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Secrets without Mystery

Esotericism in Early Jewish Mysticism

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Abstract

This paper explores the rhetoric of secrecy in Hekhalot literature, a corpus of Jewish mystical and magical writings from late antiquity. I argue that the essential relationship between secrecy and mystery that characterizes the tradition of “western esotericism” does not obtain for Hekhalot literature. Instead, the discourse of esotericism in Hekhalot literature relates to restricted knowledge of proper ritual speech and action (“secrets”), rather than to paradoxical truths about the divine (“mysteries”).

Keywords

Ancient Judaism – Jewish mysticism – Hekhalot literature – esotericism

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Jewish mystical and magical writings from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages were introduced into the intellectual culture of Renaissance Italy, where they exerted a formative influence on the shape of what modern scholarship has come to refer to as “western esotericism”.¹ By and large, the European Christian reception of these Jewish traditions placed special emphasis on their distinctive approach to language. Christian scholars, nurtured as they were on Aristotelian poetics, were particularly impressed by the kabbalistic notion that language was not merely referential, but formed the very fabric of the cosmos; letters, words, and certain

1 See Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, esp. 192–226; also Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 53–68. For basic introductions to the field of “western esotericism”, see especially von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*; Faivre, *Western Esotericism*; Goodrick-Glarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*.

formulations were imbued with creative, transformative, and even soteriological power.² Among the various Jewish mystical and magical texts that flowed into Renaissance Florence was a group of writings known as the Hekhalot corpus.³ Despite the formal and thematic heterogeneity of this loosely defined body of writings from Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, most Hekhalot texts highlight the performative power of ritual speech and especially the recitation of divine and angelic names.⁴ In a very real sense, Hekhalot literature played a small, but significant role in shaping the distinctive attitudes toward ritual and language that would come to characterize “western esotericism”.

It is, then, quite reasonable that Hekhalot literature, as one facet of the Jewish mystical tradition, has found its way into contemporary scholarship on “western esotericism”, where it regularly finds brief mention within larger discussions of the impact of kabbalistic texts and ideas on European culture. Typical of this trend is the discussion of “Hekhalot mysticism” in Kocku von Stuckrad’s introduction to this field of study.⁵ Von Stuckrad rightly describes Hekhalot literature as one of the earliest expressions of a Jewish esoteric discourse that sought to delineate specific areas of restricted knowledge concerning the nature of the cosmos and the heavenly realms.⁶ Yet, despite his methodologically sound insistence that scholars ought to approach the esoteric as a shifting ‘discursive field’ covering the variety of appeals to a ‘rhetoric of a hidden truth’,⁷ von Stuckrad reverts to describing Hekhalot literature in typological terms as a reflection of the mystical contemplation of the ‘mysteries of the Merkabah [the divine chariot-throne] and the Creation’.⁸ This characterization is of a piece with the abiding emphasis within von Stuckrad’s definition of the esoteric on ‘extraordinary states of consciousness’ through which a ‘seeker attains higher knowledge’.⁹ By implying that secrecy must address mystery—an object characterized chiefly by its ineffability—von Stuckrad’s reading of Hekhalot literature recapitulates the highly selective reception of Jewish traditions within European Christian culture, thereby perpetuating problematic trends within the modern study of religion.

2 Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 227–235.

3 See the brief account and accompanying notes in *ibid.*, 202–203.

4 See esp. Schäfer, ‘Merkavah Mysticism and Magic’.

5 von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, 33–34.

6 For more detailed discussion of the place of Hekhalot literature within the history of Jewish esoteric discourse, see Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 18–33.

7 von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, 10.

8 *Ibid.*, 33.

9 *Ibid.*, 10.

If von Stuckrad fails at times to follow his own important methodological strictures, Wouter Hanegraaff appears to draw an essential connection between esotericism and ‘the possibility of direct and unmediated, supra-rational, salvational access to the supreme spiritual level of reality’.¹⁰ For him, the discourse of esotericism is necessarily bound up with ‘the claim that direct knowledge of ultimate reality is possible and available for those who pursue it’.¹¹ With enunciations such as these, we find ourselves not all that far from what Steven Wasserstrom has called “mystocentrism”—the inclination of phenomenologically-inclined scholars such as Kees Bolle, who declared that, for religious secrets to be truly *religious*, they must ultimately refer to the central “mystery” of that religion.¹²

There are of course specific texts, communities, social movements, or even historical periods where it is meaningful to speak of a form of esotericism wherein the concealed is fundamentally impervious to language and thought. In such cases, it is not sufficient merely to gain access to a restricted body of knowledge, but one must grasp that what is hidden is ultimately ungraspable. But, as Moshe Halbertal has shown, such examples of what he terms “essential esotericism” constitute only one possible type.¹³ Numerous examples of esotericism exist that do not conceptualize secrecy in this manner. In some, the secrets are no more mysterious than the numerical code needed to open a combination lock. In still others, a given religious mystery is not a matter of secrecy at all, but is publicly proclaimed, as in the paradigmatic case of the Incarnation of Christ in many strands of Christian tradition. In a nutshell, there is a categorical difference between the disclosure that the secret code is ‘1-2-3’ and the statement that ‘1 is 3 and 3 is 1’.

