993) 13-44.

descender to the chariot is very special, very holy, because he has transcended the natural boundaries of his humanity and entered the realms of the sacred. The journey of ascent and descent is fraught with grave danger and oral examinations administered by the guardian angels.⁸¹ He must be very knowledgeable of the Torah, the prophets, the writings, the Mishnah, the Midrash, the Halakah, the Haggadah, and their interpretations and their practical observation.⁸² He must show the guardians of the gates seals and know passwords.⁸³ If he fails, destruction or insanity result. But if he succeeds, his descent to the *merkavah* can be made.

4.4 The Heavenly Curtain

Spread in front of the merkavah is the secret heavenly curtain, the *pargod*. This is the heavenly counterpart of the veil, the *paroket*, which divided the Holy of Holies from the Hekhal in the Temple in Jerusalem.⁸⁴ Upon the heavenly curtain, the thoughts and deeds of all the human generations are recorded, including future ones. Rabbi Ishmael stresses that he saw “with his own eyes” all the deeds of Israel and the Gentiles “till the end of time” printed on the curtain.⁸⁵ The printed record of humanity’s deeds on the curtain was for Yahweh’s benefit on the day of Judgment, when one glance examines everyone’s deeds and determines everyone’s judgment.⁸⁶

Ultimately, the heavenly curtain screened off the Kavod from the angels because of the destructive nature of its view.⁸⁷ But, as Christopher Morray-Jones has noticed, the

⁸¹ cf. *Hekh. Rabb.* 224-258.

⁸² *Hekh. Rabb.* 234.

⁸³ *Hekh. Rabb.* 236.

⁸⁴ Exod 26:31; 2 Chr 3:14.

⁸⁵ 3 *Enoch* 45:1-6.

⁸⁶ Frag. T.-S. K21.95.J, fol. 2b, lines 2-11, Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente*, 133.

⁸⁷ *Tg. Job* 26:9; 3 *Enoch* Rec. B 22:6.

curtain also functions as a celestial firmament, dividing the seventh heaven from the lower heavens and sanctuaries.⁸⁸

5. AN INTERNALIZED APOCALYPSE

Modern scholars have been slow to recognize that “early Jewish and Christian mysticism” is a major dimension of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic thought, even though the ancients themselves call these experiences “apokalypses.” There has been a tendency in academia to equate apocalypticism with eschatology, as if an “apokalypsis” were the Last Day.⁸⁹ So visions of destruction, retribution, and salvation have become associated exclusively with the study of the apocalyptic, *ignoring its atemporal aspects*.

This faulty understanding of apocalypticism which concentrates almost exclusively on the revelation of End time phenomenon is reflected in the standard definition of the term found in the well-respected *Semeia* volume on the subject: “Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial as it involves another, supernatural world.”⁹⁰ To be fair, this understanding of apocalypticism does not appear to have been only the misconception of the SBL Genres Project, but has been around in the scholarly prose for a very long time.

In fact, a careful reading of the second Temple apocalypses tells us that *eschatology, the secret revelation of the imminence of the End, is only part of the discussion. The other part is the mystical, the belief in the immediate and direct*

⁸⁸ Morray-Jones, *A Transparent Illusion*, pp. 153-172.

⁸⁹ Collins, McGinn, Stein.

⁹⁰ J.J. Collins, “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” *Semeia* 14 (1979) 6.

experience of God. This belief has to do with religious experience, the act of revelation itself, the encounter with God, which results in the devotee's immediate personal transformation and the uncovering of God's mysteries.

This mystical dimension of apocalyptic thought appears to me to have been developed by esoteric Jews and Christians in response to unfulfilled redemptive promises during times when hopes for their fulfillment were being historically challenged. The redemptive myth itself was founded on what seems to have been a standard Jewish myth in the Second Temple period, that there existed a heavenly *Anthropos* who was thought to have come forth from God prior to creation.⁹¹

This tale was inspired by rereading Genesis 1:3 in Greek. Since the word *phos* can mean both "light" (tov fw§?) and "man" (oJ fwv"), exegetes determined that a heavenly Man of Light came forth when God said, "Let there be *phos!*"⁹² This luminous heavenly Man was portrayed as God's partner in creation.⁹³ The *Anthropos* was identified further with both the *Kavod* and the cosmic Adam, and thus was perceived to be the Image of God. This Image, they thought, came into existence on the first day of creation and acted as a cosmogonic agent.⁹⁴ Later Jewish mystical traditions, in fact, explicitly call the primordial luminous Man the *Yotser Bereshith*, the "creator in the beginning."⁹⁵ In *3 Enoch*, the heavenly Man and *Kavod*-like Metatron is given a crown etched with the letters of light by which "all the necessities of the world and all the orders

⁹¹ Fossum, *Name of God*, pp. 266-291.

⁹² On this, see G. Quispel, "Ezekiel 1:26 in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosis," *VC* 34 (1980) p. 6; Fossum, *Name*, p. 280.

⁹³ Later, some rabbis reacted against this concept. Cf. b. Sanh. 38b; Tos. Sanh. 8.7.

⁹⁴ See especially J. Fossum, "The Adorable Adam of the Mystics and the Rebuttal of the Rabbis," in H. Cancik, H. Lichtenberger, and P. Schäfer (eds.), *Geschichte-Tradition-Reflexion. Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag*, volume 1, *Judentum* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996) pp. 529-539.

⁹⁵ On this, see G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1941) p. 65.

of creation were created."⁹⁶ Christian texts, Hermetic texts and Gnostic texts, all influenced by this old Jewish mythology, also preserve reference to the demiurgic aspect of the *Anthropos*.⁹⁷

According to this standard Jewish myth, the human being was created after the likeness of the *Anthropos*.⁹⁸ Since the first human being was created in God's image according to the Genesis story, this meant for some thinkers that Adam must have been a reflection of the *Kavod*. This aspect of the myth may explain some of the Adamic traditions which depict the veneration of the created Adam.⁹⁹ Be that as it may, the image of the first human being was said to have been so bright that it even surpassed the brightness of the sun.¹⁰⁰ His body, like the cosmic *Anthropos*, was so immense that it filled the universe from one end to the other.¹⁰¹

But this radiant image or immense body either was taken away from Adam or altered as a consequence of his Fall according to this myth.¹⁰² Aspects of this speculation were rooted in discussion about Genesis 3:21 where God made Adam and

⁹⁶ 13:1-2.

⁹⁷ cf. John 1:1-5, 9-10; *C.H.* 1.6-13; 13.19; *Gos. Egy.* 3.49.10-12; 4.61.8-11.

⁹⁸ cf. Philo, *Quest. Gen.* 1.32; 2.62; *Opif. mundi* 25; 69; 139; *Leg. All.* 3.96; *Her.* 230-231; *Apoc. Abr.* 23.4-6; *Test. Abr.* 11.4 rec. A; *Fug.* 68-71. Schenke, *Der Gott "Mensch" in der Gnosis*; Fossum, *Name*, pp. 266-291; P.B. Munoa III, *Four Powers in Heaven: The Interpretation of Daniel 7 in the Testament of Abraham*, JSPSup 28 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) pp. 85-90. The most recent article by A. Orlov brings together descriptions of the luminous Adam and the creation of the first human being after the Image: "'Without Measure and Without Analogy': The Tradition of the Divine Body in 2 (*Slavonic*) *Enoch*," (forthcoming).

⁹⁹ cf. *Life Adam and Eve* 13.2-14.2; 3 *Bar.* 4; 2 *En* 22. M. Stone, "The Fall of Satan and Adam's Penance: Three Notes on the Books of Adam and Eve," in G. Anderson, M. Stone, J. Tromp (eds.), *Literature on Adam and Eve: Collected Essays*, SVTP 15 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000).

¹⁰⁰ L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jew*, volume 5 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1928). p. 97 n. 69; B. Marmorstein, "Adam, ein Beitrag zur Messiaslehre," *WZKM* 35 (1928) p. 255 n. 3; W. Staerk, *Die Erlösererwartung in den östlichen Religionen* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1938) p. 11.