Although Hekhalot literature played a role in the formation of “western esotericism”, a tradition in which secrecy and mystery are deeply intertwined, the indigenous conception of secrecy in Hekhalot literature itself resists reduction to this model. Certainly, just about every Hekhalot text, short or long, is pre-occupied with the complex task of simultaneously revealing and restricting information concerning the names of God and his angels, proper ritual preparation and action, and the topography of the heavenly world. Some Hekhalot texts imagine God himself as the ultimate gate-keeper for these secrets, a view that is nicely encapsulated by a benediction found across various strata of this

10 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 372.

11 Ibid.

12 Bolle, ‘Secrecy in Religion’; Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 239–241.

13 See Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, esp. 59.

literature extolling Him as ‘the Sage of secrets (*razim*) and the Master of concealed things (*setarim*)’.¹⁴ And yet, the secrets alluded to in this benediction do not refer to the direct experience of God or to the contemplation of divine truths, but to mastery of proper ritual speech and action.¹⁵

Indeed, the language of secrecy, as it is deployed in Hekhalot literature, is not used to refer to profound or paradoxical truths. Nor is the legitimate transmission of restricted knowledge dependent upon initiation or even insight into impenetrable mysteries. Rather, when Hekhalot texts speak of a “secret” (most commonly, *raz*, *sod*, or *seter*), they most often are referring to names of power, such as the name by which God created the heavens and the earth.¹⁶ In other words, the secrets being transmitted are themselves the means by which human beings can wield God-like power.

It is no wonder, then, that what is centrally at stake in so many Hekhalot texts is the precision with which their teachings are transmitted and put into practice. To take one paradigmatic example: the so-called “*Havura*-account” in *Hekhalot Rabbati* (§§198–259), in which the master-teacher R. Nehunya ben ha-Qanah instructs a select group of his disciples in how to ascend to heaven, repeatedly stresses—one might say, thematizes—the concrete and precise nature of its “secret teaching”.¹⁷ We, the readers of the text, learn that those who wish to ascend to heaven must invoke Surya, the Prince of the Presence, one hundred and twelve times, making sure not to add or subtract a single adjuration.¹⁸ Curiously, a number of parallel passages found elsewhere in the corpus that are equally insistent on precision in counting instruct the practitioner to count to one hundred and eleven times—and not one hundred and twelve.¹⁹ To make matters worse, in both sets of traditions, the practitioner

14 This eulogy (with slight variations in formulation) appears in *Hekhalot Rabbati* at §§237, 267, 268, and 277; in *Chapter of R. Nehuniah ben ha-Qanah* at §310; in an adjurational passage unique to MS New York 8128 at §512; in *Merkavah Rabbah* at §§676 and 687. All citations to Hekhalot texts refer to Schäfer (ed.), *Synopse*, unless otherwise indicated. It should be noted that this benediction is found in quite a different context in rabbinic literature; cf. *tBer.* 7:2; *yBer.* 9,2 (13c); and *bBer.* 58a.

15 See Schlüter, ‘Eulogy’.

16 See, e.g., *Synopse* §166 (*Hekhalot Rabbati*).

17 The term used here at *Synopse* §198 is *sod* (סוד).

18 *Synopse* §§204–205 (*Hekhalot Rabbati*).

19 See *Synopse* §310 (*Chapter of R. Nehuniah ben ha-Qanah*) and §681 (*Merkavah Rabbah*), and MS Antonin 186, fol. 1a, lines 22–25 (fragment G19 in Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente*, 165). The prescribed number of adjurations appears to refer to the number of angelic door-guards that the ascender must pass by in the course of his journey to and from heaven. See Grodner (trans.), ‘Pirkei Heikhalot’, 61.

is threatened with immediate execution should he miscount. The arbitrariness of the ritual protocol that governs contact with God and his angels is said to have puzzled and even vexed various characters in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, just as it has the text's modern readers.²⁰ But the discourse of secrecy in Hekhalot literature does not necessitate that we invoke the notion of mystery, unless we wish to evacuate this term of any of its distinctiveness or specificity.²¹

All of this is not to suggest that the accounts in Hekhalot literature of the awesomeness and beauty of God's throne-world lack affective intensity or expressive power. A central preoccupation of *Hekhalot Rabbati* is the abiding love that God feels for his people Israel; the text instructs the visionary to bear witness once he has returned to earth to the quasi-erotic affection God lavishes on the "countenance of Jacob" that is engraved on the divine chariot-throne.²² But the text does not refer to this truth as a secret; indeed, the task of delivering this message of love constitutes the most public aspect of the visionary's path. To search for a mystery behind God's veneration of the icon of Jacob's face is to obscure what the text wishes to proclaim openly.

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20 See Dan, 'The Gate to the Sixth Palace'.

21 It is worth noting that the creators of Hekhalot literature likely had available to them the Hebrew word *mistirin* (מִסְתִּירִין). This loanword from the Greek *mustērion* is found in the context of rabbinic anti-Christian polemic in *Pesiqta Rabbati* 5.1, on which see Bregman, 'Mishnah and LXX as Mystery'.

22 See especially *Synopse* §§ 163–164 (*Hekhalot Rabbati*). For discussion, see Schäfer, *Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 259–268; also Neis, 'Embracing Icons'.

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