¹⁰¹ cf. *Gen. R.* 8.1; 21.3; 24.2; *Lev. R.* 14.1; 18.2; *Pirke R. Eliezer* 11; *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* 6-12. Orlov, "'Without Measure and Without Analogy.'"

¹⁰² cf. *Gen. R.* 11-12; *b. Moed Katan* 15b; *Aboda Zara* 8a; *Tanch. Buber Bereshit* 18; cf. *Gen. R.* 8.1; *b. Hag.* 12a; *Pesiq. Rab. Kah.* 1.1. P. Alexander, "From Son of Adam to Second God: Transformation of the Biblical Enoch," in M.E. Stone and T. A. Bergen (eds.), *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible* (Harrisburg, 1998) pp. 102-111.

Eve "garments of skin, and clothed them." It was concluded that Adam and Eve originally must have worn garments of light that were lost as a consequence of their sin.¹⁰³

This type of exegesis brought with it the consequence that the human being was in something of a predicament. Was it possible to restore this radiant image, to return the human being to his prelapsarian glory? Most early Jews and Christians thought that piety was the key to such transformation of the soul. If the person lived his or her life in obedience to the commandments (God's and/or Jesus'), at death or the Eschaton, the glory that Adam had lost would be restored. This they taught by way of their doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, the restoration of the whole person as a glorious angelic-like body reflecting God's Image.¹⁰⁴

But it appears that some Jews and Christians felt that the lost Image could be restored, at least provisionally, *before death*, that Paradise and its fruits could be had Now. That this mythological paradigm was religiously operable outside the literary context is clear to me when we examine, for instance, the literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls or Philo's account of the Therapeutae or Paul's epistles. In this literature, we have *first-hand accounts* of communities of believers involved in religious activities to achieve mystical transformation of the body in the here and now, and the elevation of the adept to the community of angels.¹⁰⁵ Many of the first Christians contemplated their own

¹⁰³ See DeConick, A.D. and Fossum, J., "Stripped Before God: A New Interpretation of Logion 37 in the Gospel of Thomas," *VC* 45 (1991) p. 124 n. 8. For later rabbinic reports, see M. Idel, "Enoch is Metatron," *Immanuel* 24/25 (1990) pp. 220-240. There is also a tradition that understands the verbs in Genesis 3:21 to be pluperfects, referring to the status of Adam and Eve *before* the Fall. Thus *Gen. R.* 20.12 states that the scroll of R. Meir read $\rho\text{O}\alpha$, "light," instead of $\rho\text{O}\iota$, "skin." The Targums presuppose this wording since they read "garments of glory ($\rho\alpha\gamma\gamma$)."

¹⁰⁴ A. Segal, *Life After Death*.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. J. Strugnell, "The Angelic Liturgy," *VTSup* 7 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960) pp. 318-345; L. Schiffman, "Merkavah Speculation at Qumran," in J. Reinharz and D. Swetschinski, *Mystics, Philosophers and*

ascensions into heaven and bodily transformations, believing that Jesus' exaltation and transformation had opened heaven's gate for them. Paul believed that the faithful who were possessed by Christ's spirit could start experiencing the transformation into the image of God while still on earth but that full glorification would only occur after death.¹⁰⁶ Others Christians promoted pre-mortem flights into heaven and full transformation in the present as the result.¹⁰⁷

This shift in thought to concentrate on the fulfillment of God's promises in the present appears to me to have been largely a consequence of failed eschatological expectations. Since the mystical tradition was a "vertical" dimension of Jewish apocalyptic thought running perpendicular to the eschatological,¹⁰⁸ this shift would have been easy to make. It moved the eschatological encounter with God and promises of bodies glorified from the future sphere to the present, from an external cosmic apocalyptic event to an internal apocalyptic experience. *This meant that the traditional rewards reserved for the Last Day, became available to believers Now* through personal mystical encounters with the divine, encounters that were frequently described by these esoteric Jews and Christians in terms of a heavenly journey that culminated in a vision of God or his *Kavod*. This visionary experience initiated the process of the person's transfiguration whereby his or her body became "angelic" and was "glorified."¹⁰⁹ Since

Politicians (Durham: 1982) pp. 15-47; C. Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (Atlanta: 1985); C. Newsom, "Merkavah Exegesis in the Qumran Sabbath Shirot," *JSJ* 38 (1987) pp. 11-30; M. Smith, "Two Ascended to Heaven – Jesus and the Author of 4Q491," in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) pp. 290-301; Fletcher-Louis, *All the Glory of Adam*; Segal, *Paul the Convert*; Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited."

¹⁰⁶ Rom 7:24; 8:10, 13, 29; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:21; 1 Cor 15:49; Col 3:9; 2 Cor 5:15-6:1.

¹⁰⁷ Gos Thom 15, 19, 37, 50, 59, 83, 84, 108.

¹⁰⁸ Rowland, *Open Heaven*.

¹⁰⁹ Regarding the rabbinic ambiguity about whether or not one can see God, refer to Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, pp. 93-97, who proposes that the negative opinion on seeing God in this literature, rules out "the possibility of a direct visual encounter with God;" I. Chernus, "Visions of God in Merkabah Mysticism," *JSJ* 13 (1982) pp. 123-146, outlines all of the passages in mystical literature

some early Christians identified Jesus with the *Kavod* or *Doxa*, they talk about visionary journeys to see Jesus as well as the Father.

The mechanism for vision *apotheosis* appears to me to be Greek in origin.¹¹⁰ It was based on an ancient physiology that suggested that the "seen" image enters the seer through his eye and transforms his soul: "The pleasure which comes from vision enters by the eyes and makes its home in the breast; bearing with it ever the image...it impresses it upon the mirror of the soul and leaves there its image."¹¹¹ This idea is as old as Plato who suggested that the vision of the object touched the eye and was transmitted to the soul. In fact, he uses the image of the soul as a block of wax upon which a vision received is imprinted like a stamp of a signet ring.¹¹²

For these mystical Jews and Christians, this must have meant that a vision of the *Kavod*, the Image of God, literally resulted in the "re-stamping" of God's image on the soul, restoring it to its original Form and Glory. In the ancient language of their mythology, they said that they would become "glorified," "exalted," or "angelic."¹¹³ They would be clothed in shining white garments, become "standing" angels worshipping God before his throne, be transformed into beings of fire or light, be "enthroned," regain their cosmic-sized bodies, or be invested with God's Name or Image.¹¹⁴

Ultimately, even their minds would surpass normal human limits of

where visions of God are mentioned and concludes that the majority of mystics "did think it possible for certain individuals, both human and celestial, to see God" (p. 141); N. Deutsch, *The Gnostic Imagination: Gnosticism, Mandaeism, and Merkabah Mysticism*, Jewish Studies 13 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995) pp. 75-79.

¹¹⁰ For a broader discussion, see DeConick, *Voices of the Mystics*, pp. 34-67. See also on the subject of transformation, Morray-Jones, *Transformational Mysticism*"; Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, pp. 47-71.

¹¹¹ Achilles Tatius, *Clitophon and Leucippe* 5.13.

¹¹² *Theaetetus* 191a-196c.

¹¹³ Cf. K. Sullivan, *Wrestling with Angels. A Study of the Relationship Between Angels and Humans in Ancient Jewish Literature and the New Testament*, AGAJU 55 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2004).

¹¹⁴ Cf. Wolfson, *Speculum*, pp. 84-85 and n. 46; E. Wolfson, "Yeridah la-Merkavah: Typology of Ecstasy and Enthronement in Ancient Jewish Mysticism," in R. Herrera (ed.), *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, and Typologies* (New York: Lang, 1993) pp. 13-44.

comprehension as it too became godlike. Enoch relates regarding his own transformation into the angel Metatron: “The Holy One, blessed be he, revealed to me from that time onward all the mysteries of wisdom, all the depths of the perfect Torah and all the thoughts of human hearts. All mysteries of the world and all the orders of nature stand revealed before me as they stand revealed before the Creator. From that time onward, I looked and beheld deep secrets and wonderful mysteries. Before anyone thinks in secret, I see his thought. Before he acts, I see his act. There is nothing in heaven above or deep within the earth concealed from me.”¹¹⁵

6. COMMUNAL PRACTICES

Avenues for mystical transformation other than the visionary were also popular in Judaism and Christianity, including asceticism, imitation, washing, spirit possession, eating "divine" food or drink, anointing the body with a sacramental oil or dew, chanting permutations of God's Name and so forth. Thus the period-literature is impregnated with references to practical activities associated with a mystical praxis.

The literature does not simply contain indirect references to ritual washing, anointing, study of sacred texts, vigils, sacrifice, fasting, withdrawal, and sexual asceticism in the narratives of the heroes. The period-literature also contains pieces of actual liturgy, prayers, hymns, repetitive chants, and “magical” formulas, as well as references to periods of silence. Many of these are suggestive of communal behavior, initiation rites, and contemplative practices, although individual activity like incubation and dream visions are also known. Some of the references point to the development of

¹¹⁵ 3 *Enoch* 11:1-3.

“magical” practices at least as evidenced in the *Hekhalot* handbooks,¹¹⁶ and sacramental ritual behavior, particularly (but not exclusively) in the Christian tradition.

The activities appear to have varied widely, so the exploration of practices as they were developed in individual communities is essential. No single praxis can be sifted out of the period-literature, so praxis must be studied as variant practices in particular community settings whenever possible. What the community at Qumran was doing in order to participate in the angelic liturgy was different from what the Sethian Gnostics were doing to ascend into the Godhead to practice the soul-journey home. What the Therapeutae were doing to become “citizens of heaven while on earth” was different from what the Hekhalot practitioners were doing to “descend to the chariot.”

What particularly has fascinated me as a scholar of Christian Origins is the reformation of the mystical praxis into the sacramental rituals of the early Christian Church and the “Gnostic” schools. The sacraments seem to me to have been set in place to “democratize” the mystical, making the presence of God regularly available to believers – baptism, anointing, and the eucharist all affecting the transformation of the soul and the integration of the Holy Spirit and the Christ into the soul. These rituals were understood to function in such a way that the person was reintegrated into the divine immediately and ontologically. Some texts even narrate this belief in terms of the ascent journey motif! That is, the ritual is presented *as the vehicle* that elevates and transports the person into the sacred realm so that he or she can come into the very presence of God.

¹¹⁶On this, see particularly M. Swartz, *Scholastic Magic. Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996); R. Lesses, *Ritual Practices to Gain Power. Angels, Incantations, and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism*, HTS 44 (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998).

Lately, I have come to understand many of narratives in the apocalyptic and mystical texts to be “verbal icons,” not simply “imaginative narratives” recounting the heavenly journeys and visions of the great heroes of the tradition, but “verbal maps” which functioned to actually bring the devotee into the presence of God. Not unlike later Byzantine pictorial icons, meditation upon the verbal images would have expressed and made present the sacred reality. The person who contemplated these texts would have been making himself ready to receive the mysteries that would be revealed directly and immediately to him. Through verbal recitation of the narrative or mental recall of the memorized text, the devotee too would have journeyed into the heavenly spheres and the presence of God, embracing this present experience through its likeness to that which was past.¹¹⁷ His ability to decipher the meaning of the words written would have provided his own journey into the heavenly world. What mattered to the devotee was not so much following the map in terms of sequential geography, but rather his ability to mentally picture the “places” where the hero had gone before, seeing again what the great heroes of the Jews and Christians had themselves seen. And in so doing, he would have appropriated the text for himself, and its mysteries.

This appropriation, in my opinion, results in part from the fact that during this period the apocalypse had been internalized. The cosmic had collapsed into the personal. The period-literature indicates that some Jews and Christians hoped to achieve *in the present*, the eschatological dream, the restoration God’s Image *within themselves* – the resurrection and transformation of their bodies into the glorious bodies of angels, and their minds into the mind of God. They developed various means to achieve this,

¹¹⁷ M. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and The Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 68-69.

including visionary flights to heaven, eating divine food and drinking divine drink, immersing themselves in water, anointing their bodies with sacred oil, intoning God's Name, and so on. As Alan Segal insightfully comments, "The myth suggests the goal; the mysticism gives the practical way to achieve it." Although the employment of particular practices varied from community to community, all appear to me to have been vying for the glories and power of Paradise Now.